

## Ascension of the Lord

At an ordination Mass, the bishop prays to God that through the ministry of this new priest, “the full number of the nations, gathered together in Christ, [may] become your one people.” Converting all the nations is a lovely thought, but a tall order, and as we all know, just getting someone baptized does not automatically bring about unity. On a much smaller scale, many Catholic families struggle for unity among themselves. Because of our sin, we all contribute to disunity. Pride seeks our own pleasures ahead of those of others, even the people we love. Anger escapes more strongly in the presence of people we think will still love us no matter how badly we act. Lies try to conceal our mischievous behavior from the very people who could help us overcome false attractions and lead a life more faithful to the gospel. At an ordination, the bishop asks us priests to work toward the unity of the nations in Christ. We strive to achieve that first in our parishes, where we face the same challenges. When I was newly ordained 45 years ago, one pastor summed up all his advice for me in three words: “Love the people.”

For the solemnity of the Ascension this year we hear a passage from the Letter to the Ephesians. Paul makes a reference to this event in a brief commentary on Psalm 68, which opens with the words, “May God arise,” or “May God ascend.” Paul writes, “What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended into the lower regions of the earth? The one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens.” Paul spices this reflection into the beginning of the second part of his letter, which typically responds to ethical issues facing the early Christians. Apparently they struggled with unity. If you can’t always get along with other Christians, even in your own family, it may comfort you to know you’re not the first one. Back in the first century, the Ephesians were not getting along. They notified Paul, who felt obliged to write something about it. Paul writes, “I... urge you to live in a manner worthy of the call you have received, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another through love, striving to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace.” A similar list of virtues appears in the Letter to the Colossians — humility, gentleness and patience—so not one but two groups of early Christians struggled to achieve unity. However, only in the Letter to the Ephesians does Paul ask them to exercise these virtues with one more: Do it “through love.” “Love the people.” That should be a no-brainer, but at times we go through the motions of humility without meaning it, without loving people.

Paul says that after the Ascension, Christ continued to care for the church by assigning roles. He “gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of faith.” Because of the Ascension, the roles we have in our families and our parish are roles we receive from Christ. If we are not a source of unity for the family or for the Church, but a source of disunity on social media platforms or at the dining room table, then perhaps we should reflect more on the Ascension of Christ. He descended in order to ascend. He became one like us so that we might become like him. He gave us each a vocation to continue his work after his Ascension. Christ calls us to unity. Let us fulfill our calling through love.

Sunday, May 12, 2024