

Homily - Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord

There's a saying you'll hear that comes up in many different circles, around many different movements.

It might be about people talking about their diet, or their favorite hobbies, or their dearest social concern.

The question goes - how do you know someone's passionate about their favorite cause?

The answer is... you don't have to ask - they'll tell you.

I'm sure we can all think of people we know who won't shut up about their favorite thing - it's usually endearing, sometimes annoying, but if nothing else, it's memorable.

Eventually we might associate it with being part of their identity.

This passion is remarkable, of course, because in most ways the normal human instinct isn't to stand out, but rather to go with the flow - to fit in.

We usually prefer not to be out of the ordinary in most respects, because to do so is to invite scrutiny, criticism, or judgment.

Only when that enthusiasm surpasses our natural concern do we become evangelists for our cause, inviting other people to share that experience.

On this Solemnity of the Ascension, Our Lord exhorts us:

“Go into the whole world
and proclaim the gospel to every creature.”

To be a Christian is to be sent on this universal mission.

The Second Vatican Council explains, “The holy people of God shares in Christ's prophetic office; it spreads abroad a living witness to Him, especially by means of a life of faith and charity and by offering to God a sacrifice of praise, the tribute of lips which give praise to His name.”

Witness by faith, charity, and a sacrifice of praise.

These are the means by which we are to share the Good News of Jesus Christ.

But again, the enthusiasm to carry out this prophetic work might not come naturally, at least not at first.

What if we don't think we're the kind of person to throw caution to the wind and share the love of God with our neighbor, or commit ourselves to works of charity and prayer?

That's a natural question, one which calls for a supernatural answer.

The Lord didn't send his apostles, or the Church, out on this mission without help or encouragement.

Quite the opposite, in fact.

Take that list of signs and wonders that he promises will accompany those who believe in his word.

Not only is it exceptional, it is also non-exhaustive - as though casting out demons, defying natural dangers, and bringing healing to the sick were not enough.

What Our Lord promises, above all, is that we will not be alone as we go out on this mission.

He remains with each of us, still accompanying us as we carry out this commission, because the work he has entrusted to us through the apostles is not yet complete.

“Who does not understand,” writes Saint Augustine, “that the promise is made to the Catholic Church, which though some are dying, others are born, shall be here unto the end of the world?”

We still have work to do, and the Lord is ready to equip us for that work.

But how will he do it?

Saint Paul explains that this is where we come to see the importance of spiritual gifts in the life of the Church.

Our Lord, he writes, “gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”

To live that prophetic call to faith, charity, and worship, we need the Lord’s help and action - we need those spiritual gifts that the apostle describes and which we see around us in the life of the Church.

But if we don’t yet recognize those gifts in our own lives, we might wonder - how do we get there?

How do we go from where we are now to becoming zealous, fervent disciples ready to share the Gospel with enthusiasm and joy, regardless of the consequences?

That's the pivotal question of this Easter season, one which will be answered in full once we arrive at the Solemnity of Pentecost and the descent of the Holy Spirit.

But like the apostles who witnessed Our Lord's Ascension, we can start that journey now, because it is a journey that begins with preparation.

To receive those gifts, we need to be ready and open to the Spirit as it comes to us and forms us to follow the Lord's will.

We have to willing to accept that to say yes to those things which are of God means to say no to those which are not.

We need to have created the space to listen to the voice of the Spirit as it calls to our hearts and consoles us with its peace.

We must approach God with the humility to admit our faults, to entrust him with our healing, and implore him with our needs.

In other words, to proclaim his Gospel, we first need to receive it ourselves, and believe - a believe that shapes our lives, not merely here in this assembly, but our homes and our vocations, and every day of our existence.

That is no small task, and we will be tempted to set it aside, and leave that mission to someone else, someone we may think is holier or more qualified.

But don't be fooled: this is our mission as well, and we do not do it alone.

In this Eucharist, we are united with the intercession of the Saints and angels, and the presence of Our Lord himself, who comes to dwell within us in this Blessed Sacrament.

So rest assured that his words are true, that as we go forth, he will be with us - even to the end of the world.