

**COMMENTARY ON READINGS FOR SUNDAY,
May 23, 2004 (Seventh Sunday of Easter)**

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One possible topic for this Sunday before Pentecost is the desire for unity with God through Jesus, a divine union which is prepared for by human union. The first reading certainly reflects lack of union: Stephen, the first martyr, is stoned to death by his enemies, fellow Jews (“brothers and fathers,” Acts 7:2) with whom he engaged in bitter debates over religious issues extremely important to everyone concerned (Acts 6:8-14). Before he dies, Stephen sees Jesus, “the Son of man, standing at the right hand of God,” as Jesus had said in Luke 22:69. Saul guarded the cloaks of Stephen’s executioners, in what may have been a legal Jewish execution of a Law-breaker (see Deut 17:2-7), although the witnesses are presented as being false, Acts 6:13-14, much like in Jesus’ trial. Like Jesus, Stephen prays for his enemies and executioners.

The second reading is from the end of the last book of the Christian Bible, the book of Revelation, which longs for the second coming of Jesus as judge and savior, to reward each one according to his or her deeds. ‘Washing one’s robes’ can be a reference to suffering which brings purification, as in Rev 7:14; Dan 11:35, or to baptism, which gives entry to the Holy City (Jerusalem, Rev 21:2; 22:14-15; cf. Matt 22:11-14).

In the gospel, Jesus prays for unity among his disciples, present and future, so that they –we– be one as Father and Son are one, united in love as God is love, 1 John 4:7-12. As the Word-made-flesh, Jesus, was in intimate union with God the Father from the beginning (literally, “in the bosom of the Father,” John 1:18), the ideal disciple will also be in such union with Jesus, as the Beloved Disciple was (John 13:23, literally, “in the bosom of Jesus;” see also John 15:1-17). Unity among Jesus’ followers is what will convince the world that we are Christians, John 17:23; cf. 13:35; Acts 2:44-47; 4:32-34.