

Ascension - A  
Acts 1:1-11;  
Ephesians 1:17-23;  
Matthew 28:16-20  
Little Flower - 5/21/23

My Brothers and Sisters,

Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord. Because Jesus ascended into heaven forty days after Easter, traditionally the Ascension was always celebrated on Thursday. However, because his Ascension is such an important part of the mystery of Christ, the Church in many parts of the world has chosen to celebrate Ascension on the following Sunday.

To understand the Ascension, we need to understand what it meant for Jesus and what it meant for the apostles and now for us. What it meant for Jesus is captured in today's reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians. As Paul wrote, God *"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."* Ascending into heaven, Jesus was seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty and empowered to send the Holy Spirit and then to return in glory at the end of time to judge the living and the dead.

Today's reading from Acts tells the story of Jesus' Ascension. In a recent article, Fr. Eugene Hensell suggested that there are three parts of the story. In the first part, Jesus promises the Holy Spirit, referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit as a baptism. Throughout this passage, Luke emphasizes the central role of the Holy Spirit in the mission of the Church. According to Luke, even the instructions Jesus gave the disciples came from the Holy Spirit.

The second part contains the commissioning of the apostles and a description of the ascension itself. *"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses...to the ends of the earth."* The description of the Ascension is stark: *"he was lifted up and a cloud took him from their sight."* Unlike his resurrection which no one saw, they witnessed his ascension.

The third part of the passage is the challenge to the apostles by the angels. In fact, the title of Fr. Eugene's article is "Get Your Heads Out of the Clouds." While they are staring intently at the sky, two angels challenge them to get busy carrying on Jesus' mission.

In today's Gospel, we heard Matthew's version of the Ascension. Many non-Catholic Christian churches refer to this passage as the Great Commission. First, the apostles are to make disciples of all nations by proclaiming the coming of the kingdom of God and by inviting people to become disciples of the crucified and risen Christ. They are to welcome people into the Church by baptizing them. Finally, they are to teach them to observe all that Jesus commanded, i.e., to believe in him and to love one another. The Gospel of Matthew ends with Jesus' promise to be with them always.

Both of these readings apply to us. God has poured out the Holy Spirit upon us at our baptism and at our confirmation. Like the apostles, we are called to be witnesses to Jesus by our lives. We are called to share the Good News of Jesus with others both in word and deed. We are called to invite others to become Christian and Catholic. We are called to teach others by word and example to live as Jesus lived and calls us to live.

My brothers and sisters, the only novena prescribed by the Church is the novena between Ascension and Pentecost when we are called to pray for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon us and upon the Church. Many Catholics, including some of us, have a very complicated relationship with the Church. For example, many people have times in their lives when they are very engaged in their faith and times when they become disengaged for all kinds of reasons. During this week, let us pray for a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit that will strengthen our engagement with and commitment to Christ and to the Church and its mission.