

+ Ascension

May 21, 2020

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,
My Very Dear Sons,

The mystery of the Ascension of the Lord is filled, “charged” as we might say, with theological hope. Everything about the Gospel scene and the gripping narrative of the Acts of the Apostles relating Jesus’ departure from earth stirs up in us the invincible conviction that our life has only begun here below and that a supernatural happiness awaits us. “And I say to you, I will not drink from henceforth of this fruit of the vine, until that day when I shall drink it with you new in the kingdom of my Father.”¹ Monks live from this kind of radical hope focusing, not on the fleeting existence of this present world, but on life beyond the horizon of the visible world here below. This hope is the picture presented by the Lord. This is what has been taught by the Fathers of the Church and by so many Saints. This is the main lesson of today’s feast. And yet, and yet....

Young people generally find it quite necessary to find hope even in this world: they are generally not ready to give up on the very human existence in a world they have barely even begun to experience! And this is not true only about young people: many adults, including a vast amount of practicing Catholics, have little use for the radical outlook that looks already to flee from the city of man, yearning only for the City of God. They want, on the contrary, to hope for something already here below. They will not be content—at least not yet—with a transcendent ideal pointing to the Kingdom of Heaven, beyond the vanishing point of human history as we know it now.

And, to be honest, who would *not* want to reform things, to change the desolate cultural landscape that is encountered in so many places today? Here is the picture painted in words by Pope Emeritus Benedict (simply Pope then) in 2007:

Like the manna for the people of Israel, the Eucharist for each Christian generation is the indispensable nourishment that sustains them as they cross the desert of the world; parched by the ideological and economic systems which do not promote life but rather humiliate it. It is a world where the logic of power and possessions prevails rather than that of service and love, a world where the culture of violence and death is frequently triumphant.²

Who would not like to see a better world, even now? There is no absolute contradiction between the Kingdom of Heaven and a more just society here below. However, there is a problem: the more radical forms of this refusal to put one’s hope in a transcendent ideal beyond the present world come with modern systems of Philosophy such as Marxism, which sets its sights on a theoretical “workers’ paradise” which, of course, does not really exist and never will, and offers a kind of substitute for the Kingdom of Heaven deemed too hard to pursue. There are also many lesser forms of this placing of hope alone in the present life. Most of the efforts of the

¹ Matthew 26:29.

² Homily for Solemnity of Corpus Christi, June 7, 2007.

so-called Liberation Theology were an attempt to reconcile the two tendencies. Many Catholics continue to place a great emphasis on hoping for a better world here below, whether in terms of saving the environment or of helping the poor in one way or another. Of course, there is nothing more evangelical than offering a poor person, a hungry person, bread or giving a cold cup of water to the man dying of thirst. That is a vital part of Christianity. The problems come when, instead of giving of my own person, I want an economic system somehow to solve the problem for me. Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta worked for the poor, but not by promoting an economic system such as socialism. She did this by adoring the Blessed Sacrament for an hour each morning after Mass and then going out to give of herself, of her person. By means of the individual acts of true Catholic Christian charity she and her Sisters really *did* change the world. They caused a wave of goodness to traverse the planet. This can happen.

The Irish poet, a Catholic and a Noble laureate, Seamus Heaney mused about the rare but real moment of history when a certain great good is realized despite the forces of evil that dominate us all too often.

History says, don't hope.
On this side of the grave
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up
And hope and history rhyme.³

Even the most faith-filled Catholics continue to aspire for something nobler, something more beautiful in this present world, as we await the destiny God has appointed for us. Though we must steer clear of any form of materialistic utopia, which must needs end in the destruction of human happiness, it is certainly possible to aspire to a relative reform of things, to the restoration of so many Catholic values that have inspired Western societies in the past and could reappear in some form or another. How we could use a restoration of sanity, of sanctity, of glad poverty, and of authentic Christian Catholic joy! Some see Distributism as the path to such hope. Others would call for some sort of return to the larger vision of what was once Christendom. Our Lady of Clear Creek Abbey and its budding village certainly belong to an effort of spiritual and human restoration through the influence of Benedictine life.

In the final analysis, however, it is only in the context of the Christian hope of everlasting life in the Kingdom of Heaven that a temporal restoration, a "tidal wave of justice," can surge forward in the sea of history. The Angels of the Ascension ask us as well as the Apostles and Disciples, "Ye men of Galilee, why wonder you, looking up to heaven? He shall so come as you have seen Him going up to heaven."⁴ We must establish the temporal upon the eternal, the visible upon the invisible, what is truly, authentically human upon the Divine. May the Holy Angels of the Ascension and their Queen help us ever to raise our eyes heavenward in expectation of the One Who ascended above the clouds and Who will return. Amen. Alleluia.

³ Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocle's "Philoctetes"* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990, 77.

⁴ Acts 1:11, *Introit* of Ascension Day's Mass.