FEAST OF THE ASCENSION (Year A)
May 24, 2020

I. Introduction

St. Martin of Tours was a holy bishop in 4th century France. He was the one who, while a soldier in the Roman army, cut his military cloak in two and gave half of it to a freezing beggar, who turned out to be Jesus Himself in disguise. Martin soon afterwards left the army, was baptized a Catholic, and became a monk. His reputation for holiness spread throughout the country, and so the people of the city of Tours sent for him under a pretext, and over his protests, elected him as bishop. Martin reluctantly accepted the position, and then spent many years visiting remote areas of his diocese, preaching the Gospel, opposing heresy, and upholding the True Faith.

Finally, in the year 397, when he was 80, old age caught up with Bishop Martin, and he became seriously ill. As the time for his death approached, his friends and assistants gathered around his bed. Martin was in a lot of pain, but he kept his eyes fixed in the direction of Heaven, knowing that at the Ascension Jesus had gone ahead of us to prepare a place for us there in His Kingdom. One of Martin’s friends suggested that he be turned on his side to lessen the pain, but the saint responded, “No, let me continue gazing toward Heaven instead of earth, for Jesus went in that direction ahead of me, and I shall soon follow Him” (Fr. Francis Spirago, Stories from the Catechist, p. 54). Today’s Feast of the Ascension is not only a reminder that Jesus has returned to Heaven, but also a promise that if we live as His followers, we will one day join Him there.

II. Development

For forty days after Easter Sunday, Our Lord spent time with the apostles, reassuring them that He was truly alive and explaining how His suffering, death, and resurrection were necessary to complete His Father’s plan of salvation and fulfill the Old Testament prophecies about Him. The Gospels don’t tell us very much about this forty day period, but it must have been a wonderful experience for the apostles—a chance to rejoice in their Master’s glorious and astounding victory over death, to learn deep and important mysteries of faith, and to experience His saving love in a wonderful and personal way. Eventually, however, this “spiritual vacation” had to come to an end; it was time for Our Lord, in His physical presence, to leave them. Today’s 1st Reading and Gospel both described what happened forty days after Easter: Jesus was lifted up into the clouds and disappeared from their sight. He did this not only because He had earned the right to go back to Heaven, but also so that His followers would have the chance to do their part in spreading the Gospel. Before leaving them, Jesus told the apostles what to do: to bear witness to Him, to teach and baptize people throughout the world, and to provide leadership for His Church. St. Paul tells us in the 2nd Reading that Jesus is reigning in Heaven as the head of the Church; here on earth we, as the Body of Christ, are called to continue serving Jesus by witnessing and working in His Name. In this way, all of Christ’s followers on earth are preparing to be united with Him in Heaven.
III. Conclusion

I remember once in high school sitting at a lunch room table; a boy named John was sitting across from me, and I noticed his eyes were following someone so intensely that nothing could distract him. I turned around to see what he was looking at, and I saw that he was watching a girl in the lunch line. For John, it was love at first sight; he was totally entranced and enchanted by the sight of her, and in a crowded, noisy cafeteria nothing else registered with him. In a sense, that’s the way our souls should be looking at Heaven; even as we’re busy with many things here on earth, being with Jesus is something we should want more than anything else. This means three things in particular. First of all, we shouldn’t become too discouraged over our moral and spiritual weaknesses and failures, our disappointments in life, and our physical and emotional sufferings. Yes, these things can hurt, and we can and should take every reasonable step to seek assistance with them, to lessen the pain they cause, and to overcome them and prevent them from occurring again. Even as we do this, however, we must remember that Jesus suffered greatly, and was then exalted and rewarded even more greatly. So it can be with us. Whenever our lives are filled with clouds or darkness, we must remember that there’s a heavenly light at the end of the tunnel, and that by carrying our cross in the footsteps of Jesus, we are assured a glorious place in His Kingdom.

Secondly, we must also maintain a proper balance when it comes to our earthly successes and pleasures. Yes, these things can be a blessing, and if we’re truly grateful for them, they can even bring us closer to God—but we must remember that everything we are and everything we have in this life is temporary. The world in which we live is passing away, and many of the things which are so important to us now actually have no lasting significance whatsoever. Therefore, we must not become so caught up in this world that we fail to prepare ourselves for the next, and we must not become so absorbed by the good things of creation that we ignore the Creator. In all things, Jesus must come first. Thirdly, if our hearts are truly set on Heaven, we will want the gift of eternal life not only for ourselves, but also for everyone else. Therefore, we will use whatever opportunities God gives us to share our faith, whether by our example, our willingness to talk about Jesus, our active involvement in our parish and community, our financial support of the Church’s missionary activities, our willingness to continue learning more about the Catholic Faith, our efforts to uphold moral standards in an increasingly immoral society, our prayers for the spread of the Gospel and the conversion of sinners, and so on. Our Lord’s command to preach the Gospel throughout the world wasn’t directed only to His apostles, but to all His followers—and Jesus expects us to use the opportunities we’re given in this regard.

St. Martin of Tours spent his last hours literally gazing up toward Heaven; the reason he could do this was that he had spent his entire life on earth preparing to go there. This should be true for us, too. Treating other people with love and respect, showing mercy and forgiveness to others, helping those in need, doing our best to follow Christ’s commandments and the Church’s teachings, and living out our faith each day are ways for us to show our true desire to follow Our Lord and to enter His Kingdom. Jesus has shown us the way; now it’s up to us to follow Him.