

Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, J.C.D.
Memorial Day Mass
16.X.10



St. Luke presents the entire ministry of Jesus as an ascension from Galilee to Jerusalem to heaven and an exodus, realized definitively now at the Ascension in the passage to the Father. It is an excellent model for this particular archdiocese continually on the move, providing signposts, and on this annual occasion pausing to remember, to give thanks, and to pray.

The Sacred Liturgy of the Church continually prescribes texts from the Acts of the Apostles to be read during Eastertide. They describe the growth of the early Church and the missionary journeys of Saints Peter and Paul and their companions. The destinations are both new fields of mission and communities where they have already evangelized. The continuity of this mission in the history of the Church has often come to mind as I made pastoral visits to military installations in various parts of the world.

The Successors of the Apostles continue to visit the communities assigned to their pastoral care to preach the Gospel, confirm communities in their faith, and encourage the presbyters in their ministry. That is clearly the reality of every diocese and in the case of the Archdiocese for the Military Services it is an apostolic journeying from the rising to the setting of the sun. We gather this afternoon in Washington, but Bishop Higgins confirms the faith of the communities in Europe, and Bishop Estabrook visits those of the southeastern portion of the US.

The Solemnity of the Ascension allows us to reflect on that reality. It “helps us to recognize and affirm our vocation, which is religious and not political; it is not a system of thought. We do not seek to conquer the world. What motivates us is the desire that each person might meet as we have met the God we love who loved us first.”¹ It is a living of the mandate so clearly expressed by Jesus in the Gospel we have just heard.

St. Paul also makes it clear in the second reading: the Ascension points out that Christ is Lord, and absolutely everything is under His sovereign dominion. He gave that to the Church as head over all. It is His Body. Christ, Head of the universe, has given the Church the essential mission to be His visible body. Therefore, the Church has a double

¹ M. Delbrêl, *Indivisibile amore. Frammenti di lettere*, p. 27ff.

mission: fill herself completely with Christ, to become the fullness of Christ; and for those who do not belong to the Church, to be the visible means by which Christ acts in the world.

This solemnity gives us a powerful dose of hope coupled with apostolic fervor. We hear the angels urge us not to look into the heavens, but to get to work in the proclamation of the Kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. With the Apostles we must grow in our understanding of the mission and our eagerness to accomplish it. The forty days spent with the Risen Lord completed the Apostles' instruction and sharpened their eager longing for the gift of the Spirit. We, too, must be deeply transformed albeit in a gradual way by our association with the Risen Lord and the Spirit He sent to us.

"Since the Ascension God's plan has entered into its fulfillment. We are already at 'the last hour'. 'Already the final age of the world is with us, and the renewal of the world is irrevocably under way; it is even now anticipated in a certain real way, for the Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity that is real but imperfect.' Christ's kingdom already manifests its presence through the miraculous signs that attend its proclamation by the Church."²

There are two levels of joy: in the face of the reality of the earth and yet through baptism we are already incorporated in Christ who dwells with the Father. Heaven is our homeland. We are pilgrims. Our joy is therefore proportional to the faith with which we live, the degree of certainty that is ours. After the victory of Christ nothing is the same for the human person and so we pray that His gifts to us might help us rise with Him to the joys of heaven.³

We are on a journey and so we look for signposts. The Silver Jubilee of this Archdiocese celebrates the quarter-century response of the Church to the pastoral needs of a particular segment of our society: the military and their families, students at the military academies, patients and caregivers in the Veterans' Administration system, and all who serve this Nation outside its borders. The happy coincidence with the Solemnity of the Ascension reminds us of mandate given by Christ to the Apostles so clearly presented by St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. The Apostles chosen in the Spirit are witnesses of all the Jesus said and did, His Passion and Resurrection. Their authority was willed by the Lord Jesus who made them the foundation of the Church for all times (Eph. 2:20 and Ap. 12:14). The bishops, successors of the Apostles, despite our unworthiness, continue that role and assure that link to the foundation. We celebrate that today as we recall the thousands of miles traveled to assure that pastoral care and the support offered to the priests who serve as chaplains to all of those faithful.

Our program is always the one mandated by Christ: like Abraham, the Apostles must leave their native place, their securities, their expectations, and reach the ends of the earth with the message of the Gospel. That is true in every apostolic mission, but especially so in this Archdiocese for the Military Services where the Shepherd is continually on the move to

² CCC 670.

³ Cf. Prayer over the gifts, Mass for the Ascension.

visit a flock, which is found in every corner of the world. Having accepted the mantle of an earlier structure, the Military Vicariate, my predecessors continued the tradition of Cardinal Spellman as he visited the troops across the globe. I, too, have found myself this year alone in the Middle East, Africa, Japan, and Europe, as well as in so many parts of the US.

Some symbols remind us of the commitment lived by this Archdiocese: the crozier or pastoral staff, which belonged to Cardinal Hayes, the first Military Vicar, given by Cardinal Cooke to Archbishop Ryan to mark the beginning of a new reality always enshrined in the tradition of the old. I am wearing Archbishop's Ryan's episcopal ring and we will use his chalice for the Eucharistic sacrifice, that unbroken link to both the Last Supper and Christ's unique sacrifice on Calvary.

More important than tangible symbols, however, are the lives we commemorate this day. St. Paul in the second reading contemplates the marvelous design of God and expresses the hope that the Christians of Ephesus might receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation—to understand and meditate the mysteries of God. Is that not our prayer for the fallen? May they have the fullness of life. There is no more reason to fear! Christ is at the head of His Church whose unity is indivisible.

We remember all of those who have died since we gathered last year. They are men and women who have sacrificed that precious gift in order to defend our liberty and the inalienable rights of all to freedom, justice, and peace. We pray for them and for the consolation of all of those who mourn their passing. Nothing will ever take away the pain caused by their loss, but we must give thanks for their faithful service and pray that they enjoy everlasting life in the presence of God.

In a very particular way, we pray for the Catholic chaplains who have completed the earthly portion of their pilgrimage. Significant is the death of Father Timothy Vakoc last June, the only chaplain to die of wounds received in Iraq. Like so many, he did not allow the risks of the roads from one FOB to another prevent him from bringing to others what he alone could give: the Mass and the sacraments of Penance and Anointing of the Sick. In the noble tradition of service to others, he did not hesitate to be Christ for those in his care. Today we honor all of those living and dead who have made that ministry a reality for the last quarter century.

I would be remiss if I did not also mention General Alexander Haig who was buried from this very shrine at the end of February. While his service to the Nation had so many facets, I remember him for his generous commitment to the ministry of the Archdiocese for the Military Services. Permit me also to remember Father Patrick Kenny who literally gave his life ministering to the patients and their families at WRAMC.

The coming week of the liturgical year is one of expectation as the whole Church gathers in prayer with Mary to await the Spirit, who comes with His power to make us witnesses to Christ. It is a time of reflection for the great work accomplished and of prayer for what is yet to be done. The Apostles returned to Jerusalem with great joy. It is the joy of contemplating the total definitive victory of Christ; the joy of understanding the plan of God

and to discover the sense of the humiliation, the sufferings, and the death of Christ. It is the joy of knowing that Christ in glory continues to be mysteriously present in His Church, filling it with His life. That is also our joyful expectation as we look back in gratitude and forward in hope.

We would be naïve to think the task easy or without opposition. As believers we form the Church militant. Although Christ's Passover has made accessible His victory over sin and death, "until everything is subject to him, 'until there be realized new heavens and a new earth in which justice dwells, the pilgrim Church, in her sacraments and institutions, which belong to this present age, carries the mark of this world which will pass, and she herself takes her place among the creatures which groan and travail yet and await the revelation of the sons of God.'⁴

The Catechism of the Catholic Church invites us to keep our eyes open to the threats present in every age. "The persecution that accompanies her pilgrimage on earth will unveil the 'mystery of iniquity' in the form of a religious deception offering men an apparent solution to their problems at the price of apostasy from the truth. The supreme religious deception is that of the Antichrist, a pseudo-messianism by which man glorifies himself in place of God and of his Messiah come in the flesh."⁵

Therefore, we gather this afternoon to pray for the grace of vigilance and to renew our commitment. Anniversaries serve that purpose as they provide an opportunity to give thanks to Almighty God for all that He has done for us. With St. Luke we walk on our pilgrimage in gratitude for the multiple signs of the Lord's goodness and in hope for the future. "We impose nothing, yet we propose ceaselessly, as Peter recommends in one of his Letters: 'In your hearts, reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you' (1 Pet 3:15)."⁶

⁴ CCC 671.

⁵ CCC 675.

⁶ Pope Benedict XVI at Oporto, 14.V.10.