

Solemnity of the Ascension
[Acts 1:1-11; Psalm 47; Ephesians 1:17-23; Matthew 28:16-20]

As we have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic over the past two months, innumerable aspects of that response have caught people's attention in different ways. One feature of our reaction to the pandemic that has been for me especially fascinating is our collective deferral to authority. Throughout this health crisis, we have all yielded, individually and collectively, to the authority of the Chief Medical Officer.

I find this fascinating, because, over the last number of decades, Western culture has developed a relationship to external authority that is rather hesitant, to put it mildly. Predominant is the preference to see myself as the only authority to govern my life. This is most frequently posited these days in terms of radical autonomy. I am my own compass; I determine the path of my life; no authority outside myself has any claim upon me; and so on. Yet, here we are willingly surrendering to the authority of another. There is an important lesson here. The fact of the matter is that we are not autonomous; we are interdependent. We need one another. Furthermore, we are acknowledging by our very actions that there is a necessary place in our lives for external authority. We are not all-knowing, and therefore need to defer to the expertise of another to guide us.

On this Ascension Sunday, that lesson deepens. We who have come to realize anew our need for human authority are invited on this solemn feast to acknowledge our dependence upon divine authority, specifically that of Jesus Christ. In the Gospel passage from St. Matthew we hear Jesus say this: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." Over the last two months we have learned how to surrender to the authority of the CMO. Our celebration this morning calls us to understand well what it means to yield to that of the Risen Lord.

Let's begin with the "why" of it. Why acquiesce to Christ and accord him authority over my life? Helpful here is consideration of the word "all" used by Jesus.

We have seen that, in the context of a public health emergency, the scope of the CMO's authority is rather broad. Her decisions have impacted not only our personal lives but also the economy and our health and educational systems. We accept this as necessary for the sole and urgent reason of protecting health and preserving life. The authority of Jesus is broad beyond measure; it is all-encompassing: "all authority in heaven and on earth." As St. Paul puts it, God has placed all things under the feet of Jesus. The reason for accepting this authority is one which far surpasses in importance our physical health. The exercise of authority by Jesus aims at our salvation, the gift of eternal life.

This is what comes to light in the Lord's Ascension, described in the first reading from *Acts*. In the return of Jesus to Heaven, we see that Jesus has opened up for all of humanity the path of return to the Heavenly Father. To be precise, he *is* the path, since only Jesus is the Way to the Father. If we want to stay well in a time of pandemic, we accept the authority of the person appointed by the province to help us navigate a path to health. If we seek eternal wellbeing, the scriptural witness is clear: we must assent to the authority of the One designated by the Father Himself to be the path that leads to everlasting life.

How do we do this? Our scriptural texts for this morning direct our attention to the two requirements that ground and shape all dimensions of our surrender to the Lord, namely, the acceptance of his teaching, and our willingness to be sent.

When the CMO lays out directives for us to follow, she patiently teaches us about the nature of the virus and why the protective measures she puts in place are necessary. Central to the commission that Jesus gives to his disciples is the command to teach all that he has commanded. God has endowed each of us with a heart to love and an intellect to understand. By commanding that we be taught, Jesus wants to engage both, so that we might know and understand how we are to act in charity as we journey through this earthly life to our heavenly destiny. His alone is the teaching that leads to eternal life. So, as he summons us to accept his authority, he simultaneously wants us to learn well what he has taught. For this purpose, he sends forth those who have been taught to teach others.

Here we come to the second requirement of surrender to Christ: the readiness to be sent as teachers. The same commission given to the first disciples, and the power for its accomplishment, is bestowed upon us through Baptism and Confirmation. The Great Commission to go and teach is given to the whole Church. To grasp what is expected of us, let's focus again on the word "all", which appears twice more in the words of Jesus. His command is to go to *all* nations and teach *all* that he has commanded.

What is at stake here is truly breathtaking, and enormously exciting! The mandate of any CMO is limited to a geographical region and confined to a certain period of time. The commission received from Jesus is without boundaries – Go to all nations! It remains valid not for a limited time but forever, since the authority of Christ is established for every age, as St. Paul puts it. Since the reign of Jesus extends over all things, teaching everything he commanded will present the power of the Gospel to transform the entirety of human existence: personal life, family, relationships, the economy, culture, law, politics, science and medicine, employment, environment, international relations, and so on. The Gospel aims at nothing less than the transformation of the world in every dimension, and by Christ's commission we are its heralds.

Now, as exciting as our mission is, it is also rather daunting, to say the least. Yet, we need not fear. Jesus, who commissions us, remains with us. Once the CMO has given her directives, she expects that we will find ways to implement them. She doesn't take us by the hand to guide us at every step. Jesus, however, does. "And remember," he said, "I am with you always, to the end of the age." We do not have to figure this out on our own. Jesus remains always with his Church, to guide and equip us at each moment and in every circumstance.

So, let us with joy and confidence, accept fully the authority of the Lord Jesus, and do everything his love commands. The illusion of self-direction closes us in on ourselves and off from the world. Surrender to Jesus turns us outward toward the world with the mission of bringing to all people the all-embracing and all-transforming power of the Gospel. There is no mission more exciting, and Jesus is with us to bring it to fulfillment.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith
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