

JMJ CHS

It is Ascension Sunday. You know it used to be called *Ascension Thursday* because scripture says it occurred 40 days after the Resurrection, putting it on a Thursday. But in recent times, most of the Catholic Dioceses have changed it to Sunday, presumably to make things ever more convenient for you, the faithful flock.

Jesus was with us for approximately 33 years, and now, His mission completed, He returns to His Father in Heaven. The Disciples must have had mixed emotions; rejoicing on the one hand, that they were the first...the first to know.... the Christ, the long awaited Messiah, the son of the living God, and that they were "the chosen", hand-picked by Jesus to be the proto-seminarians, personally trained by Him, to spread the good news throughout the world. But, on the other hand, I bet that their hearts were broken. Their master, their closest friend for the past three years of their lives, has now left them. It must have been very hard.

In today's short Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus gives them some final consolations, encouragement and instructions. Go back, go back to Jerusalem, to the upper room and wait for power from on high. That, of course, will be Pentecost and the birthday of His Church. On that day, Peter and the Apostles would be filled with that special power that would enable them to bear fruit, fruit that would last.

And so, today, I would like to focus on that promise and how it has been manifested throughout the years. First thing I would like to do is to ask a question. Was it just the Apostles who witnessed the Ascension or were there others present as well? The three synoptic Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke actually say very little about the Ascension. Mark seems to imply that it was only the 11, with Judas of course now out of the picture. We learn more from The Acts of the Apostles, which was our first reading. It reports that there were about 120 disciples gathered in the upper room praying that first 9 day novena and celebrating the very first Masses as they waited for Pentecost. If that is the case, then maybe it is safe to assume that they were there at the Ascension, too. I know that I have seen it depicted that way in the movies.

But it would have been a diverse group of people. Included would have been Mathias, who is waiting to be chosen to be the replacement for Judas, and Joseph Barsabbas, who was not chosen to be a Judas' successor. And how about Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalen and those women who accompanied her to the tomb? And how about Veronica who wiped the face of Jesus. And how about Mark, who would go on to write the first Gospel. And how about Steven and Philip, two of those seven who would eventually be chosen to be the first deacons? So regardless of whether or not this larger group of disciples was gathered there at the Ascension, or just in the upper room at Pentecost, this was the seed of the Universal Church and it included both the ordained, and the laity and they would be the foundation stones of what would be eventually be called the Roman Catholic Church, which would spread throughout the world.

The primary instruction on Ascension Thursday, I believe, came most clearly from Matthew's Gospel and we have it there on the wall in our baptistery. "*Go forth,*" it says, "*baptize all nations, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them, to observe all things that I have commanded you.*" Notice the emphasis. Baptize. Teach. Observe, Command. These are strong words. And again, both priesthood and laity, young and old, male and female, have been called, down through the ages, to obey this directive.

This is done, most simply, in the Christian family. Moms and dads who have been brought up in the faith now bring their own children to the Church to be presented for Baptism. And, as part of the Baptismal rite, they pledge to raise their child in the Faith. As a little aside, I would mention that the Canon Law of the Catholic Church says that in order for a child to be baptized, there has

to be “*a reasonable expectation that the child will (indeed) be raised in the faith.*” All too often, however, many modern moms and dads, after bringing their children for Baptism, are never seen again. Until maybe when it’s time for First Communion. This is a scandal, but probably just another one of those “signs of our times.”

So then, the next level up would be the ordained and consecrated souls chosen to do God’s special work. And again, it is a very diverse group. We know about great minds like St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine and the early Church Fathers, and various great popes. But we also know of simple people. Last week I wrote my bulletin article about one of them, the saint of my birthday, Paschal Baylon. He was a lowly cook in the monastery kitchen, but his devotion to the Eucharist made him so strong in the faith that he is now the patron saint of Eucharistic Congresses. And they put his statue on the top of pillars and named churches after him.

And we always talk about child saints like Bernadette, and the three children of Fatima, St. Maria Goretti and our own St. Philomena. To keep us humble, God frequently has chosen *the nobodies of this world to reduce to nothing those who thought they were something.* That is a quote from St. Paul’s letter to the Corinthians.

Now from this point on I would like to focus on two important *chosen* disciples from our Catholic/Christian history. The first one being St. John Bosco. He was a priest in Turin, Italy back in the 19th century. He came up from poverty to become a friend to children of poverty. He gathered street urchins and trained them in the trades through his religious order called *The Salesians*. But in addition to his great service to the poor, he also enjoyed special visions. Not too long ago I showed you a picture up here depicting one of his dreams. Remember the ship sailing on stormy and embattled waters? The ship represented the Catholic Church and there at the helm was the man dressed in white, presumably the pope, followed by the great crowd of witnesses. Most of them were identifiable as priests and religious. But I would like to think that the laity were somewhere back at the end of the line. But remember that the ship was secured by chains to two pillars. On the top of one pillar was the sacred host, Christ in the Eucharist, and on the other pillar was a statue of Mary. So, it is not hard to discern that in the end times, our salvation will come through that dynamic duo – the Son and His mother, Jesus and Mary. The image certainly seems reflective of what the Church, and our world, is going through right now.

On Monday the Church will be celebrating a remarkable Saint. She is one of my favorites. St. Joan of Arc. Her feast day is not celebrated in the United States, but I am sure it is celebrated quite festively in France. She is considered a patron saint of France because, at age 17, she saved her country from being conquered by the English. It seemed that God wanted to preserve the identity, the character and the sovereignty of France, as I believe he wants to do with any country. This would seem to stand in opposition to the movement of many in the world right now towards a one-world government.

Some years ago, like most everyone else, I had heard about Joan, but never really gave her much thought. Then, I read a quote from Mark Twain. He wrote his very last book about her, a novelized version of her very true story. He said that “*despite her age, her lack of education, her sex, her inexperience in military matters, she was easily, and by far, the most extraordinary person that the human race that ever produced.*” Well that got my attention so I read the book and became a fan. And we will celebrate her memory, even if only by honorable mention, at the Memorial Day Mass up on the Serenity Court.

OK, one more final Saint. Our Lady, Mary, Our Blessed Mother. She is not usually referred to as a saint, but there are exceptions. St Mary Church in Pinckney being the closest example. But she usually has a higher title, like Mary Queen of All Saints, Our Lady Star of the Sea, Our Lady of Sorrows, Notre Dame, Our Lady Queen of Apostles, and Our Lady of Refuge.

With an eye towards that image of Mary on the pillar in the vision of St. John Bosco, I would like to, right now, right here, today, invoke Mary as our special refuge. I told you earlier this month that I would soon make an official proclamation that our Holy Spirit campus would be a refuge. I am not exactly sure what that will mean at this point in time – we will wait for the inspiration to further unfold. But the very first act of making this refuge will be to honor those two individuals represented on the two pillars of John Bosco's dream, Jesus and Mary. It is a flag that will go on our new flag pole out on Winans Lake Road. And it will be the banner standard of St. Joan of Arc – the one she carried into battle leading her French soldiers to victory against the English. It has the image of God the Father being attended to by two angels and the names of Jesus and Mary. This flag then will identify us as a Catholic campus that serves Jesus and Mary, who together, we venerate as our refuge and our strength.

+ Fr. John