



THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD¹

Once more the liturgy reminds us of the final moment in Jesus' life among men, his ascension into heaven. Many things have happened since our Lord was born in Bethlehem. We have thought of him in the manger, worshipped by the shepherds and the Magi; we have contemplated those long years of unpretentious work in Nazareth; we have gone with him all through the land of Palestine, as he preached the kingdom of God to men and went about doing good to all. And later on, during the days of his passion, we have suffered on seeing him accused and ill-treated and crucified.

Then, sorrow gave way to the joy and light of the resurrection. What a clear and firm foundation for our faith! But perhaps, like the Apostles in those days, we are still weak, and on the day of the ascension we ask Christ: "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?"² Is it now that we can expect all our perplexity and all our weakness to vanish forever?

Our Lord answers by going up to heaven. Like the Apostles, we remain partly perplexed and partly saddened at his departure. It is not easy, in fact, to get accustomed to the physical absence of Jesus. I am moved when I think that, in an excess of love, he has remained with us, even when he has gone away. He has gone to heaven and, at the same time, he gives himself to us as our nourishment in the sacred host. Still, we miss his human speech, his way of acting, of looking, of smiling, of doing good. We would like to go back and regard him closely again, as he sits down at the edge of the well, tired from his journey;³ as he weeps for Lazarus;⁴ as he prays for a long time;⁵ as he feels pity for the crowd.⁶

It has always seemed logical to me that the most holy humanity of Christ should ascend to the glory of the Father. The ascension has always made me very happy. But I think that the sadness that is particular to the day of the ascension is also a proof of the love that we feel for Jesus Christ, our Lord. He is God made man, perfect man, with flesh like ours, with blood like ours in his veins. Yet he leaves us and goes up to heaven. How can we help but miss his presence?

Christ in the Bread and in the Word

If we have learned to contemplate the mystery of Christ, if we make an effort to see him clearly, we will realize that now we can come very near Jesus too, in body and soul. Christ has pointed out the way to us clearly. We can be with him in the bread and in the word, receiving the nourishment of the Eucharist and knowing and fulfilling all that he came to teach us, as we meet and deal with him in our prayer. "He who eats my flesh, and drinks my blood, abides in me and I in him."⁷ "He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. But he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him."⁸

¹ A homily given on 19 May 1966, the feast of the Ascension

² Acts 1:6

³ Cf John 4:6

⁴ Cf John 11:35

⁵ Cf Luke 6:12

⁶ Cf Matt 15:32; Mark 8:2

⁷ John 6:57

⁸ John 14:21

These are not mere promises. They are something real, the essence of a true life, the life of grace that leads us to deal with God personally and directly. "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, as I also have kept my Father's commandments, and abide in his love."⁹ These words that Jesus said at the last supper are the best introduction to the day of the ascension. Christ knew that he had to go away, because, in a mysterious way that we cannot fully understand, after the ascension, a new outpouring of God's love would bring the presence of the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity. "I speak the truth to you: it is expedient for you that I depart. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you."¹⁰

Jesus has gone away. He sends us the Holy Spirit, who directs and sanctifies our souls. The action of the Paraclete within us confirms what Christ had announced — that we are children of God, that we "have not received a spirit of bondage so as to be again in fear, but... a spirit of adoption as sons, by virtue of which we cry: Abba! Father!"¹¹

You see? This is the action of the Blessed Trinity in our souls. A Christian always has access to God, who dwells in the innermost part of his being, if he corresponds to the grace that leads us to become one with Christ, in the bread and in the word, in the sacred host and in prayer. On two other occasions in the liturgical year — Holy Thursday and Corpus Christi — the Church sets aside important feast days to commemorate the reality of this living bread, which we are reminded of every day. On this feast of the ascension, let us turn our mind to conversation with our Lord. Let us attentively listen to his word.

A life of prayer

"A prayer to my living God."¹² If God is life for us, we should not be surprised to realize that our very existence as Christians must be interwoven with prayer. But don't imagine that prayer is an action to be carried out and then forgotten. The just man "delights in the law of the Lord, and meditates on his law day and night."¹³ "Through the night I meditate on you"¹⁴ and "my prayer comes to you like incense in the evening."¹⁵ Our whole day can be a time for prayer — from night to morning and from morning to night. In fact, as holy Scripture reminds us, even our sleep should be a prayer.¹⁶

Remember what the Gospels tell us about Jesus. At times he spent the whole night in an intimate conversation with his Father. The Apostles were filled with love when they saw Christ pray; and, after seeing this constant attitude in their master, they asked him: "Lord, teach us to pray"¹⁷ in this way. St Paul spreads the living example of Christ everywhere when he urges the faithful to be "constant in prayer."¹⁸ And St Luke portrays the behaviour of the first Christians with a phrase that is like the touch of an artist's brush: "they all, with one mind, continued steadfastly in prayer."¹⁹ A good Christian acquires his mettle, with the help of grace, in the training-ground of prayer. But prayer, our life-giving nourishment, is not limited to one form alone. Our heart will find an habitual

⁹ John 15:10

¹⁰ John 16:7

¹¹ Rom 8:15

¹² Ps 41:9

¹³ Ps 1:2

¹⁴ Cf Ps 62:7

¹⁵ Cf Ps 140:2

¹⁶ Cf Deut 6:6.7

¹⁷ Luke 11:1: Domine, doce nos orare

¹⁸ Rom 12:12: orationi instantes

¹⁹ Acts 1:14

expression in words, in the vocal prayers taught us by God himself — the Our Father — or by his angels — the Hail Mary. On other occasions, we will use the time-proven words that have expressed the piety of millions of our brothers in the faith: prayers from the liturgy — *lex orandi*; or others whose source is the love of an ardent heart, like the antiphons to our Lady: *Sub tuum praesidium, Memorare, Salve, Regina...*

There will be other occasions on which all we'll need will be two or three words, said with the quickness of a dart, *iaculata* — ejaculatory prayers, aspirations that we learn from a careful reading of Christ's life: "Lord, if you will, you can make me clean."²⁰ "Lord, you know all things, you know that I love you."²¹ "Lord, I do believe, but help my unbelief,"²² strengthen my faith. "Lord, I am not worthy."²³ "My Lord and my God!"²⁴... or other short phrases, full of affection, that spring from the soul's intimate fervour and correspond to the different circumstances of each day.

Besides these occasions, our life of prayer should also be based on some moments that are dedicated exclusively to our conversation with God, moments of silent dialogue, before the tabernacle if possible, in order to thank our Lord for having waited for us — so often alone — for twenty centuries. This heart-to-heart dialogue with God is mental prayer, in which the whole soul takes part; intelligence, imagination, memory and will are all involved. It is a meditation that helps to give supernatural value to our poor human life, with all its normal, everyday occurrences. Thanks to these moments of meditation and to our vocal prayer and aspirations, we will be able to turn our whole day into a continuous praise of God, in a natural way and without any outward display. Just as people in love are always thinking about each other, we will be aware of God's presence. And all our actions, down to the most insignificant, will be filled with spiritual effectiveness.

This is why, as a Christian sets out on his way of uninterrupted dealing with our Lord, his interior life grows and becomes strong and secure. And he is led to engage in the demanding yet attractive struggle to fulfil completely the will of God. I might add that this is not a path for a privileged few; it is a way open to everyone. It is through our life of prayer that we can understand the other aspect of today's feast: the apostolate, the carrying out of the commission Jesus gave to the disciples shortly before the ascension: "You shall be witnesses for me in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and even to the very ends of the earth."²⁵

Apostolate: redeeming with our Lord

With the amazing naturalness of the things of God, the contemplative soul is filled with apostolic zeal. "My heart was warmed within me, a fire blazed forth from my thoughts."²⁶ What could this fire be if not the fire that Christ talks about: "I have come to cast fire upon the earth, and what will I but that it be kindled?"²⁷ An apostolic fire that acquires its strength in prayer. There is no better way than this to carry on, throughout the whole world, the battle of peace to which every Christian is called, to fill up what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ.²⁸

²⁰ Matt 8:2: *Domine, si vis, potes me mundare*

²¹ John 21:17: *Domine, tu omnia nosti, tu scis quia amo te*

²² Mark 9:23: *Credo, Domine, sed adiuva incredulitatem meam*

²³ Mark 8:8 *Domine, non sum dignus*

²⁴ John 20:28: *Dominus meus et Deus meus*

²⁵ Acts 1:8

²⁶ Ps 38:4

²⁷ Luke 12:49

²⁸ Cf Col 1:24

Jesus has gone up to heaven, as we have seen. But a Christian can deal with him, in prayer and in the Eucharist, as the twelve Apostles dealt with him. The Christian can come to burn with an apostolic fervour that will lead him to serve, to redeem with Christ, to sow peace and joy wherever he goes. To serve, that is what apostolate is all about. If we count on our own strength alone, we will achieve nothing in the supernatural order. But if we are God's instruments, we will achieve everything. "I can do all things in him who gives me strength."²⁹ God, in his infinite goodness, has chosen to use inadequate instruments; and so, the apostle has no other aim than to let the Lord work in him and through him, to put himself totally at God's disposition, allowing him to carry out his work of salvation through creatures, through that soul whom he has chosen.

An apostle — that is what a Christian is, when he knows that he has been grafted onto Christ, made one with Christ, in baptism. He has been given the capacity to carry on the battle in Christ's name, through confirmation. He has been called to serve God by his activity in the world, because of the common priesthood of the faithful, which makes him share in some way in the priesthood of Christ. This priesthood — though essentially distinct from the ministerial priesthood — gives him the capacity to take part in the worship of the Church and to help other men in their journey to God, with the witness of his word and his example, through his prayer and work of atonement.

Each of us is to be ipse Christus: Christ himself. He is the one mediator between God and man.³⁰ And we make ourselves one with him in order to offer all things, with him, to the Father. Our calling to be children of God, in the midst of the world, requires us not only to seek our own personal holiness, but also to go out onto all the ways of the earth, to convert them into roads that will carry souls over all obstacles and lead them to the Lord. As we take part in all temporal activities, as ordinary citizens, we are to become leaven³¹ acting on the dough.³²

Christ has gone up to heaven, but he has given to all honest human things a specific capacity to be redeemed. St Gregory the Great expresses this reality in a striking way: "Thus Jesus went away to where he had come from, and came back from the place he continued to dwell; for, in the very moment in which he went up to heaven, he brought together, by his activity, heaven and earth. On today's feast we should proclaim solemnly that the decree of our condemnation has been suppressed, and the judgment which made us subject to corruption has been lifted. That nature which heard the words, You are dust, and to dust you shall return, that same nature has gone up to heaven today with Christ."³³

And so I keep on repeating to you that the world can be made holy. We Christians have a special role to play in sanctifying it. We are to cleanse it from the occasions of sin with which we human beings have soiled it. We are to offer it to our Lord as a spiritual offering, presented to him and made acceptable through his grace and with our efforts. Strictly speaking, we cannot say that there is any noble human reality that does not have a supernatural dimension, for the divine Word has taken on a complete human nature and consecrated the world with his presence and with the work of his hands. The great mission that we have received in baptism is to redeem the world with Christ. We are urged on by the charity of Christ³⁴ to take upon our shoulders a part of this task of saving souls.

²⁹ Phil 4:13

³⁰ Cf 1 Tim 2:5

³¹ Cf Matt 13:33

³² Cf 1 Cor 5:6

³³ In Evangelia homiliae, 29,10 (PL 76,1218)

³⁴ Cf 2 Cor 5:14

Look. The redemption was consummated when Jesus died on the cross, in shame and glory, "to the Jews a stumbling block, and to the Gentiles foolishness."³⁵ But the redemption will, by the will of God, be carried out continually until our Lord's time comes. It is impossible to live according to the heart of Jesus Christ and not to know that we are sent, as he was, "to save all sinners,"³⁶ with the clear realization that we ourselves need to trust in the mercy of God more and more every day. As a result, we will foster in ourselves a vehement desire to live as co-redeemers with Christ, to save all souls with him, because we are, we want to be, ipse Christus: Christ himself, and "He gave himself as a ransom for all."³⁷

A great task awaits us. We cannot remain inactive, because our Lord has told us clearly, "Trade till I come."³⁸ As long as we are awaiting the Lord's return, when he will come to take full possession of his kingdom, we cannot afford to relax. Spreading the kingdom of God isn't only an official task of those members of the Church who represent Christ because they have received sacred powers from him. "You are also the body of Christ,"³⁹ says the Apostle, with a specific command to fulfil. There is so much to be done. Is it because in twenty centuries nothing has been done? In these two thousand years much work has been done. I don't think it would be fair or objective to discount, as some people want to do, the accomplishments of those who have gone before us. In two thousand years a great task has been accomplished, and it has often been accomplished very well. On other occasions there have been mistakes, making the Church lose ground, just as today there is loss of ground, fear and a timid attitude on the part of some, and at the same time no lack of courage and generosity in others. But, whatever the situation, the human race is being continually renewed. In each generation it is necessary to go on with the effort to help men realize the greatness of their vocation as children of God, to teach them to carry out the commandment of love for God and neighbour.

Christ has taught us in a definitive way how to make this love for God real. Apostolate is love for God that overflows and communicates itself to others. The interior life implies a growth in union with Christ, in the bread and in the word. And apostolate is the precise and necessary outward manifestation of interior life. When one tastes the love of God, one feels burdened with the weight of souls. There is no way to separate interior life from apostolate, just as there is no way to separate Christ, the God-man, from his role as redeemer. The Word chose to become flesh in order to save men, to make them one with him. This is why he came to the world; he came down from heaven "for us men and for our salvation," as we say in the creed.

For a Christian apostolate is something instinctive. It is not something added onto his daily activities and his professional work from the outside. I have repeated it constantly, since the day that our Lord chose for the foundation of Opus Dei! We have to sanctify our ordinary work, we have to sanctify others through the exercise of the particular profession that is proper to each of us, in our own particular state in life.

For a Christian apostolate is like breathing. A child of God cannot live without this supernatural life-force. Today's feast reminds us that our concern for souls is a response to a command of love given to us by our Lord. As he goes up to heaven, Jesus sends us out as his witnesses throughout the whole world. Our responsibility is great, because to be Christ's witness implies first of all that we should try to behave according to his doctrine, that we should struggle to make our actions remind others of Jesus and his most lovable personality. We have to act in such a way that others will be

³⁵ 1 Cor 1:23

³⁶ 1 Tim 1:15: peccatores salvos facere

³⁷ 1 Tim 2:6

³⁸ Luke 19:13

³⁹ 1 Cor 12:27: Vos autem estis corpus Christi

able to say, when they meet us: this man is a Christian, because he does not hate, because he is willing to understand, because he is not a fanatic, because he is willing to make sacrifices, because he shows that he is a man of peace, because he knows how to love.

The wheat and the weeds

I have been describing to you, not my own idea, but Christ's doctrine on the Christian's ideal. You can see that it is demanding, sublime, attractive. Still some might ask: "Is it possible to live this way in today's society?" Our Lord has called us, it is true, in a time when everyone talks about peace, and there is no peace — whether in souls or in institutions or in social life or among nations. Everyone talks about equality and democracy, and what we see all around are closed and impenetrable castes. He has called us in a time when everyone demands understanding, and understanding is conspicuous only by its absence, even among persons who act in good faith and want to be charitable. Don't forget that charity, more than in giving, consists in understanding.

We are living in a period of time when the fanatics and the intransigent — those incapable of listening to the reasons of other people — use the device of accusing their victims of being violent and aggressive. Our Lord has called us, finally, in a time when we can hear all kinds of talk about unity, and it would be hard to imagine a greater disunion among Catholics themselves, not to speak of people in general.

I never make political remarks; that's not my job. If I were to describe the present situation of the world as a priest, all I need is to think again about one of our Lord's parables, that of the wheat and the weeds. "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; but while men were asleep, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away."⁴⁰ The situation is clear — the field is fertile and the seed is good; the Lord of the field has scattered the seed at the right moment and with great skill. He even has watchmen to make sure that the field is protected. If, afterwards, there are weeds among the wheat, it is because men have failed to respond, because they — and Christians in particular — have fallen asleep and allowed the enemy to approach.

When the careless servants ask the Lord why weeds have grown in his field, the explanation is obvious: "an enemy has done this."⁴¹ We Christians should have been on guard to make sure that the good things placed in this world by the creator were developed in the service of truth and good. But we have fallen asleep — a sad thing, that sluggishness of our heart! — while the enemy and all those who serve him acted without stopping. You can see how the weeds have grown abundantly everywhere.

My vocation is not that of a prophet of misfortune. With these words I do not wish to make you see a desolate and hopeless picture of reality. I do not want to complain about this time in which the Lord's providence has placed us. We love this time of ours because it is in this time when we are called to achieve our personal sanctification. We will not admit naive longings that lead nowhere — the world has never been any better. From the very beginning, from the cradle of the Church, in the times when the twelve Apostles were still preaching, violent persecutions had already begun, the first heresies were springing up, lies were being spread and hatred was unleashed.

Still, it cannot be denied that evil seems to have prospered. Weeds have grown in this whole field of God, which is the earth, the inheritance of Christ. Not only have they grown, they are abundant. We cannot allow ourselves to be deceived by the myth of constant and irreversible progress. Progress, in an orderly manner, is good, and God wants it to take place. But people seem to consider more another kind of progress, which is false and blinds many persons, who often fail to realize that, in

⁴⁰ Matt 13:24-25

⁴¹ Matt 13:28: inimicus homo hoc fecit

some of its movements, the human race moves backward and loses some of the ground it had conquered.

Our Lord, I insist, has given us the world for our inheritance. It is up to us to keep our souls and our minds wide awake. We have to be realistic, without being defeatist. Only a person with a callous conscience, made insensitive by routine or dulled by a frivolous attitude, can allow himself to think that evil — offence to God and harm, at times irreparable harm, to souls — does not exist in the world he sees. We have to be optimistic, but our optimism should come from our faith in the power of God who does not lose battles, and not from any human sense of satisfaction, from a stupid and presumptuous complacency.

Sowers of peace and joy

What are we to do? I have told you that I was not trying to describe social or political crises or cultural declines or disruptions. Looking at the world from the point of view of christian faith, I am referring to evil in its precise meaning, as an offence against God. Christian apostolate is not a political program or a cultural alternative. It implies the spreading of good, infecting others with a desire to love, sowing peace and joy. There is no doubt that this apostolate will produce spiritual benefits for all: more justice, more understanding and a greater mutual respect among men.

There are many souls all around us, and we have no right to be an obstacle to their eternal happiness. We have the obligation of leading a fully christian life, of becoming saints, of not betraying God and all those who expect a Christian to be an example and a source of truth.

Our apostolate has to be based on understanding. I insist, as I have done before, on the fact that charity, more than in giving, consists in understanding. I cannot deny the fact that I have learned by my own experience what it means not to be understood. I have always tried to make myself understood, but there have been people who were bent on not understanding. This gives me one more reason, and a very practical one, for trying to be understanding toward everyone. But it is not this type of incidental reason that should prompt us to have a heart that is great, universal, catholic. The understanding we must show is a proof of christian charity on the part of a good child of God.

Our Lord wants us to be present in all the honest pursuits of the earth, so that there we may sow, not weeds, but the good seed of brotherhood, of forgiveness, of charity and of peace. Never consider yourself anybody's enemy.

A Christian has to be ready to share his life with everyone at all times, giving to everyone the chance to come nearer to Christ Jesus. He has to sacrifice his own desires willingly for the sake of others, without separating people into watertight compartments, without pigeon-holing them or putting tags on them as though they were merchandise or dried-up insects. A Christian cannot afford to separate himself from others, because, if he did that, his lire would be miserably selfish. He must become "all things to all men, in order to save all men."⁴²

If only we lived like this, if only we knew how to saturate our behaviour with the good seed of generosity, with a desire for understanding and peace! We would encourage the rightful independence of all men. Each person would take on his own responsibility for the tasks that correspond to him in temporal matters. Each Christian would defend other people's freedom in the first place, so that he could defend his own as well. His charity would lead him to accept others as they are — because everyone, without any exception, has his weaknesses and makes his mistakes. He would help them, with God's grace and his own human refinement, to overcome evil, to remove the weeds, so that we can all help each other in living according to our dignity as human beings and as Christians.

⁴² 1 Cor 9:22

What awaits us

The apostolic task that Christ entrusted to all his disciples leads to specific results in social matters. It is inconceivable that a Christian, in order to fulfil his task, should have to turn his back on the world and become a defeatist with regard to human nature. Everything, even the smallest occurrence, has a human and a divine meaning. Christ, who is perfect man, did not come to destroy what is human, but to raise it up. He took on himself our human nature, except for sin. He came to share all man's concerns, except for the sad experience of wilful evil.

A Christian has to be ready, at all times, to sanctify society from within. He is fully present in the world, but without belonging to the world, when it denies God and opposes his lovable will of salvation, not because of its nature, but because of sin.

The feast of our Lord's ascension also reminds us of another fact. The same Christ, who encourages us to carry out our task in the world, awaits us in heaven as well. In other words, our life on earth, which we love, is not definitive. "We do not have a permanent dwelling-place here, but we seek that which is to come,"⁴³ a changeless home, where we may live forever. Still, we must be careful not to interpret the Word of God within limits that are too narrow. Our Lord does not expect us to be unhappy in our life on earth and await a reward only in the next life. God wants us to be happy on earth too, but with a desire for the other, total happiness that only he can give.

In this life, the contemplation of supernatural reality, the action of grace in our souls, our love for our neighbour as a result of our love for God — all these are already a foretaste of heaven, a beginning that is destined to grow from day to day. We Christians cannot resign ourselves to leading a double life our life must be a strong and simple unity into which all our actions converge.

Christ awaits us. We are "citizens of heaven,"⁴⁴ and at the same time fully-fledged citizens of this earth, in the midst of difficulties, injustices and lack of understanding, but also in the midst of the joy and serenity that comes from knowing that we are children of God. Let us persevere in the service of our God, and we will see the growth in numbers and in sanctity of this christian army of peace, of this co-redeeming people. Let us be contemplative souls, carrying on an unceasing dialogue with our Lord at all hours — from the first thought of the day to the last, turning our heart constantly toward our Lord Jesus Christ, going to him through our Mother, Holy Mary, and through him to the Father and the Holy Spirit.

If, in spite of everything, Jesus' ascension into heaven leaves a certain taste of sadness in our souls, let us go to his Mother, as the Apostles did. "They returned to Jerusalem... and they prayed with one mind... together with Mary, the Mother of Jesus."⁴⁵

St Josemaria Escriva, Christ Is Passing By, "The Ascension Of Our Lord"
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⁴³ Heb 13:14

⁴⁴ Phil 3:20

⁴⁵ Acts 1:12-14