

*“Grant, we beseech Thee, almighty God: that we who believe Thine only-begotten Son, our Redeemer, to have ascended this day into heaven, may also ourselves dwell in mind amid heavenly things”*

Why is this our prayer of the day, the Collect of this Holy Mass?

The Ascension is the exalted truth of our Catholic faith. When Christ takes his seat at the right hand of the Father, it fulfills his saving mission for humanity until he comes again to judge the living and the dead.

That mission begins with the Annunciation, is realized in the Incarnation and his life dwelling among us, raising our fallen human nature to a new dignity. He nails our sins to the Cross, and the water and blood that pours out commences the Sacramental life of the Church. His Resurrection overcomes death itself, giving man a confident hope of reigning with him in the next life while faithfully serving him in this one.

And now, God takes Christ’s glorified body and divine soul into heaven. What does this mean for us? St. John taught *no one ever ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven*. This means, according to St. Augustine, that he did not leave heaven when he came down to us, nor did he withdraw from us when he went up again. In reality, he is with us more fully than ever. And we need him more than ever.

Place yourself in this amazing scene. Three years you walk with Our Blessed Lord, witness his preaching, teaching, healing, passion and death. He rises, and He breathes on you His Holy Spirit. And one final time, prior to your great commissioning to preach the Gospel everywhere, he “scolds” you for unbelief. And then you watch as he is taken up to heaven. Can you imagine?

But why the scolding? Perhaps this is his final warning about our feeble human nature. All of us, Priest, Deacon, Laity, Bishop, Religious—we can and will fail in living the mission without him. This is a humbling parting message, isn’t it? Christ knows us, and he knows the world he leaves behind, the world in which we dwell, and the impending spiritual battle for all of us to fight. The world was against him then, against him and us now, isn’t it?

Which is why he instructed us to *seek first the Kingdom of God*. Because *the world as we know it*, writes St. Paul, is not only against us, but is *passing away*. It will end, as will our mortal lives. But this is only part of us. We have an immortal soul that doesn’t pass away. While on this earthly pilgrimage, are we, asks St. Augustine, “striving to find rest with him in heaven even now through grace that unites us to him”? This is our battle, within ourselves and with the world.

Blessed Fulton Sheen tell us like it is: “there are no plains in the Kingdom of God; one is either going uphill or coming down”. The Christian never rests on flat ground. We are either ascending or descending; dwelling in mind amid heavenly or earthly things; looking up to heaven seeking the spiritual goods that last or looking down by seeking the material that don’t. We are either serving God or mammon, feeding our souls or feeding our eyes and our bellies. Where are the spiritual pitfalls today? There are plenty, but three in particular came to me in prayer, so I am preaching to myself also.

First, consumerism and materialism, and the envy, jealousy, selfishness and false happiness they produce. The world is flooding our minds with the idea that we constantly need something or to be doing something to satisfy ourselves. This is an evil seduction that drags us into dwelling on what we don't have instead of what we do, which is our priceless Catholic faith! And that faith reminds us we are here to love and serve God and neighbor, and not ourselves. Second, ignorance. So many of our brothers and sisters are ignorant of the faith. And now there is confusion about Christ's most basic teachings; what is fundamentally right and wrong, even the reality of the human person—all evil enough. But we can spend too much time finding blame: our culture, the breakdown of the family, Vatican II or the sins of Church leaders. When we complain, accuse, blame and argue about it we are the ignorant ones! And that sin is ecclesial, because we infect those around us.

Third, misunderstood suffering. The existence of evil and suffering is the excuse that God doesn't exist, and for not believing. This can happen to any of us! Death, sadness, sorrow and anguish are all part of our human condition. It was a significant part of Our Blessed Lord's life too. But, like him, it doesn't have to overcome us. We strive to affix our suffering and the suffering of our brothers and sisters to the Cross, allow it to sanctify ourselves and the world around us. Are we making prayer and sacrifice for our suffering brothers and sisters, or just worried about our own?

This is a crazy world we live in, right? But how beautiful is this, our faith, heaven? For just a short time we dwell here amid an abundance of things that pass away while battling to raise our minds and souls to what lasts forever. Miraculously God gives our mortal body an immortal soul as intimate place for him to dwell. Mysteriously it is the soul that holds our feeble self together as we wage spiritual battle, and how the Christian holds this crazy world together until Our Blessed Lord comes again from heaven.

Heaven—the destination of Our Risen Lord on the Ascension, in all his living reality—soul and glorified body. He has entered into the intimacy of the Father, into love itself, and is now the perfect God-man. He loves us, and by reigning in love itself is with us more fully than ever before. And we need him more fully than ever before.

The Good News is we can ascend to him with the grace he will pour into our souls if we struggle and thirst for it. He gives us all the tools. We just need to employ them.

We don't have any excuses. This is our mission, and one from which no Christian is excused.

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