

**Homily for the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord – Cycle B
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

May 12, 2024

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers, Deacons, and Consecrated Religious; my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Many people last night and the night before were looking up to the sky to see the *aurora borealis* or northern lights, which are beautiful ribbons of light that appear in the sky when energized particles from the sun collide with the Earth's upper atmosphere at extremely high speeds. Last month, people were looking up to the sky to see the solar eclipse. Perhaps each of us has looked up at the sky from time to time these past few weeks looking at the clouds and wondering if we would be getting more rain. At other times we might have looked up to admire a patch of blue sky or to ponder the beauty of the golden orb of the sun. In today's first reading from the *Acts of the Apostles*, we find the Apostles standing and "looking intently as [Jesus] was going" to the Father in a cloud (Acts 1:10). Their eyes, too, were fixed upward, but for different reasons than ours.

The question asked of them by the angel - "Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky" (Acts 1:11)? - seems to us a rhetorical question; what else could they possibly do at the moment? As they watched their Lord and Master being lifted up to be enthroned amid angelic shouts of joy, they must have remembered Jesus' comforting promise: "In my Father's house there are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may also be" (John 14:2-3). How long would He be gone? Perhaps they wanted to cry out, "Take us with you! Take us to your Father's house!"

Saint Augustine reminds us that "our realm is the earth; the angels' realm is heaven. So our Lord came from another realm into our own, out of the land of the living into the land of the dead, from the heights of bliss into the vale of sorrow. He came to us laden with His blessings, yet patiently bore our infirmities." He suffered our death and rose triumphant from the grave. Now he returns to His realm, but not as He first came to us; He has taken His flesh, our flesh, with Him into the Father's house, into the heavenly realm. By His glorious ascension, He shows us what we know in

our hearts, in the longing of our souls: that there is a place for us in heaven, that he has indeed prepared a place for us in his Father's house.

We, too, sometimes find ourselves looking intently, as it were, at the sky, not to look at northern lights, an eclipse, rain, clouds, or sunshine, but wondering how we find our way to the Father's house, how we can "follow where [Jesus], our Head and Founder, has gone before" (*Preface I of the Ascension of the Lord*). This is well and good because in these times we keep our thoughts fixed on the things that last and seek after holiness. When we keep our eyes fixed on the heavenly realm, we remember that, by virtue of our baptism, "here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come" (Hebrews 13:14).

Other times, though, we find ourselves looking intently at something other than the path Jesus has walked before us, at something other than what will lead us to our true home as the sons and daughters of God. We sometimes become absorbed in our work, in our pleasure, in our athletics, in our relationships, and even in ourselves; whenever this happens we are not looking intently at what matters most and we will not find the way to the Father's house. This is why we ask the Lord today that we "may in spirit dwell already in the heavenly realms" (*Collect at the Mass During the*

Day). In these moments we would do well to listen to the angelic question, “Why are you standing there looking into the sky?” The question is a subtle attempt to redirect the attention of the Apostles to the mission entrusted to them by Jesus, to “go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature” (Mark 16:15); the question can also shake us out of our stupor to refocus us on faithful and intentional discipleship and to reawaken in us a longing for heaven, to be in the presence of God who is our supreme and lasting happiness. If we remember the angel’s question, we can take up the challenge to walk with determination along the path of holiness.

The way to follow after the Lord into the glory of the Father’s house is simple; it is to keep the great double commandment to love God and to love our neighbor, and then to seek His forgiveness when we fail to do so. To love God is to live in such a way that we might be worthy of heaven; to love our neighbor is to live in such a way that we help them on the way to heaven. If we seek to keep our eyes fixed on Him who keeps His eyes fixed on us, we will live lives of love and so follow after the Lord, not only in His death and resurrection, but also in His ascension.

As we celebrate the Lord's ascension into His glory today, we also observe Mother's Day, which very appropriately is scheduled each year during the month of May, dedicated to our Blessed Mother. As such, we honor not only our biological mothers, but our Blessed Mother as well, thanking God for the gift of physical life given to us through our biological mothers as well as the gift spiritual life given to us through Mary, the Mother of God, the Mother of the Church, and hence, the Mother of us all.

My own mother, Veronica, was not baptized as an infant, but as a child she would go to church with her best friend Ramona, and saw her parents go up to Communion. Curious about what they had received, she asked them the next day, "What do you get when you go up to the priest?" They responded, "The greatest gift you can ever imagine!" Veronica decided she wanted that gift. She chose Jesus, got baptized at the age of 14, and for the rest of her life, she received the greatest gift you could ever imagine each and every day – Jesus Christ – God himself in the Eucharist.

Please note that my mother was not evangelized by a priest or a religious sister, but by her childhood friend and her friend's parents. So, you adults: do not think that evangelization pertains only to priests and religious; you have an important role to play as well in evangelizing others.

And you children: do not think that bringing people to Jesus can only be done by adults. If you have a friend who is not baptized, you may be able to help bring that person to Jesus.

As we prepare now to receive the greatest gift we could ever imagine, Jesus Christ present in this Eucharist, we are strengthened by Our Lord to carry on His mission to “proclaim the Gospel to every creature.”

May God give us this grace. Amen.