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Catacomb of Callixtus, Rome, Italy
Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord – Year C
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Gospel: Luke 24:46-53

The Christian Faith is filled with many paradoxes. The poor are rich. The weak are strong. It is in affliction that we find joy. It is in death that we find life. In the seasons of Lent and Easter, we have celebrated these paradoxes. Jesus shows us that in order to save our lives, we must lose them. And so we fasted, prayed, and gave alms. And in those mortifications, we found new life.

However, today is the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord. According to the Gospel according to Saint John, Jesus told the apostles that we would weep and mourn after the Ascension. I can imagine why. After forty days of enjoying the presence of our resurrected Lord, the apostles were left alone. Jesus disappeared. And they had to just sit and wait for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Today on the Feast of the Ascension, we celebrate a different paradox. We celebrate the paradox that for Jesus to be close to us, He had to go far away. It is only after the Ascension that God in His Triune nature can touch us and transform us on the deepest level and in the deepest way.

Only after the Ascension does our humanity come into the presence of the Father. Only after the Ascension can Christ be made present to us in the sacraments. Only after the Ascension is the Holy Spirit able to descend upon us.

This paradox of the Ascension shows us that the great and transcendent God who appears to be so distant, so far away from us is actually the God that is closest to us. The paradox of the Ascension is that the God who abandons us is the God who comes to us.

The lives of the saints bear witness to this paradox. It is in the saints' darkest hour that God is most near. When the saints' felt most abandoned is when God was most truly present. As we now know, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta was in spiritual darkness for decades. Similarly, Saint Therese of Lisieux felt completely abandoned by God on her deathbed. To these saints, God was very far away. However, we celebrate these women as the two greatest saints of modern times.

And then, there is Saint Cecilia who used to be buried not far from where we are standing right now. Legend has it that she sang a hymn to the Lord as she was being martyred. I imagine that hymn to have a slight twinge of sadness.

We know that God was closer to these saints than anyone else. Yet He seemed so far away. This is the paradox of the Ascension; God must apparently retreat in order to more truly come near.

I often lament the secularization of our times. In America, we have removed any talk of God from the public sphere. In Europe, Mass attendance and religious practice has dramatically dropped. The entire western world has been disenchanted with the Catholic faith. Faith in the Christian God is now just one option among many. And according to most people, a bad option among many other better ones.

And while I believe it is mostly our own fault that God has disappeared from our age, perhaps, it is in the darkness of the modern age that we find God. Perhaps in this culture of death, we find life.

Today's Gospel and Today's First Reading urge us to be witnesses. I do not how God will call each of us to bear witness to Him in our modern times. Perhaps, He will call us to corporal works of mercy like Blessed Teresa of Calcutta. Maybe, He will call us to a hidden life

like Saint Therese of Lisieux. Or maybe, just maybe, He will give us the gift of a martyr's death like Saint Cecilia.

Nevertheless, as we heed this call to bear witness to the Gospel, we will experience the paradoxes of the Christian faith even more acutely. We will suffer more. We will be afflicted more. We will be surrounded by chaos and darkness on every side. We will feel abandoned and alone. However, God promises us that He will turn our mourning into dancing. And our God always keeps His promises.

As we continue with the sacrifice of the most holy Mass here in the darkness of the Catacombs, let us remember the darkness of our modern times. And let us remember that this darkness is a sign that God is with us. Let us turn to the Eucharist, the true Body and Blood of the Son of God who is our shining light. Let us turn to His Eucharistic presence. His presence which was made possible by the Ascension. His presence which lets us know that Our God is truly near.