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ASCENSION

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault
(Fontgombault, May 18th, 2023)

Iis, qui viderant eum resurrexisse, non crediderunt.
They did not believe
them who had seen Him after He was risen again.
(Mk 16:14)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
My dearly beloved Sons,

THE BOOK OF THE ACTS of the Apostles, which recounts the beginning of the Church, and especially the diffusion of the Gospel from Jerusalem to Rome, from the Jewish to the Graeco-Roman world, starts with the Ascension narrative. This event is the junction between the Gospels, accounts of the life of Jesus, and the Acts of the Apostles, which tell the history of the Church, the time of the Spirit, Who is the protagonist of mission. St. Luke, the author of one of the four Gospels, and the author of the Acts of the Apostles, emphasises this continuity, both books being dedicated to the same Theophilus, “a friend of God”:

The former treatise I made, O Theophilus, of all things which Jesus began to do and to teach, until the day on which, giving commandments by the Holy Ghost to the apostles whom He had chosen, He was taken up.^a

a. Acts 1:1-2.

As he completes his Gospel, St. Luke recounts the Lord’s last apparition to the apostles, very likely in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. At that moment, says he,

He [*viz.* Christ] opened their understanding, that they might understand the Scriptures. And He said to them: “Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer and to rise again from the dead, the third day: and that penance and remission of sins should be preached in His name, unto all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. And you are witnesses of these things.”^a

a. *Lk* 24:45-48.

Ahead of His coming Ascension, the Lord invites the disciples to remain in Jerusalem, and await there that He should send on them Him Whom the Father has promised^b, the Holy Spirit. They will then be able to become His witnesses “in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and Samaria, and even to the uttermost part of the earth.”^c

b. Cf. v. 49.

c. *Acts* 1:8.

After taking His disciples in the direction of Bethany, on the Mount of Olives^d, He lifted up his hands, blessed them, left them and was taken up into heaven, while a cloud hid Him from their sight. A tradition places the location of the Ascension on the top of the mount. There a stone left there, upon which Jesus’ foot is deemed to have rested for one last time.

d. *Acts* 1:12.

In its structure, this narrative has several contact points with the period preceding the arrest of Jesus on this same Mount of Olives. Six weeks ago exactly, at the heart of the Holy Week, on Maundy Thursday evening, we commemorated the institution of the sacraments of the Eucharist and Order. During the meal, the Lord gave a long teaching to His closest disciples. After the meal, He went as usual to the Mount of Olives with His disciples. There, He suffered His agony. Not long after, a small troop led by the traitor Judas came and took the Lord away from His disciples to bring Him first to Annas, then to Caiaphas, the high priest, and last to Pilate, the Roman governor. At the end of His Passion, Jesus died, crucified, lifted up from the earth by the hand and hatred of men. The only ones remaining near Him were His Mother, a few women, and John the Apostle. As to the disciples, they had scattered. There remained for all the prediction by the Lord of His resurrection.

Last, in both cases, angels bring to an end the disciples’ expectation. During the Ascension, two angels inform the apostles

that the Lord will come back in the same way. The apostles then go back to Jerusalem. On Easter morning, the resurrection angel appears to the holy women and informs them that the Lord is risen. The women also go back to Jerusalem to bring the apostles the great news.

The Last Supper as well as the meal just before the Lord's Ascension are moments during which the disciples are invited by the Lord to a deep communion: communion in the bread and wine that are His body and blood, communion also in the teaching given by the Lord.

Sadly, these two meals also reveal the disciples' hearts. During the Last Supper, the meal is barely ending when Judas goes away to carry out his sad business. When Jesus announces that the disciples will be scattered, Peter affirms: "Even if all fall away, I will not."^a

a. Mk 14:29.

It could have been hoped that the meal preceding the Ascension would have taken place in better conditions; yet, the apostles' minds are wandering elsewhere. Whereas Jesus invites them to await the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the apostles ask Him: "Lord, is this the time when Thou wilt restore the kingdom to Israel?"^b

b. Acts 1:6.

The path the disciples follow with the Lord is in the image of their hearts. The roads diverge: on Maundy Thursday, the apostles fall asleep, leaving the Lord alone in His agony, then they scatter. During the Ascension, it is the Lord Who goes away as He goes up to heaven.

The words the Lord had addressed to Peter during the Last Supper then take their full meaning: "Whither I go, thou canst not follow Me now: but thou shalt follow hereafter."^c

c. Jn 13:36.

So why not right now? So why later? Is it due to a divine will? Is it due to the fact that the disciples' hearts are shuttered? How hard anyway it seems to walk with the Lord.

Let us emphasise the fact that if the roads of the disciples and the Lord have diverged, as regards the Lord, He doesn't forsake His disciples. The resurrection angels precede the apparitions of the Lord. As for the Ascension, the announcement of the Lord's return will be preceded by the promise of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

Today's readings call into question our own path of faith, our incredulity, our tardiness on the path of communion with the Lord. It is not sufficient merely to attend Mass to receive its fruits. As to the communion with the Lord, Who remains the way, the truth and the life, it is to be received at every moment in the everyday *Fiat*. God is not niggardly with His gifts. It is up to us to dispose ourselves to receive them.

Within a few days the Church will celebrate Pentecost. After the Ascension the disciples went back to the Upper Room and remained there in prayer with Mary. Let us prepare ourselves to receive Him Who is the light of hearts, the very good consoler, the sweet guest of souls. May He open our hearts and make them receptive to the Lord's teachings, and to the food He offers us in His Eucharist. Such is the condition for mission. There lie strength and hope for the missionary.

Veni, Sancte Spiritus! Amen, Alleluia.

