

April 28th, 2019, 2nd Sunday of Easter, Year C: THE FEAST OF DIVINE MERCY

Acts 5:12-16

This selection takes place after the Resurrection, Ascension and Pentecost. In chapter 4:29-30 the people prayed that God would “Grant to your servants, even as they speak your words, complete assurance by stretching forth your hand in cures and signs and wonders to be worked in the name of Jesus, your holy Servant.” Here we see the answer to that prayer.⁴

¹²Many signs and wonders were done among the people at the hands of the apostles. As St. Ephraem commented: “The Apostles’ miracles made the Resurrection and Ascension of the Lord credible.”³ It is clear that the power of Jesus passed into the hands of the church. As time went on, a miracle became a requirement for beatification and another for canonization of a person of heroic virtue who was not a martyr.² They were all together in Solomon’s portico. This is the covered walkway of the temple, the same area where Peter cured the crippled beggar.¹

¹³None of the others dared to join them, but the people esteemed them. The people were afraid because Peter and John had been arrested and put into jail overnight. (Acts 4:1) There is also the matter of a man and his wife who made a gift to the new church but who lied to the Holy Spirit in the process and as a result, they fell down dead on the spot.(Acts 5:1-11) Yet in chapter 4 it is recorded that about 5000 men believed.(Acts 4:4)

¹⁴Yet more than ever, believers in the Lord, great numbers of men and women, Luke often highlights the fact that the gospel claimed disciples from the ranks of both genders.¹ were added to them. While the fear-ridden people do not dare to join the Apostles in the Portico of the Temple, still, the cures worked by the Apostles draw attention to the message; they help faith, and the Church grows.⁵

¹⁵Thus they even carried the sick out into the streets and laid them on cots and mats so that when Peter came by, at least his shadow might fall on one or another of them. In the name of Jesus, the apostles displayed extraordinary power over demons, death and disease. This was particularly true in the ministry of Peter, the recognized leader of the apostolic band, who more than any other exhibits the healing power of Jesus.¹

¹⁶A large number of people from the towns in the vicinity of Jerusalem also gathered, bringing the sick and those disturbed by unclean spirits, and they were all cured. John Paul II said, “The battle against the devil, which is the principal task of St. Michael the Archangel, is still being fought today, because the devil is still alive and active in the world. The evil that surrounds us today, the disorders that plague our society, man’s inconsistency and brokenness, are not only the results of original sin, but also the result of Satan’s pervasive and dark action.” The most ordinary activity of the demons is “temptation” but there is also *external physical pain* caused by Satan, *diabolical oppression*, *diabolical obsession*, *diabolical infestation* (which affects houses, things or animals) and *diabolical dependence* as well as *demonic possession*. While Jesus first gave the power to cast out demons to his apostles, he then extended the power to the seventy-two disciples, and in the end he granted it to all those who would believe in him. However, bishops are the only ones who can practice or delegate an *exorcism* for *possession* in the Catholic Church. It is interesting to note that since 1583, when it appeared among the decrees of the synod of Reims, the Church has given warning about the danger of mistaking mental illness for diabolical possession. For the rest of the cases, prayers of deliverance can be exercised by individuals and communities. Fr. Amorth points out that when there is no *possession*, the usual means to obtain grace should be sufficient to defend ourselves from these evils.

These means are prayer, the sacraments, almsgiving, leading a Christian life, pardoning offenses, and soliciting the aid of our Lord, Mary, the saints and the angels. The use of exorcised water, exorcised oil and exorcised salt is also effective and are most efficacious when used with faith. Every priest can recite the prayers of the *Ritual* to exorcise these three items and he does not need special permission.¹⁰

Rev. 1:9-11a, 12-13, 17-19

*The Book of revelation, or the Apocalypse, is the only prophetic book in the New Testament. It claims to be a divinely-sent vision or dream, not a waking observation. The book is full of mysterious symbols with multiple layers of meaning. The main overall point is clear from the title: The Revelation of Jesus Christ. This book presents Christ in his Second Coming. We see him in glory rather than in humiliation.*⁹

Revelation was written by the last living Apostle, John, in about 95 A.D. while confined to a Roman penal colony on the island of Patmos. At the time, Rome was enforcing a cult of emperor worship. John was a well-known church leader who was proclaiming the testimony of Jesus and consequently was exiled to Patmos, a barren, rocky little island with no city on it,⁸ about 10 miles long and 5 miles wide⁷ off the coast of Turkey in the Aegean Sea.

9I John, your brother, John is like a brother of those to whom he writes, and his right to speak was that he had come through all that those to whom he was writing were going through.⁷ **who share with you the distress, the kingdom, and the endurance** This is a special NT word that is not just putting up with hardships. Rather, endurance is a virtue that enables people to remain faithful right through to the bitter end even though the final days are characterized by terrible distress and affliction.⁸ It is the characteristic virtue of the persecuted.⁶ **we have in Jesus, found myself on the island called Patmos because I proclaimed God's word and gave testimony to Jesus.** Here we have John, exiled and persecuted, having a vision of heavenly glory. Often in Christian history the clearest visions, the most startling revelations, come to those who are suffering for their faith.¹¹

10I was caught up in Spirit In Holy Scripture God's messages are frequently communicated to prophets in the form of a vision. In a genuinely prophetic vision God elevates the prophet's mind to enable him to understand what God desires to tell him.¹⁹ John is claiming direct divine inspiration for his message.¹⁵ **on the Lord's day** Sunday, which by the time that John wrote, was considered the Christian day of worship because it was on this day that Jesus rose from the grave.¹⁵ **and heard behind me a voice as loud as a trumpet,** John feels himself caught up by a divine force; in an ecstasy he hears the voice of our Lord; its power and strength he describes as a trumpet.¹⁹ A trumpet blast was the customary Jewish way of calling an assembly. It became a signal of God's final gathering of the elect. Here, however, it is like the trumpet blast that announced the visible manifestation of God on Mount Sinai when God revealed his covenant to Moses.¹⁵ **which said,**

11"Write on a scroll what you see."

12Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and when I turned, I saw seven gold lampstands These are symbols of the seven churches in Asia Minor, which were located about 50 miles apart and formed a circle in what today is known as Turkey.¹² While the seven churches are the ones to whom the book is principally addressed, the number seven signifies perfection and plentitude. We are permitted to say, therefore, that the book is intended for all the churches, for the whole Church.⁵ To the Jewish Christian reader of John's time, they would also recognize the resemblance of the lampstands to the Menorah in the Temple in Jerusalem.¹³ Remember that King David received the plan of the Temple from God Himself and it was modeled after the court of

heaven. The Book of Revelation shows a connection between the liturgy of the mass and the liturgy in heaven.²⁰ Note that the lamp is not the individual disciple but the community to which he or she belongs.¹⁵

13and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man, Here we are back to the picture of Daniel 7:13, in which the kingdom and the power and the dominion are given by the Ancient of Days to one like a son of man. As we well know from Jesus' use of it, this title Son of Man became nothing less than the title of the Messiah; and by using it here John makes it plain that the revelation which he is to receive is coming to him from no other source than from Jesus Christ himself.⁷ By the time that John wrote, "son of man" was an accepted title for Jesus, particularly in his second glorious coming to judge the living and the dead.¹⁵ **wearing an ankle-length robe,** This is a symbol for Jesus as Priest.⁵ **with a gold sash around his chest.** This is a symbol for Jesus as King.⁵ Standing in the midst of the churches, Jesus is presented as priest, king, and judge.¹⁵ **17**When I caught sight of him, I fell down at his feet as though dead. John was caught up in ecstasy. Fr. John Hampsch suggests that John was overpowered when he received the revelation that became the whole Book of Revelation.¹⁶ Note that John the Beloved Disciple does not slap Jesus on the back, and begin swapping stories about the old days in Palestine. There is awe.¹³ **He touched me with his right hand and said, "Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last,** Jesus receives the titles of God: "first and last" and "the one who lives." He merits these titles because of his death and resurrection.⁸ We use the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet to symbolize this title of being the first and the last. The Paschal or Easter candle is a symbol of the risen Christ and during the Easter Vigil the presider cuts a cross into the candle and inscribes the Alpha above the cross and the Omega below it.¹⁵

18the one who lives. **Once I was dead, but now I am alive forever and ever.** This contrast between the past and the present, between death and the life of the resurrection possessed forever constitutes the core of the Christian creed.¹⁴ **I hold the keys to death and the netherworld.** There was a conception in the ancient Church that when Jesus descended into Hades, the region of the dead, he unlocked the doors and brought out from thence Abraham and all God's faithful people who had lived and died in the generations before. But we may take it in an even wider sense than that for we who are Christians believe that Jesus Christ has authority over death, that he has abolished death and that he has brought life and immortality to light and that because he lives we shall live also and that, therefore, for us and for those whom we love the bitterness of death is for ever past.⁷ To have the keys signifies that Jesus is the master of death and of the abode of the dead. Jesus is saying that these things should no longer frighten the Christian.¹³

19Write down, therefore, what you have seen, (the vision of the Son of Man, Chapter 1:10-20) **and what is happening,** (the situation of the churches, Chapters 2-3) **and what will happen afterwards."** (the events of Chapters 4-22) It is important to remember that the rest of the book is dominated by this vision of the glorious, living Lord.¹⁵

John 20:19-31

In this selection John recounts Jesus' appearance to the disciples hiding behind locked doors. When Jesus appears, he offers them peace and brings them joy. He gives them a mission and bestows the Holy Spirit and authority over sin.¹⁷

19On the evening of that first day of the week, This is the evening of the day of the Resurrection.²¹ **when the doors were locked, where the disciples were,** It is most likely that they continued to meet

in the upper room where the Last Supper had been held.²⁴ **for fear of the Jews,** The disciples were afraid; they knew the bitterness of the Jews and they were afraid that their turn might come next. They were meeting in terror, listening fearfully for every step on the stair and for every knock at the door, lest the emissaries of the Sanhedrin should come to arrest them too.²⁴ **Jesus came** One of the qualities of Christ's resurrected body is that it is not bound by matter and he is able to pass through the wall of the room with the locked door.¹⁸ **and stood in their midst and said to them, "Peace be with you."**

20When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. This is the same body that had been crucified and had died only days earlier. Jesus took care to impress upon them that he was really, physically present—that it was in his own body, flesh and blood, that he stood before them.¹⁸ Christ carries the marks of his earthly sacrifice with him even when he ascends into heaven.²¹ **The disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord.**

21Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. This was a traditional Hebrew greeting. It does not refer to a worldly peace, which is often procured by violence and is always unstable, but a spiritual serenity that comforts us regardless of our outward circumstances.²¹ **As the Father has sent me, so I send you."** The goal of Christ in founding the Church is to give it the same mission and the same mandate, which he had received from the Father. Christ sent the Apostles as he himself had been sent by the Father, and then through the Apostles made their successors, the bishops, sharers in his consecration and mission. The function of the bishops' ministry was handed over in a subordinate degree to priests.²²

22And when he had said this, he breathed on them God breathes on man only twice in all of scripture. The breath of God gave life to man at the first creation and the forgiveness of sins to his Bride, the Church, at the New Creation.²³ **and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.**

23Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained." The Church has always understood that Jesus Christ here conferred on the Apostles authority to forgive sins, a power which is exercised in the sacrament of Penance.²² In reading the fathers of the Church, we find that, wherever people professed Christ, they confessed their sins to the priests of the Church. This is true in the writings of St. Irenaeus of Lyons (177-200 A.D.), Tertullian, in North Africa (203 A.D.), St. Hippolytus of Rome (215 A.D.) and the Egyptian scholar, Origen (250 A.D.).⁽²⁵⁾ Only God can forgive sins but he continues to do so through his chosen ones. The Council of Trent connects this episode with the institution of the Sacrament of Reconciliation by which Christ distributes divine forgiveness to the world through the successors of the apostles (bishops) and their assistants (priests).²¹ All priests in the Catholic church are ordained by bishops who can trace their lineage of ordination back to the apostles.²³ Pope Pius XII explained the reasons for the regular reception of this sacrament: "For by this means we grow in a true knowledge of ourselves and in Christian humility, bad habits are uprooted, spiritual negligence and apathy are prevented, the conscience is purified and the will strengthened, salutary spiritual direction is obtained, and grace is increased by the efficacy of the sacrament itself."²²

24Thomas, called Didymus, one of the Twelve, was not with them when Jesus came. Thomas skipped church on the first Sunday of Christian history! "Didymus" means "twin" but we do not know anything about a brother. Some have speculated that he may have looked a lot like Jesus. Tradition informs us that he went to India and the Far East preaching the Gospel and establishing the Catholic Church where he is still honored as the founder of the Church in those regions. He was killed by stab wounds in 72 AD after a remarkable apostolate.¹⁸

25 So the other disciples said to him, "We have seen the Lord." But he said to them, "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands This is the only explicit reference from the Gospels that Jesus was nailed rather than tied to the cross. and put my finger into the nailmarks and put my hand into his side, I will not believe."

26 Now a week later his disciples were again inside and Thomas was with them. Jesus came, although the doors were locked, and stood in their midst and said, "Peace be with you."

27 Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe."

28 Thomas answered and said to him, "My Lord and my God!" Thomas, doubting and touching, was changed into a witness of the truth of the Resurrection.²² Paradoxically, it is the "doubter" who makes the most complete affirmation of Christ's nature to be found on lips of anyone in the Gospel.¹⁴

29 Jesus said to him, "Have you come to believe because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed." This refers to all Christians of all time including us.²²

30 Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples that are not written in this book.

31 But these are written that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this belief you may have life in his name.

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Acts of the Apostles" With Introduction, Commentary and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (2) "1995 Catholic Almanac," (3) "The Navarre Bible: Acts Of The Apostles", (4) "The Acts of the Apostles" by Luke Timothy Johnson, (5) "St. Joseph Commentary On The Sunday Readings" by Achille Degeest, (6) "Revelation" by Wilfrid J. Harrington, O.P., (7) "The Revelation Of John" by William Barclay, (8) "The Collegeville Bible Commentary: Revelation," by Pheme Perkins, (9) "You Can Understand The Bible" by Peter Kreeft, (10) "An Exorcist Tells His Story" by Fr. Gabriele Amorth, (11) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2004" by Aelred R. Rosser, (12) "The Bread of Life Catholic Bible Study" by Deacon Ken & Marie Finn, (13) Commentary notes of Sean Innerst and Tim Gray, (14) "The Jerome Biblical Commentary," (15) "The Apocalypse and the Third Millennium" by George T. Montague, S.M., (16) "Resting in the Spirit" by Father Robert DeGrandis, S.S.J., (17) "Workbook for lectors and gospel readers" by Lawrence E. Mick, (18) "The Founding of Christendom" by Warren H. Carroll, (19) "The Navarre Bible: Revelation," (20) "The Lamb's Supper: The Mass As Heaven On Earth" by Scott Hahn, (21) "Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of John," and (22) "The Navarre Bible: St. John."

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.