

Rev. Derek Fairman

Ascension Thursday

On this Ascension Thursday, we remember that the Lord Jesus has gone to Heaven, not just to sit back and relax, but to continue to intercede for us. The Lord Jesus does not stop the work that He accomplished on earth, but brings that work into eternity, into the Sanctuary in Heaven, not built by human beings but by God. The Lord Jesus is continuing His work in Heaven, but that does not mean that He has abandoned us. He is still working on earth.

This view helps us to appreciate the liturgy that we celebrate. I want to focus upon the importance of the procession that takes place at the beginning of Mass. This procession was present at the very beginning of the liturgy in Rome, and continued for many centuries afterward, but then it waned and was eliminated in the different changes that the Roman liturgy underwent in the Renaissance and after. The Tridentine Mass, instituted by Pope St. Pius V after the time of the Reformation, rather than restoring the procession at the beginning of Mass, instructed the priest to come into the sanctuary from the sacristy door, which was located at the side of the sanctuary. At that time, it meant that there was not much of a procession. But things changed.

The Holy Week liturgies take what is familiar to us, but emphasizes it in a different way, to show its origin. The procession at the beginning of Mass on Palm Sunday is a case in point. The procession at the beginning of that Mass includes the blessing of palms, and the initial Gospel reading. There is at least a procession through the church that reminds us of the procession that formed whenever the Lord Jesus entered the city of Jerusalem. This procession on Palm Sunday gives us an idea of where the procession at the beginning of every Mass has its origin. The procession at the beginning of Mass can remind us of the day whenever the Lord entered the city of Jerusalem to bring His saving work to its fulfillment. All that the Lord Jesus taught, all that He did, found its culmination in His Suffering and Death.

In a way, whenever we come to church, we are bringing all that we have done during the week to a kind of finish or culmination. We are coming to make our offering, and we can offer our sorrows, our hopes, our concerns, and all that we have done during the week to the Lord's altar, that He may look upon us with favor. Granted, the priest, who is ordained *in persona Christi*, represents the Lord Jesus coming into His city in the procession at the beginning of Mass. Yet we can join that procession with our hearts and minds, and with our tongues, as we sing the processional hymn or antiphon.

But there is more to the procession. The sanctuary in the church represents Heaven. Since the Second Vatican Council, the baptismal font has been placed in the sanctuary to emphasize the connection between Baptism and the Mass, but before then, there were baptistries. These were alcoves in the back of the church, or in some cases separate buildings, in which the baptismal font was located. The idea was that a person was baptized, and then the person could come into the church building proper, just as a person would be baptized and come into the one universal Church. The nave, or main body of the church building, was where all the people gathered, and then the sanctuary represented Heaven, where everyone hoped to get. This helps us to understand why priests are called to celibacy: they are in the sanctuary during Mass, which represents Heaven, and they are like the angels who minister to God in Heaven.

The procession at the beginning of every Mass in some way represents the Ascension. The procession represents the Lord Jesus, made present in the priest ordained *in persona Christi*, going to Heaven, to carry on His work in Heaven, in the sanctuary. The sanctuary is where the Lord's Sacrifice, made once for all, is made present here on earth. It points back to the Cross, where the one Sacrifice was made, but it also points forward, to the eternal banquet in Heaven. We might think of the *Adoration of the Mystical Lamb* from the Ghent Altarpiece, in which there is a beautiful garden representing Heaven, and an altar, upon which sits the Lamb of God, surrounded by saints. We can connect that vision of Heaven, found in the Book of Revelation, and the Lamb upon the altar, with the Mass that we celebrate. The sanctuary reminds us of our heavenly home, and that the Sacrifice which the Lord Jesus made on the Cross endures forever.

The recessional, at the end of Mass, whenever the priest leaves the sanctuary, reminds us that there is still work to do here on earth. It reminds us that there are still those who do not know the Good News that the Lord Jesus is risen, that have various needs that the Lord Jesus wants to meet. On Mount Tabor, the apostles may have wanted to stay on the mountain, seeing the Lord in His glory, but they could not. There was more work to be done. The same is true for us. We might want to rest in Heaven, but for now there is work that needs done on earth.

As we approach the altar, we thank the Lord Jesus for all that He has done for us. As He ascends into Heaven, we ask Him to continue His saving work here on earth and in Heaven, interceding for us. We ask the Lord to keep us in His Sacred Heart, that we might know God's love for us, and that our true home is in Heaven. He is present among us in the Eucharist, and He intercedes for us so that we can join Him in the eternal banquet in Heaven.