

## Ascension (Year B) – May 13, 2018

ACTS 1:1-11; PS 47:2-3, 6-7, 8-9; EPH 4:1-13; MK 16:15-20

Some years ago, a priest in the **Archdiocese of Indianapolis** wrote a very challenging message for **his parishioners**. He had become frustrated that, whenever a **homeless** person asked any of **his parishioners** for help after Mass, they would just send the homeless person over to **him!**

This priest was pushing back against a dangerous attitude in his parish that *every problem was Father's job...not *their* job...to solve.*

This kind of “**It’s someone else’s job!**” attitude surfaces **most frequently**— in *any parish*—when parishioners **complain** to the pastor. Many parishioners are quick to express their *frustrations* about the parish, but rare is the person who follows such a complaint with the words:

**“...and I’m willing to get involved to help solve the problem”.**

These dynamics of parish life provide a good lens through which to see more clearly the difference between Catholics for whom the faith is a mere “**spectator sport**” ... and Catholics for whom the faith is a **way of life**...as well as the main reason for the difference.

Our **1<sup>st</sup> Reading** today describes the reaction of the Apostles when Jesus **Ascended** to heaven:

*While they were looking intently at the sky as he was going, suddenly two men dressed in white garments stood beside them. They said, “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.”* (Acts 1:10-11)

Now, there’s little doubt that if there were a group of us gathered on **Camelback Mountain** with **Bishop Olmsted**, and he was suddenly *lifted up to Heaven on a cloud*, we too would stand there stunned, staring up into the sky.

But a deeper reflection on the Apostles' initial reaction to the Ascension—*in the context of each Christian's duty to contribute to the Church's mission*—reveals an **all-too-common “head-in-the-clouds-Catholicism”** where people stand around **waiting** for **something** to happen...and for **someone else** to take action.

In the book, *Four Signs of a Dynamic Catholic*—which we distributed at Easter...and *a copy of which* I hope each of you has received—author **Matthew Kelly** offers a **stunning statistic** about parish life:

- **6.4 percent of registered parishioners contribute 80 percent of the volunteer hours in a parish**
- **6.8 percent of registered parishioners donate 80 percent of financial contributions**

For the sake of ease, we'll round those numbers up to **7%**. I call these **7%-ers** the “**usual suspects**”—the same familiar people who serve on multiple **committees**, who run many of our **programs**, who **tithe**...who—in a word—take on important responsibility in virtually **every aspect of a parish's life and mission**.

The reason that you always find a **small group of parishioners doing virtually everything** in **any** Catholic parish, is *not* because everything is “**covered**” and there is no need for additional help.

Rather, if you ask the **7%-ers** (*in this parish, at least*) what motivates them to serve so selflessly, most speak of their personal **relationship** with God and their profound **gratitude** to him for his goodness to them.

Presumably, then, **parishioners** for whom Catholicism remains merely a “**spectator sport**”, have not had a **genuine encounter with God**, because anyone who *has* met the Lord—and who has been deeply affected by his love and mercy—simply cannot **contain** what they've been given. When the

Holy Spirit **inhabits** and **animates** a soul, the **power** must be *unleashed*...and the **joy** must be **shared**.

Who would have ever imagined, for example, that a **rag-tag group** of Apostles—a group that included **four uneducated fishermen**, a **tax collector**, a **political/religious zealot**, and five other guys of **questionable qualifications for such a mission**—could unleash the *most universal and influential religion in the history of the world?*

*They* certainly didn't imagine it.

But **Jesus** did!

Now, just imagine if, *after Jesus Ascended into Heaven*, the Apostles had instead **retreated to the sidelines** thinking:

**“Well, he’s not here anymore to keep doing miraculous things—and that was *his* job anyway, not *ours*—so I guess there’s nothing for *us* to do.”**

Jesus’s Ascension was *not* his **retirement** from **ministry**, nor his **release** of his **Apostles** from their **mission** to continue his work...**in** the Church...and *as* the Church.

It was his *rearrangement* of the mission and the *remaking* of the missionaries!

Neither did Jesus **abandon** his Apostles to fend for themselves when he Ascended into Heaven.

Rather, he took off the **“training wheels”**—that is, their over-dependence on his tangible **presence**, and their mere **observance** of his work from the *sidelines*—and **sent his Spirit onto and into them** to make each one of them not just the **“best version of themselves”**, but *another* version of **HIM-self**.

That’s why, in the **Gospel of John**, Jesus told his disciples:

*I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.* (Jn 16:7)

Just as Jesus multiplied **five loaves** and **two fish** to feed thousands of people in one sitting, so too he **multiplies himself in each Christian**—through the power of the Holy Spirit—so that what he could **not** do because of his human limitations, he *could* do in and through each one of **them**...and *can* do in and through each one of **us**.

Had the Apostles chosen to take the “**spectator**” approach so prevalent in the Church today, you and I certainly wouldn’t be **here**...or at least we wouldn’t be here...as *Catholics*.

And as **dark** as the world is today—it would be a *whole lot darker*—assuming it would even have survived *this long*—without the light of Christ **shining on every continent**, thanks to the tireless efforts of *active, committed* disciples in every **age**...in every **place**...and in every *parish*.

The Holy Spirit given to the Apostles at Pentecost—**following Jesus’ Ascension into Heaven**—is the exact same Holy Spirit given to you and to me at our **Baptism**...and “*supercharged*” at our **Confirmation**.

But, if we treat the **Sacraments of Initiation**—Baptism, Confirmation and first Eucharist—as nothing more than **a list of obligations to be checked off and then forgotten**, rather than the supernatural means by which we receive our *mission from God*—as well as the *power to carry it out*—then we have **no business being surprised** when the darkness of the **world appears** to **overcome the light of Christ** (cf. Jn 1:5) around us...and we have **no right to complain** when darkness in our **souls** snuffs out the joy that **God** put there.

**Evangelization**—that is, the *sharing and spreading of the Gospel*—is primarily the mission of the **laity** and not the **clergy**.

The **clergy's** job is to **train** and **equip** the troops—*you*—to carry out this mission, to spread the Gospel in **your own circle of influence** by a willingness to share what your relationship with Jesus Christ has **done** for you...and *meant* to you.

But, you don't need a degree in **theology** or **Scripture** to do this—any more than the Apostles **needed**...or *had*...those things.

What you *do* need is a genuine encounter with the **Holy Spirit**.

The very same Holy Spirit that **multiplied eleven grossly *underqualified* men** into more than a *billion Catholics*.

The very same Holy Spirit who **took residence in your soul** the day you were **Baptized**.

The very same Holy Spirit who awaits your *permission* to transform **you** into the *joy-filled saint you were created to be*...with the **same divine power** that filled the **Apostles**...to spread the Gospel like *wildfire*...and to do so with **courage** and **joy**.

For those who wish to move off of the **sidelines** and into the *front lines*—to move out of the **93%**...and into the **7%**—but who don't know **how**, the first step is to say:

**“Holy Spirit...in the name of Jesus Christ...I give you permission to make me the Saint I was created to be!”**

**Say that...pray that...like you *mean* it.**

Then watch out!

Because things will begin to change...in ways you **never** imagined!