

With our celebration of the Feast of Our Lord's Ascension into Heaven, we are coming very close to the end of the Easter Season, which will close with the Feast of Pentecost. The Jewish faith, and that of the early Church, is a faith quite interested in numbers: our Jewish fathers wandered in the desert for forty years searching for the land "flowing with milk and honey," (Exodus 3. 17); Jesus prayed and fasted in the desert for forty days and forty nights – thus our Lenten season of forty days and nights; and, we celebrate forty days after Easter, which brings us to today's feast, the Ascension of the Lord. Ten days after today's feast of the Ascension of the Lord, (the number 'ten,' for the Ancients was a mystical number, as well as forty) we shall celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, which will bring our Easter season to a conclusion.

Did you listen closely to the words in the second reading today, of St. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians? The Apostle, St. Paul, uses the language of *wishing* with those early disciples, saying: "May the God of Our Lord, Jesus Christ... give you a spirit of wisdom and revelation... May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened..." (Ephesians 1. 17a, 18a) What do I mean when I say that St. Paul is using a language of 'wishing?' St. Paul's 'wishing' is not just a 'pie-in-the-sky' sort of wishing; his wish is founded on a bedrock hope of the Resurrected Christ. Let's see how St. Paul's hope connects with the Feast of the Ascension, and compare his hopes to our own, to see if St. Paul's hope is anything like our own hope, hmm?

Before we begin to examine the hope to which we have been called, let's remind ourselves about a liturgical point. Have you remembered that, since Easter Sunday, we have been *celebrating*? Though our Easter lilies may have wilted a little bit since then, our hope, seven weeks later, having heard the Word of God and received that Word in Eucharist, should be growing, even though we may not be consciously aware of it. St. Josemaría Escrivá once made the point that (you'll pardon my paraphrase, I can't remember the exact quotation): 'You go to prayer to find the Lord, and you feel nothing. Why are you surprised? You have sought Christ and found the Cross!' The Cross is *always* a sign of the presence of Christ, because the fruit of the Cross is the Eucharist. We have been celebrating that Cross since Ash Wednesday and we won't quit celebrating the Cross and Easter until the Spirit descends next Sunday in wind and flame to stir the Apostles into a force that will convert the world!

What, indeed, have we been celebrating? We have been celebrating **one thing: the Paschal Event, Christ, our Pasch; Christ, our Passover! Everything along the way – Ash Wednesday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter, the Ascension of the Lord, and finally, Pentecost, are all part of the great Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ!** To use the language of St. Thomas Aquinas, (+ 1274), the great Angelic Doctor:

Christ by His Passion merited for us the opening of the Kingdom of Heaven and removed the obstacle; but by His Ascension He, as it were, brought us to the possession of the Heavenly Kingdom. And, consequently, it is said that by ascending He *opened the way before them.* (1)

And it is by our entrance into the sacramental life of the Church, through Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Eucharist, that we, ourselves, enter, both personally and communally (i.e., *in communio*) into that same Paschal Mystery of Christ, so that we, too, are, day by day, *literally*, walking with, and in, Christ, to Heaven. We do this by our life in the Spirit. How does one live a 'life in the Spirit?' St. Paul gives us some good indicators, especially when he talks about our "inheritance" in the second reading from Ephesians. So, let's roll up our sleeves and get to work!

Now, note that St. Paul has a clear and solid expectation for us Christians: we are not just ordinary folk. As Christians, by the sacraments *we have been changed! Our lives are changed! How?*

... may the God of our Lord, Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a Spirit of wisdom and revelation resulting in knowledge of Him. (Ephesians 1. 17)

For St. Paul, as well as all the rest of the early Christian thinkers, a man walked in darkness before Baptism and Confirmation; afterwards, however, one was 'enlightened' by the Spirit due to the revelation, that is to say, the knowledge given to him by knowing that Jesus Christ – "this Jesus Christ Whom you crucified" – is the "Jesus God has raised up" and the Apostles "are His witnesses!" (cf. Acts 2. 36, 32)

In short, when St. Paul uses the word 'revelation,' he means exactly what he says: a truth has been 'revealed.' Jesus Christ is Lord, and He has been raised up for us. And that 'revelation,' once it has been accepted and grasped, both with the mind and with the heart, leads to "wisdom," that is to say, "wisdom in the Spirit." (cf. Ephesians 1. 17) This "wisdom," then, says St. Paul, causes the "eyes of our hearts to be enlightened that we may know what is the hope that belongs to the call" of Jesus Christ and, further, "what are the riches of glory in His inheritance among the holy ones" and, finally, "what is the surpassing greatness of His power for us who believe..." (cf. Ephesians 1. 18-19)

The point that I am trying to make, though it may seem rather laboured is simply this. Is it not true that our normal experience of our Catholic faith in the sacraments we receive, even though we claim those very sacraments to be miraculous, is all so... normal? Do we *really believe* that, from the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, and, of course, the devout reception of Eucharist, that the "eyes of our hearts [are] to be enlightened that we may know what is the hope that belongs to the call" of Jesus Christ? And what about the "riches of glory in the... inheritance" of Christ, to wit, which is "the surpassing greatness of His power for us who believe?" Or, let me put it another way. Isn't it enough to be an 'ordinary Catholic?' Do we have to be pious fanatics? Just what are we supposed to be?

Let me answer the question by asking a question. Do you ever get the feeling, idea, sensation – *whatever!* – that God might want *more* for us? Or, to put it another way, do you ever simply want *more* from your Church, from your religious faith? I don't know about you, but I have always wanted *more!* Let me give you an example.

I remember a scene from a movie about St. Francis of Assisi entitled *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*. Although the movie was not the best, historically speaking, it did have its points, spiritually and artistically. And some lines of St. Francis' stuck out very strongly. These words of St. Francis are paraphrased from those spoken when he was moved to give everything away, to become a beggar for Christ. He said to the Bishop and those around him:

If the purpose of life is this loveless toil we fill our days with, then it's not for me! There must be something better – there has to be! Man is a spirit! He has a soul! And that – that is what I want to recapture: my soul! I want to live! (2)

The first time I ever heard those words... I really thought that I was going to break into pieces. As a young priest – I don't think I had even been ordained two years yet – already the deadly breath of routine and control had begun to overtake my life and my soul. My prayer life was anything but alive. And, though my celebration of the Eucharist was usually careful and devout, that was about it, insofar as prayer life was concerned. I knew, in the pit of my gut, that something had to change, or I was going to slide down the "slippery slope of routine" and then, when middle age set in, was I going to allow the first fervour of my vocation end in the rubble of lukewarmness? Was there a chance, even for someone like me, to start over again? It took quite a while to find the answer, to discover how to listen to the Holy Spirit, so that the words of St. Paul could be a reality in my life and not just words in a book. And, again, we are dealing with our "inheritance." If you read on, I will tell you how I escaped.

Moving to the Gospel of St. Matthew, we can get a better handle on how to deal with St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians. If you look carefully at the words of Jesus to the Apostles, you will see that the Lord gives the Apostles a command: "Go... make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit..." (St. Matthew 28. 19) This is, as you know, the foundation of our spiritual lives. In the sacrament of Baptism, not only is original sin taken away, but, also, the sacrament "makes the baptized person a

participant in the Divine life of the Trinity through sanctifying grace, the grace of justification which incorporates one into Christ and into His Church." (3)

I think, in the past at least, as a Church we have somehow made it clear to our members that the sacrament of Baptism removes original sin, but *we have yet made people aware of the other part of the grace of the sacrament; that is, that a person begins to participate in the life of the Trinity, that is, Divine filiation, Divine sonship and daughtership?*

Note! Immediately after Jesus tells the Apostles *to Baptize*, then He qualifies or explains to them that they must *"teach them to observe all that I have commanded you."* Isn't it interesting that, in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, the Apostles are asking the Lord:

"Lord, are You at this time going to restore the Kingdom to Israel? And He answered them: 'It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by His own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.'" (Acts 1. 6-8)

Were the Apostles still yearning for a political Messiah even at this last moment? We cannot be certain from the text. Suffice it to say, they are not 'on the same page' with Christ in those last moments, at least according to St. Luke's account in the Book of Acts. When Our Lord tells the Apostles that they must *"teach [all men] to observe what I have commanded you"* Christ is not simply referring to a set of moral laws or even to a Creed, though these things are absolutely necessary in the life of the Church. Rather, it seems that this line of narration must be understood by the last words of Christ which become, as it were, almost a last will and testament of the Lord Jesus: *"And, behold, I AM with you always, until the end of the world!" (St. Matthew 28. 20)*

Please do not misunderstand my remark about moral laws and Creeds. As I say, they are necessary things, and, in the development and history of our Holy Mother, the Church, they will have their due development. But they are not *"the one thing necessary!" (cf. St. Luke 10. 42)*

Why? Because one can follow all the moral rules in the Church and the Creeds, as well, and still be spiritually dead. Our Lord is quite clear about this when He warned the early Church of Laeodicea (an ancient city in present-day western Turkey):

"The Amen, the faithful Witness and True, the Source of God's creation, has this to say: I know your deeds: I know you are neither hot nor cold. How I wish you were one or the other – hot or cold! But because you are lukewarm, I shall vomit you out of my mouth! You keep saying: I am so rich and secure that I want for nothing. Little do you realize how wretched you are, how pitiable and poor, how blind and naked you are! Take my advice. Buy from me gold refined by fire if you would be truly rich... but ointment to smear on your eyes, if you would see once more. Whosoever is dear to me I reprove and chastise. Be earnest about it, therefore. Repent!" (Revelation 3. 14-19)

What is this *"gold"* and *"ointment"* that Jesus is speaking about to the Laeodiceans? Ultimately, in modern language, we call it mental prayer. In mental prayer – and this is best done in front of the Blessed Sacrament – we simply sit with the Lord, and converse with Him, sharing with Him our lives and our hearts. In this way, our faith lives are changed from simply an assent to the Truths of the Church (no matter how sublime they may be) and an attempt to live the commandments of God (no matter how beautiful and lofty they might be) to a whole, new level. With mental prayer comes the slow but gentle realization that 1.) I am a child of God, and 2.) the Trinity lives within me, so that 3.) I am *never* alone. These three truths, as I begin to practice and live them in my life, give me the ability to *listen* to the Lord, and, astonishingly, to ask the Lord, perhaps on a moment-to-moment basis, "What would You have me do, Lord?" This is so much

so, that we get *used* to hearing the *"still, small Voice," (1 Kings 19. 12)* and, if we don't, we wait until we do!

How does this apply to our Feast of the Ascension? Very much! As long as Jesus walked the earth His presence was a 'localized' presence. But now, as soon as the Spirit descends, the Apostles will be thrust out of their cocoon of the Upper Room, the Word will be preached *"to the ends of the earth," (Acts 1. 8)*, and very soon, the Jesus' Eucharistic presence will, slowly but surely, dot the entire presence of the earth.

His Word and His Eucharistic presence is our *"inheritance."* What have we done with that inheritance? Think for just a moment about these words from the great saint of the Eucharist, St. Peter Julian Eymard:

... the mystery which was accomplished in Mary (that of the enfleshment of Christ) will then be wrought in us. At the moment of Communion the Holy Eucharist becomes in truth the prolongation of the Incarnation, the spreading of the glowing fire of love, the heart of which is in the Most Holy Trinity. In Mary's womb it extends to our human nature in general; but it reaches its farthest bounds only as it enkindles each individual soul. Through Mary, the Word is united to human nature; through the Eucharist, He is united to all men. (4)

Only by Jesus' leaving His Apostles, by His return, His Ascension to the Father, could the Holy Spirit, the *"other Advocate"* be sent. And with that Advocate, the Church will be fanned into flame, and the Eucharistic Christ will transform the world.

The question is, what about you and me? Are we being transformed, slowly but surely, day by day, by our Eucharistic *"inheritance,"* so that we know the *"hope that belongs to our call"* and the *"riches of glory"* Christ has promised us in the Holy Spirit? (cf. Ephesians 1. 18) Don't you long for something more in your spiritual life, or are you content with being *"lukewarm?" (Revelations 3. 16)* A few minutes, each day with Christ, a few moments of heart-to-heart conversation with the Lord, so that you can learn to hear that *"still, small Voice"* can change everything! How do I know? Jesus has told us. *"Here I stand at the door, knocking! If anyone hears Me calling and opens the door, I shall enter his house and dine with him, and he with Me. I shall give the victor the right to sit with Me on My throne, as I, Myself, won the victory and took My seat beside My Father on His throne." (Revelation 3. 20-21)*

Christ, Himself, *the Way, the Truth and the Life* is our inheritance! Look at it this way. If you take my advice and I'm wrong, you will live a better life anyway. And if I'm right, the benefits are out of this world... even to die for!

1. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, III, Q. 49, art. 7, ad. 4
2. *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, Paramount Pictures, Original Story and Screenplay by Suso Cecchi D'Amico, Kenneth Ross, Lina Wertmüller, Franco Zeffirelli, 1973
3. *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, USCCB, Washington, D.C., 2006, # 263
4. St. Peter Julian Eymard, *The Prolongation of the Incarnation* from his book *Holy Communion*, vol. 2 of 9, Emmanuel Publications, Cleveland, Ohio, pg. 60-61,