

THE ASCENSION

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

St. Peter's Church in Volo

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When people see a church such as ours without a free-standing altar, they usually think that we must offer Mass “with our backs to the people.” It may look like it, but that’s wrong because what we aren’t turning our backs on you at all. We are, in reality, together with you, facing East, the direction in which Our Lord ascended into heaven on this day, and the direction from which He will return. By saying that we offer Mass “with our backs to you” implies that we are ignoring you, so that we can “do our own thing” and that couldn’t be further from the truth. Offering Mass in this manner, which has always been the custom of the Church until the changes of the 1960s, we are leading you to the Lord.

In the same way, saying that at the Ascension “Christ left us” is also wrong because the Ascension isn’t really “the temporary absence of Christ from the world.”¹ After all, if Christ is truly present, body and blood, soul and divinity, in all the tabernacles of the world, then He hasn’t left the world, has He? The accounts of the Ascension that we find in the New Testament don’t use words that say that Christ “went” to heaven, as if He was leaving his disciples. Today’s lesson from the Acts of the Apostles says: “as they were looking on, he **was lifted up**, and a cloud **took him** from their sight.”² Similarly, in his gospel St. Mark writes that “the Lord Jesus **was taken up** into heaven and took his seat at God’s right hand.”³

In the Letter to the Hebrews we read that “through the blood of Jesus we have confidence of entrance into the sanctuary by the new and living way he opened for us through the veil, that is, **his flesh**.”⁴ This is the key to what the Ascension is all about.

At the Ascension, Christ didn’t go to some place far away from men and the world. It wasn’t a journey to some remote place in the cosmos.⁵ As Pope Benedict XVI once said, “The Ascension of Christ means that he no longer belongs to the world of corruption and death, which conditions our life. It means that he belongs completely to God. He, the eternal Son, has taken our human being to the presence of God; he has taken with him flesh and blood in a transfigured form. Man finds a place in God through Christ; the human being has been taken into the very life of God.”⁶ The meaning of Christ’s Ascension is that in Christ, the humanity which we all share, has entered into the inner life of God in a new way. It means that man has found an everlasting place in God.⁷ Even now, while still on this earth, we go to heaven to the extent that we share the same humanity with Jesus Christ, who is at this moment seated at the right hand of the Father in heaven. “Christ has not gone far away from us, but ... now, thanks to the fact he is with the Father, he is close to each one of us forever.”⁸ Christ is the Way, and in order to show us the road to heaven, Christ had to go to there Himself.

The event that we remember today should, therefore, not be a reason for sadness that Christ isn’t with us any longer, but rather it should be a reason for rejoicing because it was the day on which our human nature was carried up, in Christ “above all the hosts of heaven, above all the ranks of angels, beyond the highest heavenly powers to the very throne of God the Father.”⁹ Pope St. Gregory the Great once wrote that the disciples “had

a great and inexpressible cause for joy when it saw man's nature rising above the dignity of the whole heavenly creation, above the ranks of angels, above the exalted status of archangels. Nor would there be any limit to its upward course until humanity was admitted to a seat at the right hand of the eternal Father, to be enthroned at last in the glory of him to whose nature it was wedded in the person of the Son."¹⁰ This is the beautiful, magnificent and awesome mystery that we celebrate today—that our human nature, which we share with God the Son, now sits in the highest heaven at the right hand of the Father, awaiting our resurrection and ascension to join Him.

Christ assumed our humanity not just to save us on this earth but ultimately to lead the march into His heavenly kingdom as head of His Mystical Body with whom He is united not only in spirit but also in the flesh. That is why the resurrection of His body is the promise of our own resurrection on the Last Day. And that is why it is not really correct to say that Christ has left us, for if He, as head, has ascended to the Father, we as His body have been drawn up with Him through the one humanity that we share. His Ascension into heaven is the hope of our own ascension. If we remain faithful to Him and do not deny Him, then we in our glorified humanity will one day become one body with Him in heaven for all eternity.

¹ Benedict XVI, *Magnificat*, May 2007, vol. 9, no. 3, 242.

² Acts of the Apostles 1:9.

³ Matthew 16:19.

⁴ Hebrews 10:19-20.

⁵ "Benedict XVI's 1st Homily From Cathedral of Rome" 9 May 2005m (<http://www.zenit.org/english/>).

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Magnificat*.

⁸ "Benedict XVI's 1st Homily.

⁹ Gregory the Great, "Sermo 2 de Ascensione," 1-4: PL 54, 397-399. *The Liturgy of the Hours*, volume II, Wednesday of the Sixth Week of Easter, (Catholic Book Publishing Co.: New York 1976), 899.

¹⁰ Gregory the Great, "Sermo 1 de Ascensione," 2-4: PL 54, 395-396. *The Liturgy of the Hours*, volume II, Thursday of the Sixth Week of Easter, (Catholic Book Publishing Co.: New York 1976), 899.