

Salesian Province of St Joseph, Hyderabad - 24 May 2020

Ascension of the Lord - Mary Help of Christians - Professions and Renewals

Dear confreres the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a lot of disruption to our normal life and activities. We have to deal with this 'disruption,' which is the new normal, at least for a few more months to come, if not for a couple of years. I do hope that this unique experience along with the lockdown and restrictions on our movements has helped us to spend more time with God and grow deeper in our faith; has brought us closer to one another in our communities; has motivated us to read more and to become more selfless in the service of our brothers and sisters experiencing extreme poverty and privation. I wish each of you a happy triple celebration of the Solemnities of the Ascension of our Lord and Mary Help of Christians and the feast of our religious consecration – we celebrate six confreres making their perpetual profession, ten novices making their first profession and 51 confreres renewing their vows in different communities of our Province and in other Provinces. Let us pray for our brothers that they may “offer themselves to God in order to follow CHRIST and work with Him in building up the Kingdom” (Cont.3), and find meaning and fulfillment in this self-offering.

Ascension of Jesus

The solemnity of the Ascension of Jesus offers an important meaning and message for us. In the present context of hopelessness, despair, sickness, death and uncertainty, the celebration of the Ascension of Jesus gives us hope. This world is not an end in itself, left to fend for itself. The world and everything and everyone in it are intrinsically connected to God. Jesus' journey back to the Father and the subsequent gift and outpouring of the Holy Spirit re-affirm this intrinsic connection. Jesus by ascending shows us that He is the master of this world. Ascension of Jesus is not a conclusion, but a culmination and a continuation of His continued personal presence in the world and in each one of us. Jesus transcends the limitations of the human body through His glorified body. Jesus is “seated at the right hand of the Father”. He alone is in control of the continuing plan of salvation through the Holy Spirit, unrestricted by time, space and culture. He is in control of everything that happens to us. Under the current circumstances, we need to have deep faith and hope in Him, who alone has the power to cleanse our world from all forms of viruses, misery, pain and loss.

Through Ascension, our fallen human nature is elevated to the Father. Adam and Eve were created in the image and likeness of God (Gen1:26-27). They were made for eternity to be in union with God the Father. Through sin, they fell from this heavenly Garden of Eden and the eternal presence of the Father. However God willed to reinstate our fallen nature. Through incarnation, God enters human history in a very personal way, assuming the very human form that required his healing touch. God becomes a human person to heal and elevate human nature. Through Ascension, this human nature is fully elevated to the divine nature. Jesus the new Adam shows us that we are capable of re-uniting ourselves with the Father in Heaven. Jesus can and will transform our body into a glorified body, like unto His own, capable of living for eternity. Adam and Eve at creation were gifted with this divine nature which was lost to sin. Jesus, who has conquered sin and death, restores humanity to its original state. All of us who are redeemed by the blood of Christ are partakers of this gift of Jesus. Ascension is a promise of the ever-abiding presence of Jesus in the world through the Holy Spirit.

Mary Help of Christians

Mary, the new Eve, stands as an example of the one who conformed herself perfectly to the will of the Father and who lived in deep intimacy with God. Through her 'YES' God's grace and God's Spirit rush into the world. Her openness to the Spirit of God leads to the birth of Christ in her. Marian devotion forms part and parcel of our Salesian identity. Don Bosco, our father has promoted devotion to the Blessed Virgin. What began as a simple devotion to Mary under different titles such as devotion to Our Lady of the Rosary at Becchi, Our Lady of Castle at Castelnuovo, Our Lady of Grace at Chieri, takes on a deeper significance in Turin as he develops a particular devotion to Our Lady of Consolation (Consolata), which had a great significance for the boys of the Oratory who needed the image of a mother offering consolation to their wounded and battered lives that were torn apart by poverty, injustice, immorality and sin. Don Bosco presents Mary as a consoling mother. Mary is full of all perfections. Don Bosco further presents Mary as the Immaculate Virgin to be emulated. Many boys of the oratory marched on the path of this invitation. The sodality of Mary Immaculate aimed at striving towards sanctity. Many of the boys of this sodality eventually become the founding members of the Salesian society. Don Bosco lived under the shadow of the Blessed Virgin. We read in our Constitutions, "The Virgin Mary showed Don Bosco his field of labour among the young and was the constant guide and support of his work, especially in the foundation of our Society. We believe that Mary is present among us and continues her "mission as Mother of the Church and Help of Christians" (Const. 8). He entrusted himself and the Congregation to her maternal intercession. Mary Help of Christians was truly his helper and guide. At the end of his incredible journey, Don Bosco was able to say, "She did it all."

John Cagliero recalls Don Bosco's ardent devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary: "His devotion to Mary Most Holy was great. He used to speak to us very often about the devotion we should have for her. He increased our fervor with his words and example. He was filled with joy and holy delight when he sang Mary's praises with us, whether in the Church or in the playground..." He often encouraged his boys to have a deep devotion to Mary. On June 20, 1864 during the good night talk Don Bosco said, "I want you to make use of two spiritual wings – devotion to the Blessed Virgin and devotion to the Blessed Sacrament – with these two wings, you may be sure they will soon help you to raise yourselves towards heaven."

Don Bosco felt the presence of Mary every moment of his life. His Marian devotion was active and alive. When Don Bosco went to Nizza Monferrato in 1885 for the vestition and profession of the Salesian sisters, after the ceremony, Don Bosco spoke to the sisters. "I want to tell you only one thing that the Madonna loves you very much. And, you know she is here among you!" Fr Bonetti was with DB and he was the spokesperson. He interpreted saying "Our Lady is your mother. She guides and protects you." Don Bosco corrected him saying, "No, no" "I mean Our Lady is really here in this house."

This rich heritage of Marian devotion is passed on to us his sons by Don Bosco our father. Mary intends that men and women of all ages, follow her son radically, transforming themselves and the world around. In our journey as consecrated persons, she is always there to assist us to remain faithful to her son, as she remained faithful to Him till the end.

Professions and Renewals

The Ascension of Jesus is the culmination and not a conclusion. Jesus ascends to the Father and sends us the Spirit. Spirit will continue the mission of Jesus through his disciples. Leonardo da Vinci had started to work on a large canvas in his studio. For a while he worked at it – choosing the subject, planning the perspective, sketching the outline, applying the colors, with his own inimitable genius. Then suddenly he stopped working on it. Summoning one of his talented students, the master invited him to complete the work. The horrified student protested that he was both unworthy and unable to complete the great painting, which his master had begun. But da Vinci silenced him. “Will not what I have done inspire you to do your best?”

Through our consecration we take on the responsibility of continuing the mission that Jesus has started. It is the duty of every Christian, much more that of every consecrated person. Dear novices and dear confreres, we are here to take up the responsibility of completing this picture of the Kingdom of God. Perhaps we might manage to paint a small part of this great picture. Without that small part, the picture remains incomplete.

Through consecration, we follow Christ who was poor, chaste and obedient. **Jesus lived without possessions:** “For you know the graciousness of our Lord Jesus Christ – how, being rich, he became poor for your sakes, that by His poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). **Jesus lived a chaste and celibate life.** “and there are eunuchs who have made themselves so for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matt. 19:12). **Jesus obeyed His father,** even when he found it difficult in moments of excruciating pain, abandonment and loneliness: “My food is to do the Will of Him who sent me, to accomplish His work” (Jn 4:34).

Art. 60 of our Constitutions invites us to follow Christ radically. “By religious profession we mean to live the grace of our baptism radically and more fully. We follow Jesus Christ, who “virginal and poor, redeemed and sanctified humankind by his obedience”, and share more closely in his paschal mystery, in his self-emptying and in his life in the Spirit. Surrendering ourselves totally to God whom we love above all else, we commit ourselves to a form of life based entirely on gospel values.” We voluntarily, with complete freedom, choose to imitate Jesus who is Obedient, Poor and Chaste. **Obedience** is a total surrender to God and His plans for us. **Poverty** is a total detachment – from things and persons. **Chastity** is a total availability – to love all unconditionally.

Today there is a growing temptation to understand religious life from a worldly perspective. The worldly mentality and the logic of the world no longer see the Lord in everything. There is a need to re-discover the freshness and the centrality of the person of Jesus in our life. Pope Francis says that “to follow Jesus is not a decision taken once and for all, it is a daily choice...Otherwise, Jesus becomes only a nice memory of the past.” We need to fall in love with Jesus and welcome this gift of consecration with open hearts and minds and bear witness to Him in the world.

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