

Meditations: Solemnity of the Ascension (Year B)

Some reflections that can assist our prayer on the feast of the Ascension.

- Jesus sends his disciples and us on a mission
- He goes to heaven but doesn't abandon us
- Christ, as Head, goes before us

FORTY DAYS after Easter, the Church celebrates the Ascension of Jesus into heaven. As the Preface of the Mass says, “the Lord Jesus, the King of glory, conqueror of sin and death, ascended (today) to the highest

heavens, as the Angels gazed in wonder. Mediator between God and man, judge of the world and Lord of hosts.”^[1] Saint Mark narrates that, before going to heaven, Jesus ratified the apostolic mission of his disciples: *Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation (Mk 16:15)*. It is an ambitious commission: not simply evangelising the people of Israel, or the Roman empire, but the whole world, the whole of creation. “The task which Jesus entrusts to a small group of common men lacking great intellectual capacity seems truly too bold! Yet this small company, insignificant compared to the great powers of the world, is sent to bring the message of Jesus’ love and mercy to every corner of the earth. But this plan of God can be accomplished only with the strength that God himself grants to the Apostles.”^[2]

After all they had experienced during the forty days after Jesus' resurrection, the disciples responded with ardent faith and zeal to the missionary command they had received. *And they went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it* (Mk 16:20). The apostolic mission is not a task exclusive to those first disciples, but a divine task that we too receive. That is why we feel so close to that day when our Lord went up into heaven. "For a Christian, apostolate is like breathing. A child of God cannot live without this supernatural life-force. Today's feast reminds us that our concern for souls is a response to a command of love given to us by our Lord. As he goes up to Heaven, Jesus sends us out as his witnesses throughout the whole world. Our responsibility is great, because to be Christ's witness implies first of all that we should try

to behave according to his teaching, that we should struggle to make our actions remind others of Jesus and his most lovable personality. We have to act in such a way that others will be able to say, when they meet us: this man is a Christian, because he does not hate, because he is willing to understand,, because he is not a fanatic, because he is willing to make sacrifices, because he shows that he is a man of peace, because he knows how to love.”^[3] —

SAINT LUKE relates that just before going up into heaven, Jesus *led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them (Lk 24:50)*. Thus we can say that, from that day on, “he remains in that gesture of blessing. His hands remain stretched out. over this world. The blessing hands of Christ are like a roof that protects us ... In departing, he comes to us, in order to raise us up above ourselves and to open up the world

to God. That is why the disciples could return home from Bethany rejoicing. In faith we know that Jesus holds his hands stretched out in blessing over us. That is the lasting motive of Christian joy.”^[4] The Liturgy of the Hours reflects on some words of Saint Augustine about this mystery: “He did not leave heaven when he came down to us; nor did he withdraw from us when he went up again into heaven ... Out of compassion for us he descended from heaven, and although he ascended alone, we also ascend because we are with him in grace.”^[5]

Saint Mark, on his part, concludes his Gospel saying that *the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God (Mk 16:19)*. Saint Josemaría’s words help us to imagine the scene: “It is fitting that the sacred humanity of Christ should receive the homage, praise, and

admiration of all the hierarchies of the angels and of all the legions of the blessed in heaven.”^[6]

Jesus ascends into heaven but he does not abandon us. “Because Jesus is with the Father, he has not gone away but remains close to us. Now he is no longer in one particular place in the world as he had been before the Ascension: no, through his power over space, he is present and accessible to all – throughout history and in every place.”^[7] Jesus remains with us. The Holy Spirit dwells in our soul in grace and our Lord accompanies us also physically in the Blessed Eucharist. “We can come very near Jesus too, in body and soul. Christ has pointed the way to us clearly. We can be with him in the bread and in the word, receiving the nourishment of the Eucharist and knowing and fulfilling all that he came to teach us, as we talk with him in our prayer.”^[8]

AND WHILE THEY WERE GAZING into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you standing looking into heaven? This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven’ (Acts 1:10-11). The Solemnity of the Ascension gives us the ardent hope of sharing in the glory Jesus enjoys and to which we are called as members of his body. “He ascended, not to distance himself from our lowly state but that we, his members, might be confident of following where he, our Head and Founder, has gone before.”^[9]

“This ‘exodus’ towards the heavenly Homeland, which Jesus lived in the first person, he faced solely for us. It was for our sake that he came down from heaven, and for our sake that he ascended to it, after making himself in all things like men,

humbling himself even to death on a cross and after having touched the abyss of the greatest distance from God. For this very reason the Father was pleased with him and 'highly exalted' him (*Phil 2:9*), restoring to him the fulness of his glory, but now with our humanity. God in man – man in God: this is even now a reality, not a theoretical truth. Therefore, Christian hope, founded on Christ, is not an illusion but, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, 'we have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul' (*Heb 6:19*), an anchor that reaches up to Heaven where Christ has gone before us."^[10]

Our Lord is waiting for us in heaven and he sends us the Holy Spirit with his gifts and fruits so that we reach our goal. "After the Lord ascended to Heaven, the disciples gathered in prayer in the Upper Room, with the Mother of Jesus (cf. *Acts 1:14*), invoking together the Holy Spirit

who would invest them with the power to witness to the Risen Christ (cf. *Lk* 24:49; *Acts* 1:8). United to the Most Blessed Virgin, every Christian community relives in these days this unique experience in preparation for the Solemnity of Pentecost.”^[11]

^[1] Roman Missal, Preface, Mass of the Ascension of the Lord.

^[2] Francis, *Regina Caeli*, 13 May 2018.

^[3] Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 122.

^[4] Benedict XVI-Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Catholic Truth Society, London, pp. 292-293.

^[5] Saint Augustine, Sermon for the Ascension.

^[6] Saint Josemaría. *Holy Rosary*, Second glorious mystery.

^[7] Benedict XVI-Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Catholic Truth Society, London, p. 284.

^[8] Saint Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 118.

^[9] Roman Missal, Preface, Mass of the Ascension of the Lord.

^[10] Benedict XVI, Angelus, 4 May 2008

^[11] Benedict XVI, Angelus, 8 May 2005.
