

SEVENTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (THE SOLEMNITY OF ASCENSION OF OUR LORD)

THEME: PASSING THE BATON

Today we celebrate the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into heaven. Our celebration today, reminds us of how Jesus when ascending into heaven commissioned his disciples as he is commissioning us today to be his witnesses to the world and his teachers to the nations. The critical moment in a relay race is the passing of the baton from one runner to another. More relay races are won or lost at that moment than any other. The feast of the Ascension might be compared to the passing of the baton in a relay race.

On this occasion over 2,000 years ago, Jesus passed the baton of responsibility for the proclamation of the Kingdom of God to his followers. Jesus commissioned them to carry on the work he has begun. In today's first reading, Jesus tells his disciples to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth. And in the Gospel reading he tells them to be his teachers to the world. Practically, what does this mean? How do you and I, in the 21st century, carry out Jesus' commission to be his witnesses to the world and his teachers to the nations?

There are many ways to do this as there are many Christians: We can do what two 25 years old college students did recently. After completing their degrees, they entered the seminary. We can do what Albert Schweitzer did. At the age of 30 he abandoned his music career in Europe to study medicine and became a missionary doctor in Africa. We can do what the basketball coach of Spring Hill College, Alabama, did a few years back. At the age of 45 he resigned his position and began to study for the priesthood. We can do what Mother Angelica did. In her 50s she began a religious television network. We can imagine the courage it took for these five people to do what they did.

There is another way to carry out the commission of Jesus. And it probably requires even more courage in the long run. It is to become witnesses and teachers in our homes, our places of work and our schools. It is to carry out Jesus' commission wherever we find ourselves. Practically, how do we do this? Do we suddenly turn into religious fanatics and start preaching to our families, our friends, and those around us?

Not at all! We do it simply by making effort to become the kind of person God the Father made us to be. We do it simply by making effort to be the type of person Jesus teaches us to be. We do it simply by making effort to become the kind of person the Holy Spirit inspires us to be. We witness to Jesus by our lives; by our love when others need us, by our patience when others annoy us, by our forgiveness when others offend us, and by our perseverance when we feel like quitting.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, our lives speak much more eloquently than our lips do when it comes to witnessing and teaching the Gospel. People would much rather see a sermon than listen to one. Witnessing to Jesus and teaching others about him is simply sharing with them our own faith and love. It's sharing with them the one treasure we have to share.

As we celebrate the solemnity of Ascension today, Jesus invites us to take from his hand the baton he received from his Father and to continue the work that his Father gave him to do on earth. We are to witness to Jesus and teach other people about him, wherever we find ourselves, and in whatever way the Holy Spirit inspires us to use.