**THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD (YEAR C)**

Acts 1:1-11; Ps 47; Heb 9:24-28;10:19-23; Lk 24,46-53

*God mounts his throne to shouts of joy: a blare of trumpets for the Lord.*

**COMMENTARY**
*“You shall be my witnesses”*

The solemnity of the Lord’s Ascension invites us to reflect again on this mysterious event and, in its context, on the very last words that the risen Christ left for the disciples before ascending to heaven, as the evangelists narrated. By divine providence, this year Pope Francis’ message for World Mission Sunday offers us a thorough and authoritative meditation precisely on Christ’s last phrase before his ascension according to St. Luke’s account in the Acts of the Apostles that we heard in the first reading: “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 1:8). Since *ubi maior minor cessat* (where there is the greater, the lesser ceases [to speak]), we will do nothing more here than repropose some of the Pope’s passages in this regard, with an invitation to everyone to read the full text of the Message, which is available in various languages on the Vatican official website

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/missions/documents/20220106-giornata-missionaria.html>

1. *“You shall be my witnesses” – The call of every Christian to bear witness to Christ*

This is the central point, the heart of Jesus’ teaching to the disciples, in view of their being sent forth into the world. The disciples are to be witnesses of Jesus, thanks to the grace of the Holy Spirit that they will receive. Wherever they go and in whatever place they find themselves. Christ was the first to be sent, as a “missionary” of the Father (cf. *Jn* 20:21), and as such, he is the Father’s “faithful witness” (cf. *Rev* 1:5). In a similar way, every Christian is called to be a missionary and witness to Christ.  And the Church, the community of Christ’s disciples, has no other mission than that of bringing the Gospel to the entire world by bearing witness to Christ.  To evangelize is the very identity of the Church.

A deeper look at the words, “You shall be my witnesses”, can clarify a few ever timely aspects of the mission Christ entrusted to the disciples. The plural form of the verb emphasizes the communitarian and ecclesial nature of the disciples’ missionary vocation. Each baptized person is called to mission, in the Church and by the mandate of the Church: consequently, mission is carried out together, not individually, in communion with the ecclesial community, and not on one’s own initiative. Even in cases where an individual in some very particular situation carries out the evangelizing mission alone, he must always do so in communion with the Church which commissioned him. […]

In addition, the disciples are urged to live their personal lives *in a missionary key*: they are sent by Jesus to the world not only to *carry out*, but also and above all *to live* the mission entrusted to them; not only to *bear*witness, but also and above all to *be* witnesses of Christ.  In the moving words of the Apostle Paul, “[we are] always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (*2 Cor* 4:10). The essence of the mission is to bear witness to Christ, that is, to his life, passion, death and resurrection for the love of the Father and of humanity. […]

Missionaries of Christ are not sent to communicate themselves, to exhibit their persuasive qualities and abilities or their managerial skills. Instead, theirs is the supreme honour of presenting Christ in words and deeds, proclaiming to everyone the Good News of his salvation, as the first apostles did, with joy and boldness.

In the final analysis, then, the true witness is the “martyr”, the one who gives his or her life for Christ, reciprocating the gift that he has made to us of himself. “The primary reason for evangelizing is the love of Jesus which we have received, the experience of salvation which urges us to ever greater love of him” (*Evangelii gaudium*, 264).

Finally, […] the testimony of an authentic Christian life is fundamental for the transmission of the faith. On the other hand, the task of proclaiming Christ’s person and the message is equally necessary. […] In evangelization, then, the example of a Christian life and the proclamation of Christ are inseparable. One is at the service of the other. They are the two lungs with which any community must breathe, if it is to be missionary. This kind of complete, consistent and joyful witness to Christ will surely be a force of attraction also for the growth of the Church in the third millennium. I exhort everyone to take up once again the courage, frankness and *parrhesía*of the first Christians, in order to bear witness to Christ in word and deed in every area of life.

1. *“To the ends of the earth” – The perennial relevance of a mission of universal evangelization*

In telling the disciples to be his witnesses, the risen Lord also tells them where they are being sent: “…in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth” (*Acts* 1:8). Here we clearly see the universal character of the disciples’ mission. We also see the “centrifugal” geographical expansion, as if in concentric circles, of the mission, beginning with Jerusalem, which Jewish tradition considered the centre of the world, to Judea and Samaria and to “the ends of the earth”. The disciples are sent not to proselytize, but to proclaim; the Christian does not proselytize. The Acts of the Apostles speak of this missionary expansion and provide a striking image of the Church “going forth” in fidelity to her call to bear witness to Christ the Lord and guided by divine providence in the concrete conditions of her life.  Persecuted in Jerusalem and then spread throughout Judea and Samaria, the first Christians bore witness to Jesus everywhere (cf. *Acts* 8:1, 4).

[…]

For all the benefits of modern travel, there are still geographical areas in which missionary witnesses of Christ have not arrived to bring the Good News of his love. Then too no human reality is foreign to the concern of the disciples of Jesus in their mission. Christ’s Church will continue to “go forth” towards new geographical, social and existential horizons, towards “borderline” places and human situations, in order to bear witness to Christ and his love to men and women of every people, culture and social status.  In this sense, the mission will always be a *missio ad gentes*, as the Second Vatican Council taught. The Church must constantly keep pressing forward, beyond her own confines, in order to testify to all the love of Christ. Here I would like to remember and express my gratitude for all those many missionaries who gave their lives in order to “press on” in incarnating Christ’s love towards all the brothers and sisters whom they met.

1. *“You will receive power” from the Holy Spirit – Let us always be strengthened and guided by the Spirit.*

When the risen Christ commissioned the disciples to be his witnesses, he also promised them the grace needed for this great responsibility: “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses” (*Acts* 1:8). According to the account in Acts, it was precisely following the descent of the Holy Spirit on the disciples that the first act of witnessing to the crucified and risen Christ took place. That kerygmatic proclamation – Saint Peter’s “missionary” address to the inhabitants of Jerusalem – inaugurated an era in which the disciples of Jesus evangelized the world. Whereas they had previously been weak, fearful and closed in on themselves, the Holy Spirit gave them the strength, courage and wisdom to bear witness to Christ before all. […] The Spirit, then, is the true protagonist of mission. It is he who gives us the right word, at the right time, and in the right way. […]

The same Spirit who guides the universal Church also inspires ordinary men and women for extraordinary missions. Thus it was that a young French woman, Pauline Jaricot, founded the Society for the Propagation of the Faith exactly two hundred years ago.[[1]](#footnote-1) […]

In this regard, I think too of the French Bishop Charles de Forbin-Janson, who established the Association of the Holy Childhood to promote the mission among children […]. I also think of Jeanne Bigard, who inaugurated the Society of Saint Peter the Apostle for the support of seminarians and priests in mission lands. […] It was also under the inspiration and guidance of the Holy Spirit that Blessed Paolo Manna, born 150 years ago, founded the present-day Pontifical Missionary Union, to raise awareness and encourage missionary spirit among priests, men and women religious and the whole people of God. […]

Dear brothers and sisters, I continue to dream of a completely missionary Church, and a new era of missionary activity among Christian communities. I repeat Moses’ great desire for the people of God on their journey: “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets!” (*Num* 11:29). Indeed, would that all of us in the Church were what we already are by virtue of baptism: prophets, witnesses, missionaries of the Lord, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the ends of the earth! Mary, Queen of the Missions, pray for us!

*Useful points to consider*:

**Catechism of the Catholic Church**

**662** “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.” The lifting up of Jesus on the cross signifies and announces his lifting up by his Ascension into heaven, and indeed begins it. Jesus Christ, the one priest of the new and eternal Covenant, “entered, not into a sanctuary made by human hands. . . but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.” There Christ permanently exercises his priesthood, for he “always lives to make intercession” for “those who draw near to God through him”. As “high priest of the good things to come” he is the centre and the principal actor of the liturgy that honours the Father in heaven.

**665** *Christ’s Ascension marks the definitive entrance of Jesus’ humanity into God’s heavenly domain, whence he will come again (cf Acts 1:11); this humanity in the meantime hides him from the eyes of men (cf Col 3:3).*

**666** *Jesus Christ, the head of the Church, 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.*

**667** *Jesus Christ, having entered the sanctuary of heaven once and for all, intercedes constantly for us as the mediator who assures us of the permanent outpouring of the Holy Spirit.*

1. Pauline Jaricot was beatified last Sunday 22/05/2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)