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 Forgiveness of Sin and New Life

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Sunday Readings for June 8, 2014 for Cycle A:
Acts 2:1-11; Ps 103; 1 Cor 12:3-7, 12-13; Jn 20:19-23

FORGIVENESS OF SIN AND NEW LIFE

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The mystery or plan of God for humanity and all creation that is accomplished in and through Jesus can be appreciated by appeal to categories that are universal. Whatever the culture of a people, they can understand the sacred character of friendship sealed by a meal and by one laying down his life for others. They can see the meaning of light and darkness as forces opposed to each other; the hope to experience reality beyond human death resonates through most ancient cultures. So we can teach about God and the work of Jesus in terms that most people comprehend to some extent. It is necessary, however, to introduce the faithful to the culture in which the revelation of God came in its fullness. To understand the Paschal Mystery of Jesus, we must draw upon the heritage of the Exodus from Egypt and its celebration in the Passover Meal. Then we must follow the people of Israel for fifty days in the wilderness until they come to Mount Sinai (Ex 19:1). There they were invited to enter into the covenant with God whereby they became "a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" (Ex 19:6) and received the commandments so they would know God's will. Celebration of this second step in Israel's progress toward the promised land is celebrated annually. The feast is called "Weeks" (completion of seven weeks) or, in Greek, Pentecost (the fiftieth day). In ancient times it was one of the three great pilgrimage feasts (Dt 16:1-17). This explains the presence of large crowds of Jews from many nations in Jerusalem, unified in their astonishment at hearing the Apostles proclaiming the mighty deeds of God (Acts 2:11).

St. Paul explained to the Corinthian Christians that the great variety of people who respond to God's work accomplished in Jesus are united into one body by water and the Holy Spirit. Through the power of this Spirit all human divisions can be transcended so that people will not compete selfishly for supremacy, but rather work together for the betterment of all, and more important, for the service of God.

The Gospel according to St. John, with its emphasis on the unity of all aspects of Jesus' work, teaches that the gift of the Holy Spirit was bestowed first on the very day of Jesus' resurrection. At the Last Supper Peter and the others wanted to rally around Jesus when they heard of his impending death. However, they had to learn that they must accept the service of Jesus and forgiveness of their sins through his death. Only then would they be able to share fully in his ministry. At the Last Supper Jesus promised peace and another Paraclete for them (Jn 14:26-27), so as he commissioned them he said: "Peace be with you," forgiving their sins of cowardice and denial. Then he breathed on them, as God had breathed life into the first human being (Gn 2:7) and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit" (Jn 20:21-22). This being the first day of the week, Jesus thus inaugurates the new creation, manifested by his own triumph over sin and death.

When the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel condemned the sins of idolatry and injustice of their day,
they offered hope for restoration after a purifying Exile from the promised land. Jeremiah's promise of the New Covenant ended with the assurance: "I will forgive their evildoing and remember their sins no more" (Jer 31:34). Ezekiel began his message of hope with the promise that God would sprinkle cleansing waters on them and then "I will put my Spirit within you and make you live by my statutes, careful to observe my decrees" (Ez 36:25-27).

Jesus well knew that a new society must be based on forgiveness of sins and personal transformation of its members. So he offered his gift of peace and new life in the Spirit to his Church, and commissioned its leaders to forgive sins. This great gift involves a tremendous responsibility to discern when its application is appropriate. "Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained" (Jn 20:23). This requires a sincere and conscientious effort of the penitent to recognize the concomitant obligation to prepare well for the sacraments of forgiveness and new life in Christ and the Spirit.