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The Ascension of the Lord

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

Fr. Eckard I am very pleased to be here today to celebrate with you and the people of St. Maximilian Parish, this Sunday Eucharist. I experienced a great friendliness and joyfulness as I came into the church this morning and so I am very, very happy to be here and I thank you for inviting me. And especially I thank you at this point for presenting these young men and women for the sacrament of Confirmation.

But as you know from your own experience as a parish priest over many years whenever we receive a sacrament, it's very important that we prepare very carefully for that sacrament. And so before we celebrate the sacrament of confirmation for these young men and women of St. Maximilian parish, I need assurance from you as their administrator and temporary pastor, that they have taken the time to prepare themselves for this sacrament and that in your judgment and the judgment of others who helped in their preparation that all of these candidates are truly ready to be confirmed today.

Fr. Eckard: After speaking with many of them myself and interviewing them for this sacrament and having queried them on the different facets of the sacrament and their church's understanding of teachings and knowing their teachers, in my short time here I have seen great evidence of their conscientious trying to be good Christians, bishop I can say, they are great and they are well prepared.

Good, thank you, Sam.

Now my dear candidates, Fr. Eckard in very confident that you are ready for this sacrament and I share

his confidence because, I know that you've had a very good program of preparation here and I understand that you have participated in it very fully. And so I am sure that you are ready for the sacrament.

However, as you know from your study of this sacrament this is a very, very important moment for you. It's a moment when God touches you very deeply in your heart, in your spirit, with the spirit of Jesus. So it's a very profound moment and for that reason I also would like to have some assurance from you that you feel you're ready for this coming of the Holy Spirit, but even more important that you really want to be confirmed. And so I ask you now do you wish to be confirmed? [Barely audible answers and laughter.] OK. We couldn't hear you. You are supposed to be witnesses, right. OK, let's do that again. Do you want to be confirmed? [Chorus of "I do's"] All right, that was better. Now you may be seated.

I know you practiced that before today and you knew the answer, so it's a very easy question and answer. But you know, sometimes when you practice something like that it becomes just sort of routine. And so you're not really conscience of what you are saying yes to. And so for a moment I want to explain a little bit of why it's important for you to say "Yes, I want to be confirmed" in a very loud, clear, strong voice.

What are you saying yes to? That's the important question. When you say I want to be confirmed, are you just saying yes to a ceremony? You know we'll do this ceremony and we'll all go home afterwards and that's it. No, that's not what is happening. What do you say yes to when you say I want to be confirmed. You're saying to Jesus. You're saying, yes to Jesus Christ. You're saying I want to be a disciple of Jesus. I want to follow Jesus. I want to live according to the values of Jesus. And not just for a short time but for the rest of my life, forever. I want to be a disciple of Jesus. And that's a very demanding way to live. Nobody should casually say, "Well I'll follow Jesus, I'll be his disciple." No, we really have to be aware of what we're saying yes to when we say yes to Jesus. It means we're going to live according to what he taught. We're going to try to come to know him more deeply. We're going to try to make him our friend, a very important person in our lives. So that we really follow him, follow his example. Live the way he did, live according to his values. That's what you're saying yes to.

And so I hope that as we go on with this ceremony you'll be very conscience of that and when you come forward and I anoint you with the chrism. You say after that, "Amen." That means yes. So I want you to be aware that you are saying yes to Jesus. Yes, to following Jesus.

But now as we do that, we do it reflecting on the feast that we celebrate today and the scriptures that we just heard, the Feast of the Ascension. Sometimes at the end of the gospel, the Easter candle is extinguished. We didn't do that today. But it's often the way it's done because that's a symbol, Jesus is gone, he's gone back to heaven. Now, that's one of the things that we think about when we celebrate this Feast of the Ascension. We heard in the first lesson today from the Acts of the Apostles how the disciples were all gathered together and the same thing in the gospel, and Jesus is gone from their midst.

But there something else that we need to think about when we celebrate this feast. Yes, Jesus leaves us in his bodily form, the way the disciples knew him when they lived together with him in Galilee and Jerusalem and Judea. Jesus left in that form, but also when we remember this event and celebrate this feast, it should help us to be aware of how faithful God is. How God always fulfills whatever promises God has made to us. Because in fact what we celebrate when Jesus, we complete the Easter celebration with Jesus rising from the dead and ascending into Heaven. What we are celebrating is God affirming

everything that Jesus had done and said. God welcoming Jesus into the fullness of life in Heaven and as you heard in the second lesson today giving Jesus in his humanness, one like us in every way except sin, putting Jesus in the highest place in Heaven. Exalting Jesus forever.

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And that is the fulfillment of a promise that God had made to Jesus, when Jesus in his own lifetime, if you think back to just before he died, before he was killed, executed. Jesus was fearful. He really was very afraid. Remember on Holy Thursday night, we celebrate the Last Supper, but that's also the night Jesus went into the garden and prayed. And he was filled with fear, deep emotion, he agonized and prayed "God if it's possible take this chalice away from me." He was afraid and he needed strength and help, and then God gave it. Jesus said, "Not my will but your will be done." Jesus totally trusted in God. And then as he was even dying on the cross he said, "He said God into your hands I commend my spirit." He trusted in God. And what happened on this feast that we celebrated, God affirmed that trust, showed Jesus that his trust was well placed. God is always faithful. God brought Jesus through death into new life, and exalted Jesus forever in Heaven.

Now I remind us of this because, you see, as you make this pledge to follow God in Jesus and try to set a direction for your life, you have to place your confidence in God. That God will guide you, lead you, bring you through every kind of trial and difficulty in your life. That God will always be faithful to you, if you make this commitment to God, God will always be there in your life, especially through this gift of the Holy Spirit that you receive in a special way today. This is what Jesus came to understand through the Ascension. God is faithful, God always fulfills God's promises. And the same thing will happen for you. You can step forward today with great confidence and say, "Yes, I will follow Jesus Christ, whatever it costs, whatever it takes. I will follow Jesus because I know God will be faithful to me just as God was faithful to Jesus."

So that's one thing I want you to be thinking about as we celebrate the sacrament. Now there's a second thing. At the end of the gospel says to those disciples, "Now it's your turn. You go out and spread the good news. You tell people about God and how God loves us." Jesus was sending the disciples to carry on his work.

Earlier he had told the disciples, you have to be a light in the world, you have to be yeast in the dough making it come to fullness, you have to be the grain of wheat falling into the ground and dying so that it can rise to new life. That is what Jesus is saying to you today. Jesus is asking you to carry on his work. And so now as you receive this sacrament, it's important for you to begin to think about how do I give witness to Jesus in my life. Well, most of all it's going to be by trying to fulfill the one command that Jesus gave his disciples, more important than any other, "Love one another just as I have loved you and no one has greater love than this than to lay down your life for your friends." In other words love in a way that's totally generous, totally unconditional, totally without limit.

That's the way of love and you know you have a very extraordinary example of that right here because you're members of St. Maximilian Parish. You must know the story of St. Maximilian, he was a prisoner in a concentration camp during the Nazi tyranny in World War II, and there was a time when those controlling the prison were putting to death a person that had broken one of the rules. They were going to

starve him to death, and Maximilian stepped forward and said, "I'll take his place." He was ready to lay down his life for that other person. That's a tremendous way, example, of following Jesus, who gave his life for all of us, out of love for us. And that's the most complete fulfillment of following Jesus.

Now you and I probably, almost certainly, aren't going to be asked to do that kind of almost extreme gift of ourselves for others. But that's the model, being ready to totally give yourself in love for other people. Starting within your own family, starting in your community, but reaching out in love so we transform our whole world. That's what followers of Jesus are supposed to do. And so this morning as you receive the Holy Spirit in this sacrament I hope you'll be thinking about the ways that you can show love and care for other people. Again, starting in you family, but reaching out into your neighborhood, into this parish family and on into the rest of the world. How you're going to carry out the command of Jesus to "love one another as I have loved you." That's what it means to be confirmed. First of all to trust in God and God's goodness, God's love, that God will fulfill all the promises God has made to us and raise us up as he raised up Jesus and then secondly, commit ourselves to follow the way of Jesus for the rest of our lives. Especially loving one another as Jesus loves us.

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