

# Ascension/Sunday of the Fathers of the 1<sup>st</sup> Ecumenical Council

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**EPH 4:1-13; GOSPEL MK 16:15-20**

In John's gospel, just before his betrayal and death, Jesus prays to his Father in heaven for two things: he asks first, that he might again have the glory that he once had with the Father before the world existed, and second, he asks that he might be able to give the "life of God's coming age"- eternal life- to his disciples, and that having received this life, his disciples might be one as Jesus and the Father are one. By the "life of God's coming age", Jesus meant something quite specific: that his disciples should know the one and only true God, and know Jesus as the Messiah whom God had sent" (John 17). This prayer of Jesus is echoed in the letter to the Ephesians when the apostle wrote, there is "one body and one Spirit, as you were also called to the one hope of your call; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."

As we celebrate the feast of the Ascension, remembering that Jesus has been taken up, away from us, and is now seated at the right hand of power, we are being asked to ask ourselves what all of this Lenten and Holy Week and Easter stuff now means for us. The fundamental and searing question being posed to us is very simple: Why bother? And if we do bother, what's next? What are we being called to? Since we no longer live in a world where religious faith and the Christian story are obvious or self-evident or even necessary for getting by in life, we must ask ourselves why we keep on doing what

we do. We need to keep asking ourselves what it means to live the “life of God’s coming age” right now? We need to keep asking ourselves what it means to live with hope in our calling- our vocation- and to live shaped by “one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all”?

If we truly believe that Jesus has been taken up in his ascension and is now seated at the right hand of power, at the right hand of God, what is it that this glorified Jesus is asking of us? What is our calling, our work, now in this world here in Denver in the year 2012? A question I posed to the pastoral council last week was that we need to struggle to discover, to discern, not what kind of community we may want to be, but what kind of community *God* is calling us to be.

According to the writer to the Ephesians whatever else all of this means, it means that since Jesus has ascended far above the heavens, he is now able to “fill all things”, and in “filling all things”, he is able to give “grace”- “gifts”- to all of us- to each and every one of us- so that together we can work for building up the body of Christ- building up the church- until we all attain to the unity of faith and knowledge of the Son of God, until we all grow up and arrive at real maturity, to what the writer to the Ephesians calls “the full stature of Christ”.

What we hear in this apostolic message is a call to Christian discipleship, rooted in our baptism and rooted in us having received “the life of the age to come” by knowing the one true God and Jesus, the Messiah whom this one true God has sent to us. Without this there is no Church, there is no calling, there is no reason for us to be here this morning. But if it is true, then it is everything.

From a biblical perspective, when each of us went through Christian initiation- baptism, confirmation/chrisamation and coming to the Table of the Lord- we were, as our theology says, “ordered” or “configured” to Christ within the community of faith, Christ’s body. Today there is once again much talk about the priest being “ordered” or “configured” to Christ through ordination, which is undoubtedly true, but the foundational “ordering” or “configuration” is what happens to all the baptized when we were initiated into Christ. This isn’t about some little magical dot being placed on our souls- whatever that might look like. Being “configured to Christ” means that each and every one of us has been drawn into a deep and profound “ecclesial relationship”, a “churchly relationship”. Vertically, we were indeed baptized into communion with God, in Christ, by the power of the Spirit. But this vertical relationship with God is inseparable from our horizontal relationship with all our brothers and sisters in baptism who constitute together a communion of believers- and not just those in the Catholic Church, but with all the baptized whoever they are and wherever they are.

To live the “life of the age to come” here and now- to know the one true God and Jesus the Messiah whom God has sent- concretely means that we strive, as the writer to the Ephesians says, to live together “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: because there is only one body and one Spirit”. It also means that we recognize that all authority in the Church- the authority of apostles, prophets, pastors and teachers- is given by the risen and ascended Jesus for one purpose and one purpose only- to empower and to equip the people of God- you- “for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ”. The purpose of all authority is so that

others might grow, might blossom, might mature and that they might then take on real adult responsibility. When authority is dysfunctional, it infantilizes, it keeps people in a state of dependency and passivity, it impedes their growth and development.

Now, this certainly “relativizes” all power structures in the Church, or maybe more accurately put, it places all power structures in a proper perspective. But it also places a tremendous responsibility on you who share in the priesthood of the baptized. You are responsible for the work of ministry in this community. You are responsible for building up the people of God with the gifts and the talents that you have. You are responsible for carrying on the work of Jesus in this place together with the ordained ministers. And together we are being called to a life of discipleship. Together we are being called to bear with one another in love. Together we are being summoned by Jesus to do what we need to do so that we can develop a more mature community of faith and so that all of us can be more deeply “configured” to Jesus.

If we actually took all of this seriously and lived in this way as a community of faith, we would not have problems with finances. We would not have problems with finding people to be involved in our various ministries. We would not have problems developing our work of hospitality, of visiting the sick and elderly, of ecumenical engagement. We would not be afraid to be sent outward toward the world in mission. The sharing of “time, talent and treasure” would simply be what we do *because of who we know ourselves to be*.

One of the truly great gifts of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council was to call us all back to a vision of the Church grounded in the scriptures and the apostolic tradition in which we take

seriously our common calling and vocation rooted in baptism, a vision of the Church that both recognizes and calls forth from all of us the gifts that each and everyone of us has been given by Christ for the building up of his church. My challenge to you today is that you not leave this Liturgy without at some point asking yourself what grace, what gifts, you have received from God and without asking yourself what you can give for the strengthening and the maturing of this wonderful community of faith.

See:

Richard R. Gailardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church* (2011)