

In Ascensione Domini A

Lectio Divina by Fr. Randy Soto

I. Lectio

A. In the First Reading from the Acts of the Apostles, Jesus ascends into the Heavens but he does not leave us orphans. As his physical appearance begins to be hidden by the clouds of eternity, his presence is felt in our midst all the more: His Glory shines through the cloud, the angels, and his Divine Word. He blesses us and sends us to proclaim the good news to the whole world, so we cannot remain there, simply standing, for we must build the Kingdom of Heaven so that when he returns he may find us shepherding to each other: *“Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking in the sky? The Lord will return, just as you have seen him ascend, alleluia.”*

B. We are overwhelmed with what Jesus has done in his ministry, so we make echo of the Ps 47 and say: *“God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.”*

C. Paul prays to God so that the community of Ephesus may receive spirit of wisdom and revelation to know God. This spirit and this revelation consist of knowing Christ and Christ Risen and Ascended into Heaven. This also includes knowing of Christ as the Head of the body, the Church. Consequently, the Ascension of Christ is a consolation to all of us, for where the Head now seats *ad dexteram Patris*, we shall follow suit on the last day.

D. Typical of Matthew’s style, the last scene of the Gospel places us upon a high mountain. There Jesus addresses his disciples for the last time. His words reassure the Apostles that Jesus is going to be always the God with us, the Emmanuel; but at the same time lead us foreword into a pro-active *Missio Ecclesiae*: *“All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go and teach all nations, says the Lord; I am with you always, until the end of the world.”*

III. Meditatio

A. Saint Augustine: *Sermo de Ascensione Domini* (PL 2:494-495).

Today our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven; let our hearts ascend with him. Listen to the words of the Apostle: If you have risen with Christ, set your hearts on the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God; seek the things that are above, not the things that are on earth. For just as he remained with us even after his ascension, so we too are already in heaven with him, even though what is promised us has not yet been fulfilled in our bodies.

Christ is now exalted above the heavens, but he still suffers on earth all the pain that we, members of his body, have to bear. He showed this when he cried out from above: Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? And when he said: I was hungry and you gave me food.

Why do we on earth not strive to find rest with him in heaven even now, through the faith, hope and love that unite us to him? 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.

He did not leave heaven when he came down to us; nor did he withdraw from us when he went up again into heaven. The fact that he was in heaven even while he was on earth is borne out by his own statement: No one has ever ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven.

These words are explained by our oneness with Christ, for he is our head and we are his body. No one ascended into heaven except Christ because we also are Christ: he is the Son of Man by his union with us, and we by our union with him are the sons of God. So the Apostle says: Just as the human body, which has many members, is a unity, because all the different members make one body, so is it also with Christ. He too has many members, but one body.

Out of compassion for us he descended from heaven, and although he ascended alone, we also ascend, because we are in him by grace. Thus, no one but Christ descended and no one but Christ ascended; not because there is no distinction between the head and the body, but because the body as a unity cannot be separated from the head.

III. Oratio

A. We begin our celebration today by pondering the angel's question to the Apostles: *"Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking in the sky? The Lord will return, just as you have seen him ascend, alleluia."* (EA); then we pray to follow hopefully, Jesus into his Celestial abode: *"may we follow him into the new creation, for his ascension is our glory and our hope* (OP). We also pray the Eucharist may assist us in our purification and sanctification process: *"may his gifts help us rise with him to the joys of heaven, where he lives and reigns forever and ever"* (PG); in the Preface, the Church gives us succinctly the nature and purpose of Ascension of Our Lord: *"Today the Lord Jesus, the king of glory, the conqueror of sin and death, ascended to heaven while the angels sang his praises. Christ, the mediator between God and man, judge of the world, and Lord of all, has passed beyond our sight, not to abandon us but to be our hope. Christ is the beginning, the head of the Church; where he has gone, we hope to follow."* As we receive Holy Communion we are reminded that Jesus Christ promised to be with us forever: the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is the Sacrament of his perennial presence in the world until he comes again: *"I, the Lord, am with you always, until the end of the world, alleluia."* (CA). Finally, we make an act of faith in the Eucharist as token of the heavenly realities in which Christ the Head of the body of the Church lives to intercede for all the faithful until one day we may join him eternally: *"Father, in this Eucharist we touch the divine life you give to the world. Help us to follow Christ with love to eternal life where he is Lord forever and ever."*

B. Traditionally on this Mass the roman Canon is recited for the Eucharistic Prayer. We should be mindful that it has *Communicantes Propria* for this Liturgical Celebration of the Ascension.

III. Contemplatio

SAINT LEO THE GREAT

A. Sermon 73: On the Lord's Ascension, I (New Advent.org).

Since the blessed and glorious Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, whereby the Divine power in three days raised the true Temple of God, which the wickedness of the Jews had

overthrown, the sacred forty days, dearly-beloved, are today ended, which by most holy appointment were devoted to our most profitable instruction, so that, during the period that the Lord thus protracted the lingering of His bodily presence, our faith in the Resurrection might be fortified by needful proofs. For Christ's Death had much disturbed the disciples' hearts, and a kind of torpor of distrust had crept over their grief-laden minds at His torture on the cross, at His giving up the ghost, at His lifeless body's burial. For, when the holy women, as the Gospel-story has revealed, brought word of the stone rolled away from the tomb, the sepulcher emptied of the body, and the angels bearing witness to the living Lord, their words seemed like ravings to the Apostles and other disciples. Which doubtfulness, the result of human weakness, the Spirit of Truth would most assuredly not have permitted to exist in His own preacher's breasts, had not their trembling anxiety and careful hesitation laid the foundations of our faith. It was our perplexities and our dangers that were provided for in the Apostles: it was ourselves who in these men were taught how to meet the cavillings of the ungodly and the arguments of earthly wisdom. We are instructed by their looking, we are taught by their hearings, we are convinced by their handlings. Let us give thanks to the Divine management and the holy Father.' necessary slowness of belief. Others doubted, that we might not doubt.

Those days, therefore, dearly-beloved, which intervened between the Lord's Resurrection and Ascension did not pass by in uneventful leisure, but great mysteries were ratified in them, deep truths revealed. In them the fear of awful death was removed, and the immortality not only of the soul but also of the flesh established. In them, through the Lord's breathing upon them, the Holy Ghost is poured upon all the Apostles, and to the blessed Apostle Peter beyond the rest the care of the Lord's flock is entrusted, in addition to the keys of the kingdom. Then it was that the Lord joined the two disciples as a companion on the way, and, to the sweeping away of all the clouds of our uncertainty, upbraided them with the slowness of their timorous hearts. Their enlightened hearts catch the flame of faith, and lukewarm as they have been, are made to burn while the Lord unfolds the Scriptures. In the breaking of bread also their eyes are opened as they eat with Him: how far more blessed is the opening of their eyes, to whom the glorification of their nature is revealed than that of our first parents, on whom fell the disastrous consequences of their transgression.

And in the course of these and other miracles, when the disciples were harassed by bewildering thoughts, and the Lord had appeared in their midst and said, Peace be unto you, that what was passing through their hearts might not be their fixed opinion (for they thought they saw a spirit not flesh), He refutes their thoughts so discordant with the Truth, offers to the doubters' eyes the marks of the cross that remained in His hands and feet, and invites them to handle Him with careful scrutiny, because the traces of the nails and spear had been retained to heal the wounds of unbelieving hearts, so that not with wavering faith, but with most steadfast knowledge they might comprehend that the Nature which had been laid in the sepulcher was to sit on God the Father's throne.

Accordingly, dearly-beloved, throughout this time which elapsed between the Lord's Resurrection and Ascension, God's Providence had this in view, to teach and impress upon both the eyes and hearts of His own people that the Lord Jesus Christ might be acknowledged to have as truly risen, as He was truly born, suffered, and died. And hence the most blessed Apostles and all the disciples, who had been both bewildered at His death on the cross and backward in believing His Resurrection, were so strengthened by the clearness of the truth that when the Lord entered the heights of heaven, not only were they affected with no sadness, but were even filled with great joy. And truly great and unspeakable was their cause for joy, when in the sight of the

holy multitude, above the dignity of all heavenly creatures, the Nature of mankind went up, to pass above the angels' ranks and to rise beyond the archangels' heights, and to have Its uplifting limited by no elevation until, received to sit with the Eternal Father. It should be associated on the throne with His glory, to Whose Nature It was united in the Son. Since then Christ's Ascension is our uplifting, and the hope of the Body is raised, whither the glory of the Head has gone before, let us exult, dearly-beloved, with worthy joy and delight in the loyal paying of thanks. For today not only are we confirmed as possessors of paradise, but have also in Christ penetrated the heights of heaven, and have gained still greater things through Christ's unspeakable grace than we had lost through the devil's malice. For us, whom our virulent enemy had driven out from the bliss of our first abode, the Son of God has made members of Himself and placed at the right hand of the Father, with Whom He lives and reigns in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever and ever. Amen.

B. Sermon 74: On the Lord's Ascension, II. (New Advent.org).

The mystery of our salvation, dearly-beloved, which the Creator of the universe valued at the price of His blood, has now been carried out under conditions of humiliation from the day of His bodily birth to the end of His Passion. And although even in the form of a slave many signs of Divinity have beamed out, yet the events of all that period served particularly to show the reality of His assumed Manhood. But after the Passion, when the chains of death were broken, which had exposed its own strength by attacking Him, Who was ignorant of sin, weakness was turned into power, mortality into eternity, contumely into glory, which the Lord Jesus Christ showed by many clear proofs in the sight of many, until He carried even into heaven the triumphant victory which He had won over the dead. As therefore at the Easter commemoration, the Lord's Resurrection was the cause of our rejoicing; so the subject of our present gladness is His Ascension, as we commemorate and duly venerate that day on which the Nature of our humility in Christ was raised above all the host of heaven, over all the ranks of angels, beyond the height of all powers, to sit with God the Father. On which Providential order of events we are founded and built up, that God's Grace might become more wondrous, when, notwithstanding the removal from men's sight of what was rightly felt to command their awe, faith did not fail, hope did not waver, love did not grow cold. For it is the strength of great minds and the light of firmly-faithful souls, unhesitatingly to believe what is not seen with the bodily sight, and there to fix one's affections whither you cannot direct your gaze. And whence should this Godliness spring up in our hearts, or how should a man be justified by faith, if our salvation rested on those things only which lie beneath our eyes? Hence our Lord said to him who seemed to doubt of Christ's Resurrection, until he had tested by sight and touch the traces of His Passion in His very Flesh, because you have seen Me, you have believed: blessed are they who have not seen and yet have believed John 20:29 .

In order, therefore, dearly-beloved, that we may be capable of this blessedness, when all things were fulfilled which concerned the Gospel preaching and the mysteries of the New Testament, our Lord Jesus Christ, on the fortieth day after the Resurrection in the presence of the disciples, was raised into heaven, and terminated His presence with us in the body, to abide on the Father's right hand until the times Divinely fore-ordained for multiplying the sons of the Church are accomplished, and He comes to judge the living and the dead in the same flesh in which He ascended. And so that which till then was visible of our Redeemer was changed into a sacramental presence , and that faith might be more excellent and stronger, sight gave way to

doctrine, the authority of which was to be accepted by believing hearts enlightened with rays from above.

This Faith, increased by the Lord's Ascension and established by the gift of the Holy Ghost, was not terrified by bonds, imprisonments, banishments, hunger, fire, attacks by wild beasts, refined torments of cruel persecutors. For this Faith throughout the world not only men, but even women, not only beardless boys, but even tender maids, fought to the shedding of their blood. This Faith cast out spirits, drove off sicknesses, raised the dead: and through it the blessed Apostles themselves also, who after being confirmed by so many miracles and instructed by so many discourses, had yet been panic-stricken by the horrors of the Lord's Passion and had not accepted the truth of His resurrection without hesitation, made such progress after the Lord's Ascension that everything which had previously filled them with fear was turned into joy. For they had lifted the whole contemplation of their mind to the Godhead of Him that sat at the Father's right hand, and were no longer hindered by the barrier of corporeal sight from directing their mind.' gaze to That Which had never quitted the Father's side in descending to earth, and had not forsaken the disciples in ascending to heaven.

The Son of Man and Son of God, therefore, dearly-beloved, then attained a more excellent and holier fame, when He betook Himself back to the glory of the Father's Majesty, and in an ineffable manner began to be nearer to the Father in respect of His Godhead, after having become farther away in respect of His manhood. A better instructed faith then began to draw closer to a conception of the Son's equality with the Father without the necessity of handling the corporeal substance in Christ, whereby He is less than the Father, since, while the Nature of the glorified Body still remained the faith of believers was called upon to touch not with the hand of flesh, but with the spiritual understanding the Only-begotten, Who was equal with the Father. Hence comes that which the Lord said after His Resurrection, when Mary Magdalene, representing the Church, hastened to approach and touch Him: Touch Me not, for I have not yet ascended to My Father John 20:17: that is, I would not have you come to Me as to a human body, nor yet recognize Me by fleshly perceptions: I put you off for higher things, I prepare greater things for you: when I have ascended to My Father, then you shall handle Me more perfectly and truly, for you shall grasp what you can not touch and believe what you cannot see. But when the disciples' eyes followed the ascending Lord to heaven with upward gaze of earnest wonder, two angels stood by them in raiment shining with wondrous brightness, who also said, You men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing into heaven? This Jesus Who was taken up from you into heaven shall so come as you saw Him going into heaven Acts 1:11 . By which words all the sons of the Church were taught to believe that Jesus Christ will come visibly in the same Flesh wherewith He ascended, and not to doubt that all things are subjected to Him on Whom the ministry of angels had waited from the first beginning of His Birth. For, as an angel announced to the blessed Virgin that Christ should be conceived by the Holy Ghost, so the voice of heavenly beings sang of His being born of the Virgin also to the shepherds. As messengers from above were the first to attest His having risen from the dead, so the service of angels was employed to foretell His coming in very Flesh to judge the world, that we might understand what great powers will come with Him as Judge, when such great ones ministered to Him even in being judged.

And so, dearly-beloved, let us rejoice with spiritual joy, and let us with gladness pay God worthy thanks and raise our hearts' eyes unimpeded to those heights where Christ is. Minds that have heard the call to be uplifted must not be pressed down by earthly affections , they that are fore-ordained to things eternal must not be taken up with the things that perish; they that have entered on the way of Truth must not be entangled in treacherous snares, and the faithful must

so take their course through these temporal things as to remember that they are sojourning in the vale of this world, in which, even though they meet with some attractions, they must not sinfully embrace them, but bravely pass through them. For to this devotion the blessed Apostle Peter arouses us, and entreating us with that loving eagerness which he conceived for feeding Christ's sheep by the threefold profession of love for the Lord, says, dearly-beloved, I beseech you, as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul 1 Peter 2:11 . But for whom do fleshly pleasures wage war, if not for the devil, whose delight it is to fetter souls that strive after things above, with the enticements of corruptible good things, and to draw them away from those abodes from which he himself has been banished? Against his plots every believer must keep careful watch that he may crush his foe on the side whence the attack is made. And there is no more powerful weapon, dearly-beloved, against the devil's wiles than kindly mercy and bounteous charity, by which every sin is either escaped or vanquished. But this lofty power is not attained until that which is opposed to it be overthrown. And what so hostile to mercy and works of charity as avarice from the root of which spring all evils ? And unless it be destroyed by lack of nourishment, there must needs grow in the ground of that heart in which this evil weed has taken root, the thorns and briars of vices rather than any seed of true goodness. Let us then, dearly-beloved, resist this pestilential evil and follow after charity , without which no virtue can flourish, that by this path of love whereby Christ came down to us, we too may mount up to Him, to Whom with God the Father and the Holy Spirit is honor and glory forever and ever. Amen