The Ascension

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Tonight you, the members of the Order of the Ascension" are renewing your vows. How honored I am to be included in this occasion and to be asked to preach! For a number of years now your individual faces have reflected to me in myriad ways the reality of Christian faith in action. You have inspired me and many others not only by your commitment to help people in parishes that are in distress, but also by the high level of skill with which you do your work, and by the concern that your words and actions express and make manifest God's Word, Jesus Christ, as scripture reveals him and tradition interprets him.

Recent reflection on your role in the church has impressed me with how apt is the name you have chosen for yourselves, the Order of the Ascension. The Ascension means that Jesus has taken up his rule over the new creation in a decisive manner, and that he penetrates and intervenes in the lives of Christians in an even fuller way than he did during his earthly ministry. The New Testament authors disagree on how or when the Ascension actually happened, but they all adhere to the conviction that it did occur. In Luke's gospel which we just heard, the Ascension took place on the evening of the Resurrection, and the same interpretation is given in the longer ending of Mark. For John, the Ascension takes place as a kind of process, while in Acts the author seems to have gained a new understanding after his account in Luke, for now the Ascension takes place forty days after Easter. Ephesians, I Timothy, and Hebrews all refer to Jesus' Ascension and agree on its most basic meaning.
"I tell you the truth," says Jesus in John, "it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate (Paraclete) will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you." There is a very interesting passage in the Book of Margery Kempe, that odd, passionate younger contemporary of Julian of Norwich, where Margery marvels when she learns that Mary Magdalene had relinquished her desire for the earthly Jesus, rejoicing at Easter to find him in his resurrected body. And, referring to Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus in the garden, Margery confesses that had Jesus said to *her* "Touch me not" (as he did to Mary Magdalene), she would have wanted to kiss his feet, and that whenever she heard those words repeated in a sermon, she "had such great grief and sorrow" that "she wept, sorrowed and cried as though she would have died, for the love and desire that .she had to be with our Lord."
Margery expresses that profound sense of abandonment that any human being would feel at the leave-taking of a beloved person. But if she could accept Mary Magdalene as her model, Mary Magdalene who was honored in the middle ages as the first of the great contemplatives, Margery might grow spiritually and come to understand that what God requires of Christians is not a fierce attachment to Jesus' earthly manhood (although, certainly, Jesus' humanity is highly significant). Instead, God asks for a more profound relationship with his resurrected self.

The New Testament witnesses offer amplification of what this means. From Ephesians we learn "God raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places." (1:20) But Jesus does not sit still on that throne! Now, rather, in a new way Jesus acts in the power of God so that his redeeming rule becomes truly cosmic. In no sense has he forfeited his earthly humanity; his incarnation continues to mean that he will act decisively in human events, but after his Ascension, he will act more powerfully than ever before. We know that he intervenes in peoples' lives. He confronts Paul on the road to Damascus and turns everyone

else's worldview topsy-turvy. Jesus now battles against principalities and powers in the heavenly places. His body expands and he sends it back to earth so that Christians may feel it and participate in it, this to such an extent that centuries after his death and resurrection, Luther will refer to Christ's "ubiquitous body." Now Jesus is everywhere. Most significantly, he sends the Holy Spirit of God through his own agency, through his own personality to create the church. Jesus may have ascended to heaven, but he i~ also here with us, now more than ever before, "He in us and we in Him," we pray after receiving the Eucharist. It is the ascension that makes this possible.

In renewing your vows tonight, you create the ongoing tradition of your order, an order whose fundamental meaning is rooted and grounded in Christ's Ascension. On the occasion of his Ascension, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit as a Comforter to his followers, but how do we know this Spirit, where do we locate its rule?

Let us reflect a little on the meaning of tradition to get some light on what it may mean to renew your vows. Some theologians see the Holy Spirit as equivalent to the kingdom of God. But the Russian Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky takes a rather different view. He asserts that the Spirit is functionally identical with the tradition, itself. Tradition, moreover, is not an impersonal deposit from the past. Instead it is whatever opens us up from our narrow individualism to life in the Church. Furthermore, tradition makes humans open to each other, their past and their future. More specifically, tradition is how we are formed into the likeness of Christ. We receive from Christian tradition, all those things which make us Christ-like, and each of us in our own particular way. Lossky objects to what he calls "sacramental determinism" which he regards as an impersonal grace people receive from the Eucharist. More important, Lossky insists, is to view tradition as the means whereby I become myself in my own uniqueness for other Christians.

Sometimes people in the Church experience tension between the individual and the collective or what we might call the charismatic and the institutional. We may be inclined to think of the one as mold-breaking and revolutionary and the other as conservative and authoritarian. But we do not have to stay stuck in that polarity because the nature of redeemed humanity is such that neither individualism nor collective values can be exclusively true. We need one another to be ourselves in the Church. We are who we are because we live for others and others for us. "Your life and your death is with your neighbors, " said St. Anthony in the fourth century. In a sense, we all go to heaven in one another's pockets.

The Holy Spirit as tradition establishes communication among Christians. Communication, koinonia, was the first gift of Pentecost. Indeed, there is a relationship between communion in the church and eschatology because the supreme goal Christ has set for all of creation is perfect communion.

No doubt, your hearts sink sometimes, as does mine, when you look at actual church communities after hearing beautiful words like this of God's promise. Perfect communion, ha! Judgement Day will come before that describes most Christians. But we must believe that it is somehow possible and true, we must have faith in God's promise through his Holy Spirits Bonhoeffer describes the impediment to Christian coming in truth and its solution in his little book *Life Together*, for me a work that grows in significance the longer I live among awkward Christians (myself included, of course) who try to work out the implications of their faith in

community. Bonhoeffer distinguishes between what he calls "human love" and "spiritual love" .We may not like the terms he has chosen, but his description and analysis of the human condition hold up, I think.

Essentially, "human love is directed to the other person for his own sake, spiritual love loves him for Christ's sake. Therefore, human love seeks direct contact with the other person; it loves him not as a free person but as one whom it binds to itself. It wants to gain, to capture by every means; it uses force. It desires to be irresistible, to rule." Bonhoeffer thinks that human love has little regard for truth. "It makes the truth relative, since nothing, not even the truth, must come between it and the beloved person." There are two marks, he thinks, which reveal the difference between spiritual and human love: Human love cannot tolerate the dissolution of a fellowship that has become false for the sake of genuine fellowship, and human love cannot love an enemy, that is, one who seriously and stubbornly resists it. "
The reason for this is that "human love is by its very nature desire--desire for human community" at all costs even when it requires that truth be sacrificed. But spiritual love is different from this. Spiritual love does not desire, but serves. "Human love makes itself an end it itself. It creates of itself an end, an idol which it worships, to which it must subject everything." "Spiritual love, however, comes from Jesus Christ, it serves him alone; it knows that it has no immediate access to other per sons. "

How frequently people in church communities claim immediate access with each other! I watch liaisons form, emotionally incestuous liaisons, and I wish people knew that there is something better. But instead, they opt for a boundary-less mode of relating, they make infinite demands on each other for complete nurture, perhaps to make up for the nurture they never received as children.

But Bonhoeffer in his youthful maturity, and with all his own emotional needs, nevertheless sees that for Christians there is something better. "Jesus Christ," he says, "stands between the lover and the others he loves." "Because Christ stands between me and others, I dare not desire direct fellowship with them. As only Christ can speak to me in such a way that I may be saved, so others, too, can be saved only by Christ himself." Bonhoeffer claims that he does not know "in advance what love of others means on the basis of the general ideal of love that grows out of [his] human desire--all this may rather be hatred and an insidious kind of selfishness in the eyes 0f Christ." "Where Christ bids me to maintain fellowship for the sake 0f love, I will maintain it. Where his truth enjoins me to dissolve a fellowship for love's sake, there I will dissolve it, despite all the protests 0f my human 1ove...Human love can never understand spiritual love, for spiritual love is from above; it is something completely strange, new, and incomprehensible to all earthly love."

A way, I think, to get in touch with what this spiritual love is like is through a contemplative gaze on the faces of other Christians. What contemplation means for Christians is a long story, but at base it means that we look at the other having already relinquished all ego assertion, every need to control, to make the other be the one we need her to be. Looked at thus, faces give us our most immediate and concrete understanding of the mysterious infinity of possibilities the Holy Spirit gives us access to. If you want to see the Holy Spirit, look at the faces of holy people, people who have realized, although imperfectly, their Christ-likeness. We see in those faces a fusion of word and spirit. That which is inexhaustible is incarnate in the human face. We never see enough, we never see all in a person's face. But the people we call

holy give us insight into God. Their faces, their eyes, their fleshly concreteness tells all we need to know.

If we see holiness in the face of our neighbor it is only because of the way Christ sent us the Holy Spirit through his Ascension. When Jesus ascended, it was as though he were saying, "Don't just stand there looking up into heaven. Look instead at the people you know, the events of your day, the struggles and conflicts of your time. Then bring them all to me, ask me and I will show you how I have been acting to redeem all humankind through those things. Ask me, and I will give you guidance toward healing and justice."

The ascension draws us up along with Jesus to share in his rule at the right hand of God. His ascension lifts us up; it is our ascension, too. "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (In 12:32) The mystery of Jesus' Ascension makes noble the entire human race. And that is why we should honor one another and seek to see the Holy Spirit in one another's face. God is moving us upwards toward the fulfillment of our humanity and the abundance of life in him. In truth, God longs for us to revel and rejoice in Jesus' Ascension reality.