

Source and Summit
Feast of Transfiguration (A)
(Mt 17:1-9)

The mountain is a place to meet God. It is the highest point on earth, the place where heaven and earth meet. Moses and Elijah are two examples from the Old Testament who went up the mountain to speak with the Lord.

At Mt. Sinai, the people saw the cloud which enveloped the summit, and heard the voice of God like thunder. God spoke to Moses the Ten Commandments, and told the people to obey the Law.

In the course of his ministry, Jesus went up the mountain to pray, with three apostles. The cloud of heavenly glory overshadows them, just as at Mt Sinai; they experience the glory of God and hear His voice, just like the OT. God reiterates the message of obedience, but tells the people to obey Christ: *“This is my beloved Son, listen to him.”*

Moses and Elijah are there.¹ Whereas before they only heard the voice of God, without seeing the glory of the God directly, now the five not only hear God, but see His glory “face to face,” in the face of Christ shining like the sun (Mt 17:2). For the one and only time on earth, the glory of Christ’s divinity is seen in his humanity. Moreover, they experience through Christ the full revelation of the Holy Trinity: he is the beloved Son of the Father who speaks, bound together in the overshadowing glory of the Holy Spirit²

The Transfiguration was the “high point” of the public ministry of Jesus. It reiterates the day of his baptism,³ and completes the phase of his ministry during which the Kingdom has been announced, and Jesus’ identity has been revealed through signs and miracles, and powerful teaching. Just before the Transfiguration, at Caesarea Philippi, the apostles formally confessed him to be the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

This “summit” of revelation in the very center of the Gospel is also a turning point in the Gospel. Now that he is fully revealed in his divine glory, Jesus begins his journey to Jerusalem to accomplish his mission. Whereas his focus had been in the region of Galilee touring the towns and villages, Jesus now resolutely sets his face toward Jerusalem (Lk 9:51). Exactly 40 days later, Jesus will be on the Mount of Olives, and the same three apostles will see him “transfigured” in the agony of blood and sweat.

¹ Elijah was taken up to heaven in a chariot of fire (2K 2:11), to return before the Messiah (Mal 4:5-6). Moses’ too, had a mysterious death, with an unknown grave, buried by God himself (Dt 34:5-6). He too may have been assumed like Elijah (cf. Jude 1:9).

² The cloud, like the dove and wind and fire, is a prominent biblical symbol of the Holy Spirit (*Catechism* 697).

³ ...when the Father’s voice was also heard, and the Holy Spirit was also manifested as a dove.

The Transfiguration is the “Summit” of revelation for the disciples as they recognize and commit themselves to the Lord (first half of the Gospel). It is also the “Source” of hope and courage as they face the trials which will come in his Passion and Death (second half of the Gospel).

The Mass accomplishes the same thing for us which the Transfiguration accomplished for the disciples. The *Catechism* 1324, quoting *Lumen Gentium* 11, says: *The Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life.” The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself.*

In the Bible, a classical interpretation of the Mountain is the Church.⁴ The Church is the Lord’s mountain that He raises up in the world. It is the place we leave the world behind to go and be with God. It is a the place where heaven and earth meet. Every Church is filled like the Temple with the cloud of God’s heavenly glory; by every sacramental celebration the church is the place of the Transfiguration. We are still on earth, but the glory of heaven fills the place.

In order to more fully experience the mystery of the Transfiguration when we go to Mass, we should bear some things in mind.

1. The mountain must be ascended. That is, we must leave the world. The “world” must not be allowed to intrude into the church, into the sacramental celebration. Not only should phones (and cameras) be turned off, but already we should be fasting prior to arriving, and prior to that been cleansed through the sacrament of confession.
2. It is a privilege to be at Mass, a response to the Lord’s personal invitation. Our attitude should always be that of Peter who wanted to set up tents: “*it is good to be here.*” Perhaps we should stow our watches at the door as well! We should never be impatient to leave, or complain about the length.
3. At Mass we participate in the holy dialogue of Scripture, between Christ (Gospel) and Moses and Elijah (Law and Prophets of the OT). Our sacramental experience of Christ will be fruitful to the degree we enter into this conversation.
4. In the Mass, God the Father shows us Christ, and tells us to obey him. There is always a revelation, and a message. Our participation in the Mass

⁴ For instance, Heb 12:18-24.

is not complete unless we see Christ more clearly, and follow his teaching more perfectly.

5. In the Transfiguration, Christ's Divinity shines through his humanity. In the sacrament of the Eucharist, by means of Transubstantiation, the reality of Christ is manifested under the appearance of bread and wine. The same Holy Spirit Who overshadowed Mary in the Annunciation, and Who overshadowed the apostles in the Transfiguration, overshadows the elements of bread and wine during the "epiclesis" of the Eucharistic prayer, to transform them into his Body and Blood.
6. The profundity of the Mass, and sacramental communion with the Holy Trinity, leads to awe and reverence. As the disciples prostrated themselves in holy fear, so too Mass culminates in a moment of silent kneeling and prayer after Holy Communion, until the priest, like Christ, invites us to get up with the invitation "let us pray."
7. Finally, we have our Mission. As the disciples descend the mountain to continue the journey to Jerusalem, the Mass "sends" us back to the world where salvation must be accomplished. The final words of the Mass are, "Go forth, you are sent."

In roughly an hour, the Mass presents us with the mystery of the Transfiguration. It serves as a summit of our spiritual life, the high point of our knowledge and faith in Christ; as well as the source grace and mission for the upcoming week.