

+ Ascension

May 9, 2024

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,

Everything about the feast of the Ascension speaks to us of the vertical dimension of human existence. *Ye men of Galilee, why wonder you, looking up to heaven?* This seems very normal in the context of the Christian faith that has us say so often, *Our Father who art in Heaven*. Not only does our faith point us in the direction of higher things--of celestial matters, of heavenly realities--but also it orients our whole being toward a supernatural destiny, an entirely new reality that surpasses even the highest physical objects we can see or imagine. We are Christians: all of this is our birthright. By virtue of our Holy Baptism, we are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Much of modern society and of contemporary culture, on the contrary, seems to point in a very determined manner to the earthly side of things, to the horizontal dimension of life. Nearly all modern thinkers, going back several centuries, preach this other gospel that tends always to minimize what might lie beyond the visible world. Several popes have underlined the phenomenon and warned the Church against it, beginning with Pope Saint Pius X, whose teaching has been echoed by his successors, especially by Pope Benedict XVI, the great theologian-pope. Almost everything in modern society seems to work against us, in order to keep us away from prayer and from looking up to Heaven. It is truly a conspiracy of the horizontal. Pleasure, power, money—especially money—seem to be the things that really count, according to this flat world view, according to this “pancake gospel.” “Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: Little we see in Nature that is ours,” said the English poet. Only the wise lament such a state of things. Most men find it all quite acceptable and convenient. “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die” (I Corinthians 15:32 and Ecclesiastes 8:15).

What *really* confuses us, though, sometimes is the attitude of some clergymen who seem prone to the same horizontal vision of life. More recent liturgical forms turn us towards one another, with the priest “facing the people”. This liturgical orientation is fairly typical of a state of mind. Furthermore, instead of describing the Church as a hierarchy, the teachers of the Faith see her mostly as *communion*, underlining always the dimension of mission, of solidarity, of social justice—even of care for the environment. These are worthy priorities, but very much conceived along a horizontal line of reasoning. And we are not speaking merely isolated churchmen, but priests, bishops, and popes. How are we to understand?

Well, to begin with, the Church certainly *is* a communion! Who could doubt it? This has always been an essential dimension of the mystery of the Church. There truly is a horizontal—let us say a missionary—axis of Christian life. Alongside Our Lady of the Annunciation, to give a kind of example or image here, along with Our Lady receiving vertically from Heaven the very Word of God into her heart and womb, there is also Our Lady of the Visitation, the Blessed Virgin going out to help her cousin, going forward as a missionary of the Incarnation on the horizontal highways and byways of the world. Next to the contemplative and more heavenly-oriented Mary of Bethany, there is her sister Martha, who is preparing the meal for Our Lord on a very horizontal table. Indeed, the Church has been a great teacher of communion and of what we call in modern terms “solidarity.”

But how do we understand the correct relationship between these two dimensions, the vertical and the horizontal? How can we avoid being deceived and drawn into a predominately horizontal way of seeing the world with all the bad consequences that follow? It is rather obvious that the horizontal has gotten out of hand in our time, and that Christians have become preoccupied with the earthly mission, often to the detriment of the Faith itself. Martha seems to have claimed in our time the “better part” once awarded by Our Lord to her sister, Mary. Where is the truth?

As always, really, the truth is in the One whose own middle name is Truth. “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). In Our Lord there is what we might refer to as a more vertical dimension, that is to say His divinity. Christ is a Divine Person, the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity. But Christ also has a complete and very real human nature. In this context we might see it as a horizontal dimension, since this human nature of Christ is something created. As a simple matter of theological fact, in Our Lord the vertical and the horizontal are in perfect rapport, perfect relationship. Take one dimension away, divinity or humanity, and you have destroyed the reality of Christ: you are a heretic. Pope Saint Leo the Great, who was up against the Monophysite heresy in the 5th century, often insisted on this point. The Divine nature comes first, but this fact does not make the human nature of Christ unreal or unimportant. The vertical and the horizontal in Christ form together one harmonious Word Incarnate, one God-Man. We have to hold both ends of the chain.

The Church, Mystical Body of Christ reflects something of the same relationship. We find in Her a properly vertical dimension, the hierarchy of official teaching and discipline, which comes first, in this sense that she was established as a Divine institution through the Apostles and their successors. But we also find that more horizontal side, the mission. Next to the vertical hierarchy of Pope, Cardinals, Bishops, Priests, Deacons, down to the altar servers and the common faithful, there is the hierarchy of sanctity, where anyone might be a saint, surpassing all the priests and dignitaries in the perfection of charity. This missionary dimension of the Church corresponds to Christ’s commandment to make disciples of all the nations. It is the dimension of the second commandment like unto [the first] (Mt. 22:39).

This being said, human beings are made to stand up toward the sky, unlike the animals who go on all fours. We are made for looking at the stars. *Quid admiramini, why wonder you?* ask the Angels. This is not a blame, but a promise. Christ has ascended up to Heaven. He will come again from above to take us up above. “[Jesus had] said to them earlier: You are from beneath, I am from above. You are of this world, I am not of this world (Jn 8:23). The Holy Father, during a general audience, made the following remarks:

The Ascension of Jesus into heaven acquaints us with this deeply consoling reality on our journey: in Christ, true God and true man, our humanity was taken to God. Christ opened the path to us. He is like a guide climbing a mountain who, on reaching the summit, pulls us up to him with his rope and leads us to God. If we entrust our life to him, if we let ourselves be guided by him, we are certain to be in safe hands, in the hands of our Savior, of our Advocate... This is the invitation to base our contemplation on Christ’s lordship, to find in him the strength to spread the Gospel and to witness to it in everyday life: contemplation and action, *ora et labora*, as St Benedict taught, are both necessary in our life as Christians. (General Audience, 17 April 2013)

May we ever climb, side by side, up the spiritual mountain mentioned by Saint Benedict, men and women of the mission, but destined for the stars. Amen. Alleluia.