

ASCENSION – C (May 29, 2022)

We celebrate today the feast of Jesus' ascension into heaven. St. Luke affirms the historical reality of this event both in the gospel reading and in the very beginning of the Act of the Apostles which he also wrote and from which comes our first reading. The Catechism affirms this truth in referring to Jesus' ascension as 'the irreversible entry of his humanity into divine glory' (n. 659). And that has major importance for us as well. By our own powers, we could not hope to attain eternal life and joy in heaven. Because Jesus took on our human nature with his divine nature, his resurrection and ascension opens the path for us to follow him when God will raise our own bodies from the dead at the end of time.

Heaven is real and it is our ultimate goal, and it is where Jesus is seated at the Father's right hand as we heard in the second reading. It's so important for us to remember these basic truths and what God has prepared for our eternity. And that's most especially the case when what we see or experience in this life makes us wonder if God and heaven is in fact real, or if it's all make-believe like the nonbelievers among us claim. Recently we have had to confront yet again the horrible sin of mass shootings in Buffalo NY two weeks ago and then at the Texas school earlier this week. It's impossible to grasp what led those killers to commit such evil against innocent children, women and men.

And very soon after these tragedies happened, the usual angry debates began regarding more restrictive laws on guns. I have to confess some real confusion on my part. On one hand, more restrictions seem logical, at least with regard to who can buy what kind of guns and at what age—especially those dealing with mental health or other such issues. On the other hand, there is the reality that some of the cities and states with the most restrictive gun laws themselves have among the highest rates of gun violence in the country. For example, the city of Chicago has very strong restrictions; yet, over 200 people have already been shot and killed there this year. In one recent weekend alone, 28 people were shot in 20 separate incidents. If this was an issue that could be controlled by laws alone, then why does Chicago—with its very strict gun laws—continue to have such a deadly epidemic of violence? As I said, I don't know the right or most effective answer to that particular question. Let the discussions and debates continue—respectfully, soberly, and prayerfully...and not just to score cheap political points on either side of the aisle.

The fundamental problem, of course, is sin—the rejection of God and the God-given dignity of every person, and the claim to do whatever one wants regardless of the effects on others. Where so many people and even some in positions of influence claim the right that total license to define right and wrong for themselves, the results are entirely predictable. And it is precisely what happened, by the way, in chapter three of Genesis when our first parents gave in to the serpent's temptation to ignore what God had revealed to them and eat the forbidden fruit. Ignoring and rejecting God always leads to bad consequences such as the horrifically evil events in Buffalo and Texas.

God gave Moses and us the commandments and Jesus reaffirmed and strengthened those commandments. We ignore them as individuals and as a culture and nation at our own peril—a peril that is becoming ever more obvious and ominous. Yes, we need more effective laws and

enforcement and security measures. But the problem at its root is spiritual, and so the ultimate remedy also has to be spiritual at its root—and that is the return to God, the God of Jesus Christ, and taking more seriously his call to conversion and holiness. No, none of us here today is guilty of the specific sin of murder. But we are all and always called to acknowledge and repent of the wrong we have done and the good we have not done. The call on ongoing conversion is extended to every single one of us without exception.

Another necessary response to these tragedies and the spiritual crisis we face: prayer. I know that many are tired of hearing about victims of violence being in ‘our thoughts and prayers’ and dismiss that response as nothing but a meaningless and useless copout. But these tragedies are the direct result of ignoring and rejecting God. The simple, unavoidable fact is that we need God, and therefore we need prayer. The consequences of trying to resolve our problems and anger and frustrations on our own and without God...well, those consequences are entirely predictable and they are all around us and in the headlines we read every day.

So...please pray, and do so every day. Pray for the victims of these crimes and their families, and pray for the conversion of those who have done or would do such things. Pray for those who refuse to pray or who think prayer is pointless in these tragedies. Pray at home or in this church or during our regularly-scheduled times of Eucharistic adoration. Pray on the way to work or on the way home from work. Pray while you are planting or cultivating the fields or mowing the lawn. Pray...well, you get the idea. Jesus died on the cross, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. He did this to show us the way and to be the way by which we can serve him and others in this life and join him in eternal heavenly joy. But he won’t do that against our will. Prayer helps us to align our will and desires more closely to God’s will—He who is infinite wisdom and love and justice and mercy. Pray as if your life and that of our nation and world depend on it...because in a very real way, it does.