

**“Lift Up Your Hearts’, All the Way to Heaven”**  
**Homily for the Solemnity of the Ascension, Year “A”**  
**May 24, 2020**

**Introduction**

Handy rules of life, simple adages that help us navigate the circumstances of day-to-day living: we all know them, hear them, and usually try to live by them. You know, sayings such as, “haste makes waste,” and “many hands make light work,” and “distance makes the heart grow fonder.” Have you ever noticed, though, that some of these maxims have an equally popular counter-punch that would seem to state the opposite?

Does haste make waste, or rather is it that “he who hesitates is lost”? Is it that “many hands make light work,” or that “too many cooks spoil the broth”? Does distance really make the heart grow fonder, or is it more the case, “out of sight out of mind”? It always takes wisdom to know which rule of life to apply in a particular circumstance.

**Ascension Reveals Heaven**

That last dichotomy, “distance makes the heart grow fonder” versus “out of sight out of mind,” is one worth contemplating on the occasion of the mystery of faith we celebrate today, our Lord’s Ascension into heaven.

First of all, try to imagine the scene at our Lord’s Ascension as described by St. Matthew in our Gospel reading for this Mass. The apostles are gathered there with their Master and Teacher, a small band of disciples who have learned and been formed by him for three years, and witnessed the saving actions by which God fulfilled His promise of salvation. Even in the midst of their worship, though, they had doubts. And with all of those feelings of awe and doubt and excitement and hesitation filling them, their Lord is apparently taken away.

You can imagine the feeling if you have ever been in a situation where someone with a great and compelling presence is now absent: there is a sense of loss, a vacuum that has been created. We can think, for example, of this experience of the whole world at the death of Pope St. John Paul II, certainly one of the most towering figures of the entire twentieth century. But while they must have been feeling this sense of absence, there is also something more going on here.

The Ascension is, really, the culmination of the exaltation of our Lord. It is an exaltation which began, in the teaching of the Gospel of St. John, with his crucifixion. That is where he was exalted, that is, lifted up, on the Cross. In the Fourth Gospel we hear our Lord speak often of his being “lifted up,” which St. John interprets as his crucifixion. The Cross is the throne from which he reigns:

the ultimate act of self-gift, the culmination of his self-emptying which began with the Incarnation.

This movement of self-emptying then leads to his Resurrection, his triumph over death and glorification. Now, in the Ascension, he returns to his Father in glory, seated at His right hand in heaven. Thus, the Ascension reveals heaven. This small tight-knit band of disciples enjoyed fellowship with the God-man for three years, were witnesses to his exaltation, and now he reveals to them the dimension of divine and human fellowship which is based upon the entire movement of his exaltation from crucifixion to Resurrection to Ascension: the glory of heaven.

### **Connection with Mission**

But there is more to the story still. As St. Luke tells us in the Acts of the Apostles, our Lord foretold to this band of disciples that they would be receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit. And Matthew and the other Gospels inform us that, just moments before our Lord returned to heaven, it was then that he gave to his apostles the Great Commission: "Go ... and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you."

That is why the "two men dressed in white garments [who] stood beside them" said, "'Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?'" the verse from the First Reading that is also the entrance chant for this Mass of the Solemnity of the Ascension.

This, then, puts all the pieces together: the exaltation of Jesus reveals the life of heaven, where our hearts are to be set, the dimension in which we should already seek to live, and the only way to do that is by participation in the Great Commission. In other words, exaltation – the whole movement of which begins in crucifixion and ends in the glory of heaven – means commitment to mission. Put more simply: exaltation implies mission.

### **Absence of Mass and Eucharist: A Litmus Test**

So where does that leave us in the here and now? For two months now, our people have found themselves in the unusual situation of not having access to the Mass. While we have been working hard to reopen for public Masses in a safe and responsible way, and I am confident that we will be able to do so for at least a limited number of people in the very near future, this fast from the Mass and the Eucharist can be seen as something of a litmus test as to which rule of life applies to us at this time: is it distance makes the heart grow fonder, or out of sight out of mind? Or, is it something else, something greater?

If our hearts are truly set on heaven, we will feel the absence of our communion with the Lord, even as he continues to be present to us through the gift of his Spirit to the Church. As the great liturgy scholar and Benedictine abbot Dom Prosper Guéranger puts it: "If our heart is seeking its Jesus, and longs to come to him, it is alive with the true life; if its energies are spent upon created things, and it feels no attraction for its Jesus, it is dead."

At every Mass, in an exhortation that comes to us from the synagogue liturgy, the priest calls out to the people: "Lift up your hearts." That is: lift up your hearts to heaven, set them on heaven, and strive to live there already here and now. The Christian whose heart is "alive with true life" is aware that in the present time that true life is hidden in "heaven" because, by believing in Christ, the Christian has entered into the dimension of that fellowship of God and man which is the Christian's eternal destiny, the Christian has begun this life already in the here and now, however imperfectly. And that fellowship is revealed in mission: participation in the Church's mission of evangelization is where the hidden life of heaven is revealed in our own time and place.

### **Conclusion**

Let us be clear, though: participation in the mission of the Church does not mean being professionally employed by a parish or diocese or other religious organization, nor is it reserved only to the ordained and consecrated religious. God gives everyone a vocation, and the whole point of a vocation is to participate in the mission of the Church in accordance with the demands of that vocation. It takes all vocations to fulfill the Great Commission: married couples and families, as well as priests, consecrated religious and deacons, everyone using their unique God-given talents to follow Christ's example of self-emptying so that the pattern of his exaltation may be repeated in the here and now.

The extent to which you give yourselves to living your vocation, especially in this time of absence of the Eucharist, is the extent to which is revealed how much your heart is growing fonder for your Eucharistic Lord. Even beyond a heart fond for communion with its Lord, living one's vocation faithfully and well expands the heart to be truly capacious to receive the fullness of love and grace our Lord wishes to lavish upon it, and so keep our hearts set on the eternal destiny that awaits God's faithful ones: fullness of communion with Him in the glory of heaven.