

Archbishop Timothy P. Broglio, J.C.D.
29th Annual Memorial Mass
21 May 2023



Last Sunday found me presiding at the closing Mass of the International Military Pilgrimage to Lourdes in the cavernous underground Basilica of St. Pius X. It was a unique experience to look out over the assembly clad in the military uniforms of various Nations, color guards with national flags, and my counterparts from several nations. My French colleague preached an excellent homily on charity inspired by last Sunday's Gospel.

It now appears as a fitting prelude for our gathering in another place of pilgrimage, the magnificent Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception to pray for the repose of the souls of the fallen, to supplicate the merciful God for all of the intentions sent to the Archdiocese in these weeks, and to honor also the living who have served or continue to serve our Nation.

The Solemnity of the Ascension draws us to thoughts of action as we journey to the fullness of the eternal life into which we were baptized. We live in the truth to be able to announce it and fulfill the mission the Lord gives us: evangelize, baptize, and move forward with Him to eternal life at the end of our earthly pilgrimage. What justifies our passion for the faith is not our need, but the truth, the nature of reality in the world.

At the Regina Coeli today Pope Francis made the point that the Ascension does not celebrate the departure of the Lord Jesus, but rather His presence in a new way. The late Pope Benedict XVI made the same observation in his usual succinct and clear style: "Ascension' does not mean a departure into some remote region of the cosmos but, rather, the continuing closeness that the disciples experience so strongly that it becomes a

source of lasting joy. Now, through his power over space, Jesus is present and accessible to all — throughout history and in every place.”¹

We are here, because we recognize that truth and we want to share our inheritance with everyone. The missionary dimension of this solemnity is not lost. St. Augustine made a clear statement of the reality in a passage cited in the Office of Readings today. “Why do we on earth not strive to find rest with Him in heaven even now, through the faith, hope, and love that unites us to Him? While in heaven He is also with us; and we while on earth are with Him. He is here with us by His divinity, His power, and His love. We cannot be in heaven, as He is on earth, by divinity, but in Him, we can be there by love.”²

A look at our inheritance is clear in St. Paul’s invitation to the community of faith in Ephesus. “You may know what is the hope that belongs to His call, what are the riches of glory in His inheritance among the holy ones.” St. Paul the great missionary contemplates the marvelous design of God and expresses the hope that the faithful might receive a spirit of wisdom and revelation—to understand and meditate the mysteries of God. Is that not so useful for us in these challenging days? We strive for the fullness of life. There is no more reason to fear! Christ is with us always as He tells the disciples in the Gospel passage. Consequently, they taught us to move forward even in the face of opposition to proclaim the truth about Jesus Christ and the world.

We can move forward because we know that the Lord is looking upon us with immense love and sustaining us in the moments of crisis or challenge. That was certainly the message communicated to those on pilgrimage with the Knights of Columbus in Lourdes. It was a clear invitation to put our burdens on the Lord who sustains us and offers solace and rest in moments of stress, illness, and other difficulty.

The Solemnity of the Ascension is the encouragement of Christ for us to gather all the forces of our hope by focusing on Him in faith. The graces radiating from the Ascension are meant personally for us as we see that the ascending Jesus is looking at us in all times and places,³ as we see in His massive image in the apse of this basilica. Certainly, the question of the men dressed in white to the Apostles reiterates the notion of mission. “Why are you standing there looking at the sky?” There is work to be done. Yes, it is sustained by contemplation and we are all also indebted to the contemplative nuns and monks who pray for us, but we are charged to go forth and bring the message of salvation to our contemporaries.

Bishop Robert Barron makes the point very well speaking about the link between today’s celebration of the Ascension and next week’s observance of Pentecost. “...in the Ascension something of earth moves into the heavenly sphere, and at Pentecost,

¹ Benedict XVI, Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2,

² St. Augustine, *Sermo de Ascensione Domini*, Mai 98, PLS 2 494.

³ Cf. Peter John Cameron as cited in *Aleteia*, 20.V.23.

something of heaven—the Holy Spirit—invades the earth.”⁴ The invasion is the catalyst for the beginning of the apostolic mission to announce Jesus Christ to the world.

May we be ever fired with that desire to bring the Lord to our sisters and brothers by our style of life, in the silence of our witness, and in the immense respect with which we treat every person. We strive to find ways to insert the Gospel into the discourse of our society while we also attempt to lower the tone and remain focused on the issues at hand.

At the same time in a world where the secular and the immediate rule, we are called to invite others to fix their gaze forward. We are on pilgrimage and the goal is not a medal, a challenge coin, or a tee shirt; it is everlasting life. We will never resolve all our problems in this life and what is ultimately important is entrance into eternal life. There is no question that this world will end and certainly our participation in it will end. The Lord Jesus does not lie. That is one of the reasons why we gather here to pray for those who have gone before us.

The Psalm proclaims Almighty God as the great King over all the earth and we believe that, but the signs of that effective kingship are important and they seem to be waning. War in Europe in Ukraine, collapse of Sudan, terrorism in West Africa, the plight of Haiti, mass shootings in our own country, constraint to fund the end of pre-born life in our VA facilities or forcing military commanders to fund travel and time off for the same purpose, the frequent inability of leaders to work together for the common good, and a host of other concerns dominate the news. How do we proclaim the truth in these situations?

We find ways to proclaim the truth in its entirety. Jesus says it clearly in the Gospel: “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”⁵ Jesus Christ is Lord and we are His “mail carriers, not His editors”.⁶ The challenge has always been to proclaim the truth in a way that the people of any given time can understand it. We do that in our catechetical efforts, our presence in social communication, the activity of the Holy See in favor of peace, outreach to the poor and migrants in our country through Catholic Charities, and outside our borders with Catholic Relief Services.

Pope Francis helps us comprehend the tension between our desire for the fullness of life in the presence of God and the mission to proclaim here and now His word of salvation. “Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for His people. When we stand before Jesus crucified, we see the depth of His love which exalts and sustains us, but at the same time, unless we are blind, we begin to realize that Jesus’ gaze, burning with love, expands to embrace all His people. We realize once more that He wants to make use of us to draw closer to His beloved people. He takes us from the midst of His people and He sends us to His people; without this sense of belonging we cannot understand our deepest identity.”⁷

⁴ Robert Barron, *The Word on Fire Bible, Acts, Letters, and Revelation*, p. 36.

⁵ Mt. 28:20a.

⁶ Peter Kreeft, *Food for the Soul A*, p. 367

⁷ Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 268.

That makes our gathering this afternoon so logical. As the Archdiocese for the Military Services, USA, we gather to pray for the eternal rest of those fallen in war and those who served, returned to a routine, and then died of old age or infirmity. The International Military Pilgrimage to Lourdes also brought to mind those who carry the wages of war in their bodies, hearts, and minds. They contrasted with the young military cadets from France, Italy, and elsewhere. We pray for them all along with the families who have paid the price of service either through loss or illness.

Finally, in this perfect prayer we also remember in a special way the priests who served the military or the VA or the foreign service, and have been called back to the Father's house.

Indeed ours is the land of the free, because the brave have made their home here, but have never hesitated to leave what is comfortable and endanger themselves to ensure that freedom.

Our basilica compares very favorably with the heavy concrete of the one underground in Lourdes. However, the Lord who becomes sacramentally present is the same here, there, or in countless military settings across the globe. He looks upon us with love and sends us forth on mission.