

The Ascension of the Lord
Homily Given By: Fr. John Koziol, OFM Conv.
May 24, 2020 (10AM Mass)
(Acts 1:1-11) (Eph 1:17-23) (Mt 28:16-20)

We have been separated from one another for a long time. I believe our last Mass together was on March 15, the Third Sunday of Lent. Two months without one another is a very long time.

I remember our first Sunday Mass without a congregation. I didn't anticipate how difficult and emotional it would be. Staring out from the altar at all those empty pews that are usually filled with joyful worshipers, praying and singing together...it was really a shock. During Communion, I became teary-eyed as I gave Holy Communion to only three people, the Lector and two music ministers. I thought of all of you, sitting at home, wishing you could be here and desiring the Eucharist.

You have been physically away from St. Philip's for over two months. This has never happened in our lifetimes. I know this physical separation has taken its toll and we are eager to get back to life as it was before the Coronavirus. Unfortunately, this is not likely for a very long time, probably not until the discovery of a treatment, a cure, and a vaccine.

It is true that our Church will re-open tomorrow morning and we will celebrate Mass with those who feel ready to return, but we will not celebrate in the same way as we did before. We will have to wear masks and sit 6 feet away from one another. We will not be able to hug or even shake hands. Those who gather will feel some anxiety and maybe even fear...certainly sadness.

We need to be honest about the toll this pandemic has had on all of us and will continue to have on us, individually and as a Church family. Being physically separate from one another is painful and not natural.

A parishioner e-mailed recently and shared with me that she has spent the last two months praying daily, reading and studying, participating in Catholic programs and forums online, and meeting with her Prayer Group (I presume online). I'm sure she has also worshiped with us via Live Stream. Then she listed the losses that all of us have experienced as a result of the pandemic:

- not being able to be with family and friends
- the loss of jobs and businesses
- the closing of churches
- not being able to worship together
- not being able to embrace family members and friends
- not being able to shake hands
- the loss for some of retirement funds and homes
- the inability to visit loved ones and friends in hospitals and nursing homes
- the loss of celebrations like weddings, baptisms, and graduations
- not being able to eat in restaurants

I would include in this sad list:

- the loss of loved ones and friends from Covid-19 and other illnesses
- not being able to gather for funerals and funeral receptions to pray for them, honor them, and grieve for them
- the loss of a sense of security and control

We could add many other losses to this list. Our parishioner wondered if there was a way for us to grieve together all of our losses. She wrote: “Trust me, I am grateful, blessed beyond measure, but I wonder if I’m not alone in needing to have a place to grieve with others.”

Well, Carol, you are not alone and I thank you for writing to me to share your feelings of loss and grief. We need to be honest about the toll the pandemic is having on all of us and the grief that we feel. I will certainly consider how we might do that together.

Let me share another loss that I have heard about from many of you. Everyone I have spoken to during the last two months have told me that what they miss most is receiving the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion. It has been ten weeks since you last received the Eucharist. That has been a tremendous loss.

It is true that we are Live Streaming our Masses and that has truly been a blessing. We need to thank God for the blessing of technology and the ability to connect with one another and to celebrate with one another virtually. We also need to thank Fr. Martin, who for almost two years has made it possible for us to Live Stream our Masses for those who are elderly, sick, or have no transportation to come to Church.

But let’s be honest: as much as we have appreciated Live Stream Masses during this pandemic and as much as we have been able to receive Spiritual Communion, it is certainly not the ideal.

Catholics are sacramental people. As Catholics, our lives are centered on the sacraments. We baptize our children. We confirm our young adults. When we sin, we seek forgiveness in Confession. When we are seriously ill, we are anointed with oil. When we fall in love, we marry. Some of us are ordained. And most especially, we celebrate and receive the Eucharist every Sunday. But not only do we celebrate and receive sacraments, we believe that *we are* sacraments. When we gather together as an assembly to worship God, we are a sacrament, a visible sign, of the presence of God. One theologian put it this way: Christ is the sacrament of God and the Church is the sacrament of Jesus Christ. The Church, gathered together, reveals the presence of Christ to the world. In order to be sacramental people, we need to be assembled together; we need to gather, to embrace, to hold hands, to sing together, pray together...in essence, we need to physically be together in order to be the visible, mystical Body of Christ.

All seven sacraments are meant to be celebrated communally and they require proximity and, very often, touching...at least by the minister of the sacrament, baptizing, anointing with oil, laying on of hands, offering the Body and Blood of Christ. These are all physical actions that can’t be done over the phone or through the internet. Of all world religions, Catholicism is the most tactile, and our sacraments involve all of our physical senses: touch, smell, taste, sight, and hearing. Some jokingly call Catholicism a religion of smells and bells.

For the foreseeable future, many will not be able to return to Mass because of age, illness, or health issues that place them in the high-risk category, and even out of fear of the virus. To you, we encourage you to stay home and participate via Live Stream. We love you, we care about you, and we miss you, but we want you to be safe. Remember that the obligation to attend Sunday Mass has been lifted by our bishops until the end of June and can be extended by them if need be.

Those who will choose to be physically present for Mass will find our celebrations to be not only different, but also limited. Wearing masks, social distancing, disinfecting hands before and after receiving Communion, being directed where to sit and when to exit...all of these things are necessary, but these measures will hinder a true sense of celebration and communion with one another. So be prepared for that and please be patient and charitable. All that is being asked of you is for your safety and the safety of all those who will be present. In a real sense, your cooperation is a true act of love of God and love of neighbor.

I didn't really intend this homily to be a downer, so let me conclude with the Good News! I have heard Fr. Martin say many times over the last ten weeks: God has a plan and God's plan is perfect! I believe that. I don't think God sent the virus, but God has allowed it, and God always wills the good, and God intends for good to come out of this terrible virus.

We can already see many good things that have occurred as a result of the virus. Families are spending more time together, people are praying more and reading and studying about our faith, the environment has improved, we are learning how to use technology to teach, study, and spread the faith (the new evangelization), and people are working together, caring more, sharing more, loving more...and so much more.

Only God knows all the good that will result from the pandemic, the hearts transformed, and the lives changed for the better. Yes, we are grieving our losses, but we are also hopeful and filled with faith that God is in charge and that God is with us.

Today is Ascension Sunday. Jesus returned to the Father, not to separate Himself from us, but to become more deeply and more intimately involved in our lives, our Church, and our world.

I'm pretty sure that when Jesus ascended to the Father, those who loved Him felt the grief of His physical absence – similar to the grief that we have had over the last two months, being separated from the Church and the sacraments that we love. They had not yet received the Holy Spirit and were most likely devastated by their losses: the loss of His physical presence, the loss of seeing Him, hearing His words, embracing Him, feeling His embrace, kissing Him, and feeling secure that He was with them. I think we can identify, can't we?

We often think of Jesus' ascension into heaven as Jesus leaving us, but it is really just the opposite. His return to the Father and the descent of the Holy Spirit allowed Jesus the Christ to be *more* present to us than when He lived among us a man. Jesus has not abandoned us or left us orphans. He is always present to us through the gift of His Spirit and the gift of Christ's Church.

This same Holy Spirit is here with us now. He is our advocate, our truth, our consoler, and our consolation. Allow the Holy Spirit to fill you today...and remember that God has a plan and God's plan is perfect.