

“I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father.” (Jn 16:28)

Today’s Solemnity of the Lord’s Ascension can easily become obscured by the Great Solemnities of the Easter Triduum, on one side, and Pentecost on the other. The Ascension lacks the power of the Resurrection, by which the Lord triumphed over Sin and Death. It also lacks the drama of Pentecost, when the Church, born of the Holy Spirit, burst on to the world stage. Far from being of secondary importance, today’s great solemnity unifies the events of the Easter Triduum and Pentecost.

The Lord’s Ascension marks the culmination of his earthly mission, through the ‘irreversible entry of his humanity into divine glory.’⁽¹⁾ ‘Henceforth Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father... where he who exists as Son of God before all ages, ... is seated bodily after... his flesh was glorified.’⁽²⁾ Sitting at the right hand of the Father signifies that Jesus is fully, ‘participating in this divine dominion.’⁽³⁾

The gospel of Luke states that Jesus ‘was carried up into heaven.’ (Luke 24:51) How should we interpret the meaning of these words? Does scripture intend us to believe that ‘Heaven’ is an actual place, located somewhere above or beyond us. A place ‘within which’ Jesus sits on a throne, and ‘within which’ the Father sits on a throne, and ‘within which’ the Holy Spirit hovers above them like a dove, as countless hosts of angels and saints sing in praise of God’s glory? The answer of course is no. These worldly images are simply figurative. They are a way of helping us to grasp something of the mystery and the majesty of what Heaven truly is. Speaking of Jesus’ being taken up into Heaven Romano Guardini states that: ‘The spatial up is only a figurative expression for something spiritual’ (4). Speaking of Christ, St. Paul teaches that, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.” (Col 1:15-17) God is above all things, and all things, with the exception of Hell, are within him.

As is often the case, Pope Benedict XVI provides us with a definitive answer: 'God is Heaven. He is our destination, the destination and the eternal dwelling place from which we come and for which we are striving.'⁽⁵⁾ 'God himself is the house with many rooms of which Jesus speaks (Jn 14:2); God is man's home.'⁽⁶⁾ So now we know where Jesus Ascended to, he Ascended fully and definitively into God - "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me." (Jn 14:11)

The question to consider now is, what is the significance of this change for us ?

I would suggest that, in God's providential plan of salvation, Jesus' Ascension into Heaven was necessary for 3 reasons:

1. To intercede - St. Paul teaches us that Jesus is: "a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." (Heb 7:17)

As our eternal high priest, 'Christ permanently exercises his priesthood...(by making) intercession,'⁽⁷⁾ "for all time to save those who approach God through him." (Heb 7:25) By entering the Holy of Holies, 'He might plead in heaven to His Father with a human nature common to the rest of men. He could now, as it were, show the scars of His glory not only as trophies of victory but also as emblems of intercession.'⁽⁸⁾ "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (1 Tim 2:5)

2. To lead the Way - Jesus enters heaven "as a forerunner for us." (Heb 6:20)

'Left to its own natural powers humanity does not have access to the 'Father's house', to God's life and happiness. Only Christ can open to man such access.'⁽⁹⁾ 'Jesus... precedes us into the Father's glorious kingdom so that we, the members of his Body, may live in the hope of one day being with him for ever.'⁽¹⁰⁾ In the Gospel of John we hear Jesus declare, "In my Father's house there are many rooms... I go to prepare a place for you? ... so that where I am, there you may be also." (John 14:2-3) In our humanity it would not have been possible for us to enter into God's presence. When Jesus goes to the Father he goes, Fully God and Fully Human. He goes not go simply as the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, but rather as 'Jesus of Nazareth', the 'Son of Man', and the 'Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. Jesus carries our nature with him into God. He leads the way for all of humanity, so that where he is we may be also. In 'Christ human nature, the humanity in which we all share, has entered into the inner life of God.'⁽¹¹⁾ 'For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became

the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God.' ⁽¹²⁾

Jesus is in God and we, his mystical body, are in him. Therefore, we too are in God. This means of course that we do not need to wait until death to experience the 'Kingdom of Heaven', Heaven comes to us. Through the action of the Holy Spirit every baptised person experiences Heaven, through the indwelling presence of God "Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?" (1 Cor 6:19) This brings me to my third and, you will be relieved to hear, final point!

3. To send the Holy Spirit - Jesus said: "... it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." (John 16:7)
It was his going to the Father that made Pentecost possible. Definitively reunited, 'The Father' and 'The Son' sent us 'The Holy Spirit.'

But why, we might ask, was it necessary that the Holy Spirit should come to us? Why couldn't the Risen Jesus have simply stayed...

The Venerable Fulton J. Sheen provides a truly incisive answer to this question: "Had Christ remained on earth, sight would have taken the place of faith."⁽¹³⁾ As we have witnessed countless times in the Gospels, Jesus called everyone he encountered to deeper faith. Faith is an essential element in the working out of our salvation but, if had remained in his Resurrected Body, faith would not have been needed, because we would have had the incontrovertible evidence of his presence. This knowledge however is reserved for those who, like Jesus, have entered definitively in to the 'Kingdom of Heaven' and are enjoying the full beatific vision.

Also, 'During his earthly life, Jesus, like all of us, was tied to the external conditions of bodily existence: to a determined place and a determined time... And between the I and the you, there is a wall of otherness... Now he can even surmount the wall of otherness that separates the I from the you.' ⁽¹⁴⁾ 'Because Jesus is with the Father, he has not gone away but remains close to us. Now he is no longer in one particular place in the world as he had been before

the 'Ascension': now, ...he is present and accessible to all-throughout history and in every place' ⁽¹⁵⁾

It is the, 'Holy Spirit, who makes it possible for Christ, who has gone away, to come now and for ever in a new way... in the sacramental reality. In this reality, Christ, who has gone away in his visible humanity, comes, is present and acts in the Church in such an intimate way as to make it his own Body' (16). In this way therefore the Holy Spirit continues 'in the world, through the Church, the work of the Good News of salvation.'⁽¹⁷⁾

In this way we see being fulfilled the words of Jesus following the Resurrection: "I am with you always, to the close of the age." (Mt 28:20)

'Jesus himself is what we call heaven; heaven is not a place but a person, the person of him in whom God and man are forever and inseparably one. And we go to heaven and enter into heaven to the extent that we go to Jesus Christ and enter into him. In this sense, ascension into heaven can be something that takes place in our everyday lives...' ⁽¹⁸⁾ Jesus 'is with us now, and in his eucharistic presence he is especially close.'⁽¹⁹⁾ In this way, through his sacramental presence, we come to recognise that 'in God not only is there room for man; in man there is room for God.'⁽²⁰⁾

Notes:

- (1) Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1999, No. 659
- (2) Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1999, No. 663
- (3) Benedict XVI, 2011, Jesus of Nazareth Part 2, loc. 157.
- (4) Romano Guardini, The Lord, 1957, loc.585-586.
- (5) Benedict XVI, Feast of the Assumption,15/08/2012.
- (6) Benedict XVI, Feast of the Assumption,15/08/2012
- (7) Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1999, No. 662
- (8) Fulton Sheen, 2019, The Life of Christ, loc.646
- (9) Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1999, No. 661
- (10) Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1999, No. 666
- (11) Pope Benedict XVI, 2011, Dogma and Preaching

- (12) Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1999, No. 460, St Irenaeus, Adv. haeres . 3, 19, 1: PG 7/1. 939.
- (13) Fulton J. Sheen, 2019, The Life of Christ, loc.646
- (14) Benedict xvi, homily 22/03/2008
- (15) Benedict XVI, 2011, Jesus of Nazareth Part 2, loc. 158
- (16) John P. II, 1986, Dominum et Vivificantem, No.61
- (17) John P.II, 1986, Dominum et vivificantum, No.3
- (18) Pope Benedict XVI, 2011, Dogma and Preaching
- (19) Benedict XVI, 2011, Jesus of Nazareth Part 2, loc. 160
- (20) Benedict XVI, Feast of the Assumption,15/08/2012