

## Ascension of the Lord

At the beginning of my first Sunday mass as pastor here at the cathedral not quite one year ago I started the way I'd begun every other mass: I processed up the aisle as usual, kissed the altar as usual, and started over to my chair as usual. But because I'm in the habit of walking to the largest chair in the sanctuary, I actually took a step in the wrong direction before I caught myself. As most of you know, a cathedral is named after a chair called the cathedra - it's the chair where the bishop of the diocese sits whenever he celebrates mass. Others are not supposed to sit there. I corrected my course in time that day and went to the chair where I belonged.

I was telling this story to a bishop from another diocese. He said, "I had the other problem. The first time I celebrated mass in my cathedral as a newly ordained bishop, I kissed the altar and went to the priest's chair. Somebody had to tap me on the shoulder, point out the cathedra, and say, 'You're supposed to sit up there.'"

A chair can signify the position of the person who uses it. At the office, in a classroom, in the living room, at the dining room table, or in the car, you can probably think of certain seats where the same person always sits because of who they are and the responsibilities they hold. Even when you come to church, you may claim the same seat each time. It is yours, and it affirms who you are.

If such a chair is empty, it may cause concern. When someone from your family is away, an empty seat at the table reminds you that they are gone. When a pope or a bishop dies, the period between leaders is called in Latin *sede vacante*, or "empty seat." But when the chair at the cathedral is empty on a day like today, it usually means that the bishop is elsewhere in the diocese, doing his work. He is present to us, even though he is absent.

Psalm 47 meditates on a chair so important that it is called a throne. It is where God sits. Just as we celebrate the solemnity of Christ the King each year, people may have first sung today's responsorial at a pre-Christian royal festival. To be precise, God is not just sitting on his throne. "God mounts his throne." Like the rising sun, God processes up to take the seat that belongs to him alone.

It's easy to see why the followers of Jesus have long interpreted Psalm 47 as a prophecy for his ascension. At the end of his earthly ministry, witnesses watched as Jesus ascended into the heavens. We can imagine him processing up to mount the throne that belonged to him alone from the beginning of time.

In the fifth century Pope Leo the Great wrote this reflection about the birth and ascension of Christ: "he had not left his Father when he came down to earth, nor had he abandoned his disciples when he ascended into heaven." When his heavenly throne was empty, Leo says, Christ was still present there; while his seat on earth is empty, he is still here.

Each of us occupies a chair. It may be real or symbolic, a position that we hold. At times our responsibilities take us away from our chair. People miss us. Our families and work places don't function as well when we are away. No one can perpetually fill a throne the way Christ can, but we will help those who rely on us if we prepare them well for how to live when we leave our chair behind.

Sunday, May 13, 2018