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### The Ascension of the Lord (A)

As we celebrate today the Ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ, the readings present to us two principle articles of Christian faith: the divine power and authority of Christ, and the Last Judgment.

The "Lord Jesus, the conqueror of sin and death, ascended to heaven while the angels sang his praises."<sup>1</sup> Today, Christ Jesus "mounts his throne amide shouts of joy" (Psalm 47:6); the "great king over all the earth" (Psalm 47:3) now "sits upon his holy throne" (Psalm 47:9).

One might say that the Lord returned to the Father in much the same way that he came to the earth: quietly and without much fanfare. He was born of the Virgin Mary under the cover of darkness and under the cover of a cloud he ascended his throne. The angels announced his birth to the shepherds and the angels announced his glorious return to the Apostles.

Before he ascended to the Father, Jesus told the Apostles, "I am with always, until the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20). And yet, Jesus "was lifted up, and a cloud took him from their sight" (Acts 1:9). How are we to make sense of this?

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<sup>1</sup> *Roman Missal*, Preface: Ascension I.

Let us first consider this cloud. This ancient image from the Old Testament

is a sign of the hiddenness of God who, in his very hiddenness, is close to us and exercises his power for us; who is always beyond our reach and yet always in our midst; who eludes our every attempt to lay hold of him and manipulate him, but by that very fact exercises a providential rule over us all.<sup>2</sup>

Is it any wonder, then, that the Apostles simply stood there "looking intently at the sky as he was going" (Acts 1:10)?

In the mystery of the cloud the Lord Jesus revealed the fullness of his divine power, saying to the Apostles, "All power in heaven and earth has been given to me" (Matthew 28:18).

Having ascended to his heavenly throne, the Father "put all things beneath [Jesus'] feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way" (Ephesians 1:22-23).

The Eleven were overcome with wonder and awe, with faith and hope. They were overcome with a desire to be with their Lord, to follow him who said, "I am with you always."

Is this not our desire as well? Do we not wish that we could have been present with the Apostles, to see with them the Risen Lord ascend to his glory? Do we not, too, wish to be with Christ the Lord?

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<sup>2</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching*, Matthew J. O'Connell, trans. (Chicago, Illinois: Franciscan Herald Press, 1985), 62.

We see, then, that Christ, "the mediator between God and man, judge of the world and Lord of all, has passed beyond our sight, not to abandon us but to be our hope!"<sup>3</sup>

Today, with the Apostles, "we rejoice that Christ our Savior has taken his place at the right hand of the Father, because where he has gone, we hope to follow."<sup>4</sup>

Not only is it our desire to be with the Lord, but it is his desire to be with us! This brings us to the second principle article of the Christian faith revealed in this Solemnity, the Last Judgment, for we know that "this Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven" (Acts 1:11).

We see in the Ascension of the Lord that our own humanity ascended into heaven. This means that humanity

has entered into the inner life of God in a new and hitherto unheard of way. It means that man has found an everlasting place in God. Heaven is not a place beyond the stars, but something much greater, something that requires far more audacity to assert: Heaven means that man now has a place in God.<sup>5</sup>

Because of the union with God now possible in Christ, the Lord commissioned the Apostles, saying,

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age (Matthew 28:19-20).

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<sup>3</sup> *Roman Missal*, Preface: Ascension I.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Regina Caeli Address*, 21 May 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching*, 62-63.

At the moment of our deaths, we will each stand before the throne of God and face our particular and individual judgment, which will be made known at the Resurrection of the Dead. We will be judged both for what we have done and what we have failed to do, all in accord with the double command of love of God and love of neighbor.

The thought of being judged by the Lord often inspires a certain fear in many people as they consider the prospect of their death and the life they have lived. But the image of the Last Judgment

is not primarily an image of terror, but an image of hope... [I]t is an image that evokes responsibility, an image, therefore, of that fear that ... has its place in love. God is justice and creates justice. This is our consolation and our hope. And in his justice there is also grace.<sup>6</sup>

When we stand before the throne of God justice and grace will meet in the gaze of Christ Jesus.

Before his gaze all falsehood melts away. This encounter with him, as it burns us, transforms and frees us, allowing us to become truly ourselves. All that we build during our lives can prove to be mere straw, pure bluster, and it collapses. Yet in the pain of this encounter, when the impurity and sickness of our lives becomes evident to us, there lies salvation. His gaze, the touch of his heart heals us through an undeniably painful transformation "as through fire" [I Corinthians 3:15]. But it is a blessed pain, in which the holy power of his love sears through us like a flame, enabling us to become totally ourselves and thus totally of God. In this way the interrelation between justice and grace also becomes clear: the way we live our lives is not immaterial, but our defilement does not stain us forever if we have at least continued to reach out

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<sup>6</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, 44.

towards Christ, towards truth and towards love.. At the moment of judgment we experience and we absorb the overwhelming power of his love over all the evil in the world and in ourselves. The pain of love becomes our salvation and our joy.<sup>7</sup>

We see then that today's Solemnity is both a most serious one and also one filled with great joy. Man does indeed have a place in God, a place in which all of the deepest yearnings of our hearts will be fulfilled. It is in God alone that we will be satisfied! Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.