

Solemnity of the Ascension Year "A"

May 31-June 1, 2014

Readings: Acts 1:1-11; Ephesians 1:17-23; Matthew 28:16-20

While I respect the fact that some people prefer not to observe birthdays or anniversaries, I myself cannot imagine seeing it as anything other than a happy day, no matter what the year might be. It is another year of grace, another year of experience and hopefully wisdom. When it comes to Church feasts however, I can see why the disciples may never have envisioned the Ascension as a day of joy and feast. After all, it represented the day that they were left on their own, no longer able to converse daily with the bodily Risen Lord. It had to be a bittersweet day.

The observance of today's feast is of great antiquity. Although no documentary evidence of it exists prior to the 400 A.D., Saint Augustine says that it is of Apostolic origin. For centuries, artists have tried to give visible witness to the account of Sacred Scripture. Today's Feast is no different. There are many paintings of Jesus floating up heavenwards, supported by jubilant angels, and even some that show only his feet remaining, sticking out of a cloud.

It is difficult to criticize the artists because this entire event is hard to picture given our limited intellects. We come face to face with our own limitations, grasping to encapsulate this mystery. In the account in Acts of the Apostles, chapter 1:11, after the Lord ascends out of their sight, the angels ask why the disciples just stand there, staring into space. But in truth, as Jesus ascends, he tells the disciples to wait for the power of the Holy Spirit. But notice that he does not tell them to wait passively for the rapture.

Can this feast be one of joy for us even when on the face of it we have lost our visible link with the Father? It seems impossible to picture the apostles without some real sadness on this day, and yet

his Ascension to his heavenly home is precisely the place to which we have been called, and where our faith teaches we will be reunited with the heavenly host praising God endlessly. But this was a temporary separation– just as for God’s faithful people, so too is bodily death. It is not the end. We ought not feel abandoned. Reflecting upon this Feast, Saint Augustine wrote: “He did not leave heaven when he came down to us; nor did he withdraw from us when he went up again into heaven...”<sup>1</sup> He is present differently.

We just celebrated the Sacrament of Holy Orders on Saturday morning in a simply beautiful ceremony. Yes, it is particularly special for the newly ordained and their families– but not only for them. It is special for all of us in the Church. For us priests it brings us right back to that very special day in our lives, and fills our hearts with joy and gratitude for the gift of our ministry. It is an annual opportunity to ask God for the grace to conform more closely to the person of Jesus Christ and to love His people more generously.

It is truly a privilege to serve as a priest, helping people come to realize in a more profound way the presence of Jesus in their lives. He is not distant from us; through the sacraments, he is here in our midst. Even in my own weakness, the Lord allows his grace to work through me and to make present his Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity. I am grateful to God for these past twenty-five years. I walked down that aisle unsure of what was ahead, but trusting that whatever it was, God would give me the grace to face it in faith and trust. Indeed, God is never outdone in his generosity.

In today’s Gospel there is also a challenge. Matthew’s account indicates that there is much work to do. The Lord did not seem interested in lengthy farewells. He promised the Holy Spirit and all

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine, *Sermo de Ascensione Domini*, 98, 1-2.

his words and actions after his resurrection indicate that he will always be near us: “While in heaven he is also with us; and we, while on earth, are with him. He is here with us by his divinity, his power and his love. We cannot be in heaven as he is on earth- by divinity- but in him, we can be there by love.”<sup>2</sup>

The Solemnity of the Ascension reminds us not only that our true home is in heaven, but also that it is the virtue of humility, that carries us upward. In this we find the pathway to our true and eternal home. Let us go there rejoicing, grateful that He has shown us the way.

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<sup>2</sup> *Sermo de Ascensione Domini*, Mai 98, 1-7.