

My friends in Christ, we heard it proclaimed just now in today's Gospel passage from Saint Mark that, after He had spoken to the Apostles, the Lord "was taken up into Heaven and took His seat at the right hand of God." Jesus ascended into Heaven, Body and Soul – taking His throne in the Kingdom to shouts of joy; a blare of trumpets for the Lord.

And as for the Apostles – Jesus having just left them, having gone to Heaven now, leaving them to their own devices – what did they do in response to the Ascension? Why, they packed up and went home, of course! "Well, that is a wrap, gentlemen," Peter said unto them – and that was that. No! That is *not* what they did. What did they do? What was their response to His departure and Ascension into Heaven? "They went forth and preached everywhere." Now...if *I* were them, and if the leader of *my* new religion just up and left, well...I can imagine that I *definitely* would have brushed my hands of the whole darn thing and gone home. I mean, after all, *He* gave up and went away; why, therefore, should *I* be expected to stick around?

But the *Apostles...they* stayed. "They went forth and preached everywhere." Why? Because Jesus was – and *is* – the real deal.

But even so, even given the fact that "they went forth and preached everywhere," the Lord was gone now. How in the world, therefore, could the Apostles expect to be successful, or to have any impact at all, in going forth and preaching everywhere? Christ is gone now, and they are just a bunch of dumb guys – how, therefore, could they possibly even *hope* to succeed in this endeavor?

Because Jesus "worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs."

And now, we come to the heart of it. Jesus, Body and Soul, is in Heaven – that is what we celebrate with the Ascension. But He certainly is *not* gone. Rather, He has sent another Advocate, and that is the Holy Spirit. And in these short concluding verses of the Gospel according to Saint Mark, we begin to perceive the mystical connection between Jesus Christ, Who is the Word...our own endeavor to proclaim the Word in our evangelization efforts...and the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit – in His Personhood, in His advocacy, in His intimate role in our lives – the Holy Spirit equips and empowers the disciple; and we do well, therefore, to foster a stronger and far more fervent devotion to the Holy Spirit...*if* disciples of Jesus Christ we would be. To this end...in

the narthex, I set up a table near the baptismal font with Holy Spirit prayer cards, so that as we pray the Holy Spirit prayer (and *hopefully* even commit it to memory, pray it daily, as we would the Lord's Prayer or the Hail Mary)...*hopefully* as we pray this great prayer, we *will* enjoy a stronger relationship with the Holy Spirit and thus be strengthened *by* the Holy Spirit in all that we may strive to say and do in the most holy Name of Jesus Christ.

Having ascended into Heaven, Christ sends forth His most powerful field commander – the Holy Spirit – and the Advocate is given for us so that we (and *every* member of the Mystical Body of Christ that is the Church) might undergo discipleship formation and *ultimately* be sent forth as joyful missionaries, active and intentional disciples of Jesus Christ, sent forth on a mission from God, sent forth into mission lands – our place of work; our school; the ballpark; the grocery store.... Just as it happened for Mary and the Apostles in the Upper Room at Pentecost, so it happens for us; it is the same Holy Spirit Who transforms would-be disciples of Jesus Christ from just ordinary people into *extraordinary* Spirit-filled evangelists.

My friends in Christ, *we* are the apostles now. The Holy Spirit is with us, *in* us, and now, *we* are the “sent ones,” and *we* are the faithful, joyful missionaries. And it is now *us* who are sent forth on a mission from God, sent forth into mission lands – and the time is *now* to unleash the Gospel.

With this Ascension homily then, and in the midst of our Parochial Year for Evangelization, we begin the next phase of this Parochial Year that will take us through the summer: unleashing the Gospel. The first phase of the Year has had us focus on ourselves being evangelized (being formed as disciples of Jesus Christ), for we cannot give what we ourselves do not have; we cannot proclaim Whom we do not know. We ourselves first must *be* evangelized before going forth with reasonable expectation of succeeding at *any* effort of evangelization.

The first phase, then: being evangelized ourselves; that is, discipleship formation. And now the second phase: unleash the Gospel.

Unleashing the Gospel is precisely what the Apostles did; the Acts of the Apostles, through which we have been making our way all through the Easter season – that book is devoted totally to that one ferocious and untiring mission of unleashing the Gospel. Saint Peter, our patron, inspired

conversion in *thousands* of people each time he preached and unleashed the Gospel. And Saint Paul traveled half the world, it seems, proclaiming the Word wherever he went, winning souls for Christ, establishing churches – again, *unleashing the Gospel*.

The evangelistic exploits of the Apostles is a story told in a biblical book that is twenty-eight chapters long...and now it is *our* turn. The race continues; the baton has been passed on to us. The Acts of the Apostles continues, and we are now living in the midst of Chapter Twenty-Nine.

Acts 29: unleashing the Gospel in 21st-Century America. But you know, we do not have to be like Saints Peter and Paul; we do not have to stand up in busy marketplaces and shout at the top of our lungs that God *loves* us...that God *made* us...that, although we sinned, God *saves* us in Christ Jesus. Rather, if we would simply, confidently, faithfully, and joyfully approach someone whom we already know, whom we already love...that invitation to hear, to receive, and to believe in Him and in His Gospel of life and love – that is a *personal* invitation. Evangelization is not a program put on by a parish or a diocese but rather simply an offer of communion with a Person, and that Person is the Lord. Heart speaks unto heart. Share *your* story with another, and in so doing, *the* Story (that is, the Sacred Story of Jesus Christ) will more easily and more readily be heard, received, and believed.

The best example of how this works is Jesus Himself: Chapter 4 in the Gospel according to Saint John. Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well. He did not stand up and proclaim Himself to all the town; no, He simply sat down beside that woman and related with her. Heart speaks unto heart. And in that simple, quiet conversation, He won her over. And then, *she* went through all the town, and then *they* came to know Him at the well, and at the last *they* were won over, too. Spiritual multiplication! And it all began with that first, initial, one-on-one encounter between her and Jesus.

Jesus shows us that the Gospel is most effectively communicated and shared in our person-to-person encounters with another (when heart speaks unto heart). Being a disciple of Jesus Christ means always being prepared to bring the love of Christ to another, and this happens unexpectedly, at any time, in any place: our place of work; our school; the ballpark and the grocery store.

Accompaniment with those whom we are hoping to evangelize – that is absolutely *essential* if we are to unleash the Gospel. When Christ accompanied the two disciples on the road to Emmaus,

He did not immediately begin by instructing them and catechizing them and correcting them where they were wrong. No; He instead first listened to them (an active listening; a *holy* listening), thereby giving them an opportunity to share their hopes and fears and so earning their trust. He met them precisely where they were in their faith and then helped them to go even further.

When we unleash the Gospel...when we *share* the Gospel and thereby go forth, in our holy striving, to evangelize...we accompany them; and also, we are patient. Because sharing the Gospel is merely the *beginning* of evangelization. Those whom we accompany, they may need some time to stew over what we share with them, to integrate the Gospel into their lives, thus to bring their lives in conformity with it. They may have developed worldly habits and darkened ways of thinking that need to be healed. And this is not often an easy process – especially for those who may have spent many years living apart from God. They need others to walk *with* them, thus to lead them closer to God with patience and compassion.

For Saint Peter and Saint Paul – *they* could inspire conversion in *thousands* of people with just a single sermon. I wish *I* could do that! But for us normal folk, who knows but that we might need days, months, even several years of walking with another person before we can be confident that we have won them for Christ.

But there again, that is *precisely* why Jesus Christ, when He ascended into Heaven, sent forth the Holy Spirit...to be with us always...to equip us and thus empower us in all that we strive to say and do in the most holy Name of Jesus Christ.... And so, as we go forth to unleash the Gospel, so to share the Gospel with others, may it be that God the Holy Spirit would continue to remain with us always...to remain *in* us always.... And now, if you already have one of those Holy Spirit prayer cards that I mentioned earlier, then I invite you now to take it out as we pray together: ...

(pray “Come Holy Spirit”)