

Graduation
Ascension (A)
(Acts 1:1-11; Eph 1:17-23; Mt 28:16-20)

Acts of the Apostles recounts how following the Resurrection Jesus appeared to the chosen apostles during 40 days, speaking to them of the Kingdom. After this he ascended to heaven, to be seen no more until he returns again in glory in the Second Coming.

Now begins a new phase in the plan of salvation: it is the time for the Church to continue in the world in place of Christ. Or rather, for Christ to continue in the world, no longer through his physical Incarnate presence, but through his spiritual Sacramental presence in the Church. Christ ascends to heaven, so that the Holy Spirit might be sent in his place.

In this final phase of the world's salvation, which takes place through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the Church, Christ will work through his disciples, starting with the 12 apostles. What began in Jerusalem on that first Pentecost with a community of 120 (Acts 1:15), soon spread through "Judea and Samaria," and then via Rome, to the "ends of the earth." By the time the last apostle John died toward the end of the first century, Christianity had been firmly established and headquartered in Rome, with its highway system that gave access to all the corners of the known world at that time. Historical documents tell us that by the end of the first century, disciples of the Lord had reached Spain¹ in the West, as far as England in the North,² all the way to Persia and India in the East,³ and down into Egypt and Ethiopia⁴ in the South. In the two thousand years since, the Gospel has continued to spread to other newly discovered regions: the New World, Far East, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Oceania.

Today, every disciple, working together with the successors of the apostles, has the task of continuing this work in our local area, being personally converted to Christianity, and then spreading Christianity within our sphere of influence by imbuing it with the presence of Christ, and the teaching of the Gospel.

Baptism is the sacrament by which we are converted and incorporated into Christ; Confirmation is the sacrament by which we are empowered and commissioned to go into the world in his Name.

Baptism is thus identified with "spiritual infancy," since by it we are "born again" into the life of Christ. Just like a baby, we are given birth through Holy

¹ Cf. "Apocryphal Acts of St. Paul," *Catholic Encyclopedia*. (www.newadvent.org/cathen/11567b.htm)

² Cf. St. Bede, *Ecclesial History of the English People* (731).

³ Cf. "St. Thomas the Apostle," *Catholic Encyclopedia*. (www.newadvent.org/cathen/14658b.htm)

⁴ Cf. "Christianity in Ethiopia," *Wikipedia* (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity_in_Ethiopia)

Mother Church, by water and the Holy Spirit. We become children of God, members of the Household of God, entitled to the privileges and inheritance of God's children, which includes the heavenly banquet.

But if Baptism is spiritual infancy, then Confirmation is identified with "spiritual adulthood." Here we take up our responsibilities, exercising the qualifications given to us by the Holy Spirit.

Just as the apostles, after a long period of instruction and training, personally supervised by the Lord, began their mission after the Ascension with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost; so we, after learning our faith in catechism, being nourished in the Eucharist, and being trained morally through regular Penance, we undertake our responsibilities to the Lord through Confirmation.

Confirmation corresponds in the spiritual order, to "graduation" in the secular order. Graduation means you have completed your studies and training, and you are now ready to go out into the world and assume your responsibilities and duties as an adult, serving and contributing to the common good while taking care of your own household and family. No one graduates to become a "deadbeat," a drag on society, a leacher off of everyone else. No one graduates to become a thief or criminal, having to cheat and steal in order to get by. We study, learn, and train so that we can be contributors, providers, dependable leaders and helpers, people who can not only take care of themselves but also do for others.

In the same way, Confirmation shows that we are "fully initiated" into the Catholic Church, as active and committed disciples. Everyone in the Church has a contribution to make, a responsibility to the mission of the Kingdom of God.

Some are called to the vocation of priesthood to follow in the footsteps of the apostles, so that through a special training and period of study with the Lord, they may be prepared to teach and lead the various communities, celebrating the Holy Sacraments for them.

Others are called to the vocation of consecrated religious life. Leaving behind the world, particularly having one's own family or a career, they join together with others through holy vows to dedicate themselves fully to one of the Church's apostolates: the contemplative life, evangelization, teaching, healing, or service to the poor.

Others take up the sacrament of holy Matrimony, through which they dedicate themselves to building the Kingdom of God in their household, through their children and grandchildren, as well as bringing Gospel values to others through their profession.

All the laity have the responsibility to establish their parish as the House of God in their community: the place where there is regular prayer, learning, and worship. If every Catholic household is like a cell in the Body of Christ, the parish is the heart which keeps all those cells alive through sacramental grace.

Another very important vocation that serves Christ in the Kingdom of God, which we often do not think about, is the vocation of the sick and suffering. Some people feel that because they are sick, or homebound, or elderly, they are not able to do much. In the eyes of the world they are even viewed as useless. But within the Church, they live out a deep union with Christ on the Cross. Their great spiritual “work,” their important responsibility, is to offer the sacrifice of the Cross through their sufferings. In many ways it is these hidden vocations that provide the spiritual success of other apostolic efforts.

In all cases, one’s particular mission flows from the Gifts received in Confirmation, whereby the disciple was fully initiated and, like the apostles at the time of the Ascension, *sent*.

When graduating, one receives an official diploma, which are the authoritative credentials of one’s qualifications. Confirmation too, gives the disciple his “credentials.” Imprinted indelibly into his soul, by the heavenly tongue of fire, is the official “seal” of the Father, which is Christ. A Christian carries in his being the imprint of Christ’s full stature. This is what the Gift of the Holy Spirit accomplishes. It gives the disciple “all authority in heaven and earth” (Mt 28:18) to go forth and make disciples, bearing witness to Christ through the testimony of the Gospel.

We may not necessarily have to travel to the “ends of the earth” as the apostles did in the first century. But can we at least go out to our local community, starting with the circle of our family, friends, and co-workers?

We are not Initiated in order to be “deadbeat” Catholics, but rather active contributing members of the mission of the Church, according to our particular vocation. May the grace of Pentecost, the grace of our Confirmation, be renewed in each of us as we come to the culmination of this holy season.

Come, Holy Spirit, enkindle in our hearts the fire of your divine love.

Lord, send forth your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth.