

+ Ascension

May 18, 2023

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek Abbey
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,

With the entire Holy Catholic Church, Christ's Mystical Body, we celebrate today the Lord's Ascension into Heaven. Echoing the praises of the Angels and Archangels, of the Seraphim and Cherubim, of Thrones and Dominations, Principalities, Powers, Virtues, and of the Queen who rules them all, we add the glow of our own gladness to the spiritual brightness of those blessed beings, who feast their eyes on the very vision of God, while the Son of God, in His sacred and resurrected humanity, climbs to the height of His glory.

It was just forty days ago that Christ broke through the bonds of death to rise to a life that will know no decline, but already the time for this departure is upon us. Although there is a sadness in this separation from the Lord, who must leave us here on the earth of our exile, nevertheless Christ's Ascension is part of a chain of mysteries that leads to the final fulfillment of our personal destinies as well to the consummation of the life of the Church. Each phase of the life of Christ, as reflected in the Liturgical Year, leads to the next step toward the final realization of the plan of God's infinite and Divine Providence. This is the mystery of time, the "little by little" of creation.

But do we human beings really want to go to Heaven and move beyond the horizons of our familiar places? Do we truly want to vanish through the vanishing point of time and space in order to enter an unknown dimension, where God is said to dwell? There is a strong tendency in the men and women of our age to keep everything here below, to want to find Heaven on earth in the present moment, rather than to long for a distant world "over the rainbow." In his analysis of the errors of Modernism, Saint Pius X referred to this tendency as "immanentism," from the Latin meaning to "remain in."

The fact is that our earth is both, on the one hand, a garden of wonders, a delightful and beautiful reflection of God's Wisdom and Goodness, and, on the other hand—especially since the Fall of Adam and Eve—a place of imperfection, a kind of "rough draft" of human happiness, where much evil and misery lurk in the corners. There are simply too many dangers and sad things afoot for us to be able to sit back and enjoy an abiding peace. We can be happy only in the manner in which a pilgrim is happy, knowing that he is on the way to his destination and making progress. To seek transcendence, that is to say, to tend toward a different, higher world, is a duty and a deliverance. We must raise our eyes above the mediocrity and evil of what too often surrounds us. How terrible a thing it would be if we had nothing other to hope for than what we find in this world!

So let us follow the Lord. Let us sprout wings of prayer. Let us be mystics and spiritual beings, acknowledging what is most pure and noble in our nature. Never should we despise the flesh, as if it were intrinsically evil. Never should we follow the error of heretics who condemn marriage. Nevertheless, we were made for greater things than the material necessities of life. True, there is danger in pursuing the more spiritual way. Legion are the false mystics who have led men away from the truth under the guise of hidden, secret mysteries. But the splendid success of the best-known Catholic mystics, few as they are, largely compensates for the damage done by false ones.

In a Saint Teresa of Avila or a Saint John of the Cross—not to mention Our Blessed Father Saint Benedict—the Church finds the most beautiful realization—success—of what we call the spiritual life,

where the transcendent element bears its finest fruit. What begins in us in Holy Baptism is nurtured throughout our lives by God's grace, especially through the infused virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The saint is the person in whom these gifts have reached their greatest development, whose spiritual life on earth blossoms so well as to border on the very life of eternity. The Church in the twenty-first century teaches this same doctrine. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (n. 2558) quotes Saint Therese of Lisieux: "For me, prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy."

There is a small problem, however. How are we to reconcile these two ideas: that of an exaltation of human life and that of Christian humility? How do we follow Our Lord above the clouds and yet keep our feet on the ground—especially the moral ground of the poor in spirit? It is Satan who, in his pride, declares, "I will ascend into heaven, I will exalt my throne above the stars of God...I will ascend above the height of the clouds, I will be like the Most High" (Isaiah 14:13-14). Well, one of the liturgical texts for Masses of the Blessed Virgin during Eastertide gives us a clue:

Alleluia, The rod of Jesse hath blossomed; a virgin hath brought forth God and Man; God hath restored peace, *reconciling in himself the lowest and the highest.*

In fact, it is the Incarnation itself that assures us that our exaltation in Christ will not contradict humility: in the Word Incarnate, Heaven and Earth are brought together. In leaning upon the Son of God and His mystery, we will not be challenging God, but allowing Him to raise us up in a way that will achieve our supernatural destiny, rather than causing us to teeter on heights that are not for us.

It is clear that our contemporary society as a whole will have nothing of this heavenward gaze, but the world—the worldly world of today as of yesterday—is not a sure reference for our human existence. So much of it is simply make-believe and vanity. Souls pretend to be "in the know," but are really looking—often desperately—for the truth that will save them. Everyone is looking for happiness, and no one finds it in mere worldliness. But new avenues of evangelization need to be explored. The text of the Gospel is there for anyone to see, but it takes more than a text.

One way to bear witness to the Gospel, one way to make transcendence real for the men and women of our day, is simply to live as if Heaven mattered. One need not even say very much. To spend hours at liturgical offices, whether as a monk, a nun or a member of the laity, is to say to the world: "There is more here than meets the eye." While others consume precious time in pleasures that are frequently harmful or spend their lives in amassing money, we live in the presence of the Holy Angels, participating in the same liturgy that goes on in Heaven. It is so simple, but so profound! It may be that we never do so much for the salvation of the world as when we kneel before the Blessed Sacrament, apparently wasting time, but actually transcending time.

May God, who ascends today amid shouts of triumph, may the Lord, who climbs to Heaven with the sound of trumpets, deign to look upon our weak but fervent desire to follow Him. May the Queen of Heaven smile upon us, as she delights in the homecoming of her King.
Amen. Alleluia.