

## **A Reading by Gilbert of Hoyland on the Eternal Dwelling.<sup>1</sup>**

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As the Lord says: 'In my Father's house are many dwellings': dwellings obviously of lesser lights, because God himself 'dwells in light inaccessible'. John understands this as a multitude of dwellings, not because there is one dwelling for each spiritual creature, since for some one or other there are many dwellings, as the Lord says in Luke, 'and you shall have authority over ten towns'. 'For star differs from star in splendor.' Yes, as the number of virtues increases, so the gift of splendors is multiplied, as the prophecy in Isaiah indicates: 'and the Lord shall fill your soul with splendors'. Blissful surely is the soul, which will be filled not only with one but with many splendors, those indeed of which it is said: 'Yours is princely power in the day of your birth, in the splendors of the saints.' The most blissful splendors are those which the Lord pours upon his saints; the beginning of eternity, the day of truth, and the virtue of charity.

Who will grant me that my spirit may be enlightened with a ray of this triple splendor? that this most blessed number of days may complete, yes complete and contain my days? Who I ask, will grant me that my days may stretch out to that line of eternity, may shine in the splendor of truth and be inflamed with the spirit of charity? Unlike the dispensation which prevailed at the first creation of the world, when an alternating return of dawn and dusk set limits between the many days, then indeed there will be one unending day, one unbroken high noon. There at the first creation, only between morning and evening, so to speak, inauspicious night was banned, but in this new day high noon will replace dawn and dusk: the two limits of the day will no longer grow dim. As Zechariah says, 'in the evening there will be light, for then there will be no temporal 'variations, no shadow of change'. Yet when, oh when, will this occur? When, O good Jesus, will you manifest yourself as you are in your high noon? For in you we shall see the Father, and it will be enough for us. How sluggish are our ears, how slow our hearts! slow to see, quick however to believe!

Scripturally, in each and every appearance after your blessed Resurrection, I do not recall ever having read of your appearance at midday. You appeared either when the day had hardly begun or was already ending, that one might understand that here below all light of truth is obscured by some shadow of ignorance. At the same time, a pleasant distinction should be noted in the fact that in the dawn's early light he showed himself at the tomb to the women seeking him anxiously, but that late on the same day, the first of the week, he showed himself to the disciples huddled at home.

Oh that you would appear to us also, O Lord, here in our dawn or in our dusk, for you are above dawn and dusk, the brightest high noon. In that high noon we shall recline at table in your fatherland. Meanwhile as we are journeying on, let us pray, O Lord, that you may warm us with the last ray of evening light. Now we are concluding our discourse with the onset of a day but we do not exclude you: rather we close with you as we opened with you. In the morning let us give thanks, breaking into that song of the Canticle: 'I rested in the shade of the one I longed for.'

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<sup>1</sup>Treatise 1, The works of Gilbert of Hoyland IV, Cistercian Publications, Inc. 1981, CF34. p.11-13.

**A reading about the meaning of the Ascension, from a book by Fr. Jean Danielou. <sup>1</sup>**

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The Apostles' Creed contains a noteworthy passage in which, grammatically speaking, we move from the past to the future: "He ascended into the heavens, to be seated at the right hand of God. He will come again to judge the living and the dead." Thus the mysteries of Christ are not completed with the ascension. There is still another mystery to come, that of the Parousia. Between these two there is a mystery which is, in the present, that of the session at the right hand. So there is a mystery of Christ with which we are contemporary that corresponds to that moment of sacred history, which belongs to us, which constitutes the present activity of the Word.

Here we find, in the mysteries of glory, the order which we ascertained in the mysteries of darkness. Through the ascension the humanity of Christ was exalted above every creature and was introduced by the Word into the inaccessible sanctuary of the Trinity. But the humanity of Christ tends to attract everything else to it. "If only I am lifted up from the earth, I will attract all peoples to myself." Christ has only entered the heavenly sanctuary as a forerunner. The presence of his humanity in the sphere of the Trinity is the guarantee of the possibility that is henceforth ours to attain. The impassible gulf is henceforth overcome; the impossible has become possible. In a suitable image, the epistle to the Hebrews shows the humanity of Christ as cast like an anchor, not into the depths of the sea, but into the far places of heaven, laying the foundation of our hope that we shall in our turn attain to the anchorage beyond the veil.

Thus there is, henceforth, in the heart of each person an ascensional power that lifts it up and draws it towards the Father, that "gravity" of love of which Augustine spoke, and which counteracts the "gravity" of the flesh. This is the meaning of the era of the Church, in which Christ, having entered into the glory of the Father, seeks to lift up humanity as a whole. By this means the movement is completed which began at the Incarnation, when the Word of God came to seek for mankind, but in order to lead it back to the Father. *"This is why we are told, he has mounted up on high; he has captured his spoil; he has brought gifts. And he who so went down is no other than he who has gone up, high above all the heavens to fill creation with his presence."* And truly this humanity is a mighty weight to raise. Its gravity resists grace. That is the whole drama of the present period in sacred history. But the power of the Word is greater than our resistance. (over)

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1 □ Jean Danielou, *Christ and Us*, New York: Sheed and Ward, pp. 155-159.

Received into the heavenly sanctuary, the humanity of Christ has been transfigured by the life of the Spirit in its soul and its body. It has been invested with glory. This communication of the Holy Spirit fills the humanity of Christ with the fullness of the divine life. But the gift of the Spirit was accepted by Christ so that he might pour it forth at the time of Pentecost. Thus the humanity of Christ is raised above every creature so as to be henceforth the spring from which eternal life would gush forth upon the world. *"He showed me a river whose waters give life; it flows, clear as a crystal, from the throne of the Lamb midway along the street."*  
(Rev 22.1)

## **THE ASCENSION AND CHRISTIAN PRAYER,**

from an Article, *The Humanity of Christ in Monastic Prayer* by Fr Thomas Merton<sup>1</sup>

At the Ascension, in the sight of the disciples, "the nature of humankind soared above the dignity of all the creatures of heaven" and "there was to be no limit to the advancement of Christ's humanity until, seated together with the eternal Father, it might share enthroned the glory of Him whose nature it shared in the son." And of course, the Fathers never ceased to remind their hearers that this same humanity of Christ which was enthroned with the Father in the divine glory, was to return and judge the world. "He set a limit to His bodily presence, and would remain at the right hand of the Father until He should return in the same flesh in which He had ascended." Monastic prayer is eschatological and is centered on the expectation of the Parousia, the advent of the "immortal and invisible King of ages" who is both "God alone" and the Christ, our Redeemer and Liberator.

In the meantime it is our nature which is enthroned in heaven with Christ. It is our nature which shares the divinity of Christ and of the Father. Hence St Leo puts these words into the mouth of the glorious Redeemer: "I have united you to myself and I became the son of man that you might become children of God." St Gregory adds that Christ has made us children of God by taking us to heaven with Him: "He has led captivity because he has swallowed up our corruption in the power of His incorruption." St Leo says that with Christ's ascension into heaven we have recovered possession of paradise, and not only that, "we have even penetrated, in Christ, into the height of heaven," we have been enthroned with Him because we are "one Body" with Him. This is the reason why we should rejoice at His going to the Father: "above all the heavens, your lowliness is raised, in Me, to be placed at the right hand of the Father." He is not separated from us unless we choose to remain bound to the earth by our passions. In contemplation we experience, at least obscurely, something of this mystery of our union with Him now in heaven.

This has important implications for the life of prayer. The life of the monk, being that of a Christian, is a way of living in heaven. While living bodily in exile and in his earthly pilgrimage, the monk is already spiritually in paradise and in heaven where he has ascended with Christ. That is to say, although he is not physically present in heaven, he is free to come and go there as he pleases, in spirit, in prayer, in faith, in thanksgiving, praise and love, because he already "is" there mystically in Christ. "Let us therefore, exult with a worthy and spiritual joy, happy before God in thanksgiving, and let us lift up the free eyes of our heart to that height where Christ is."

The Lord has already "made known to us all that He has heard from His Father"(Jn 15,15). St Gregory, commenting on this line, says that Christ has made us His friends by making known to us "the joys of interior charity and the festival of the heavenly country which He daily makes present in our minds by the desire of love." And St Gregory explains that this loving knowledge of heavenly things is very real indeed, no mere fancy: "for when, hearing of heavenly things, we love

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<sup>1</sup>"The Humanity of Christ in Monastic Prayer", *Monastic Studies* 2, 1964, 11-13.

them, we already know the things we love, for our love itself is a way of knowing." It is by the charity of Christ in our hearts that we "are in heaven" and know the things of heaven.

The source of our freedom and the power that raises our prayer to the height of heaven is the Holy Spirit, sent by Christ and the Father after the God become flesh ascended into heaven. And faith in Christ's presence in heaven as one of us merits for us the grace of the Holy Spirit. The angels, says St Gregory, already rejoice to have us as their companions, while they adore the humanity of the God become flesh.

**A reading about the Visitation of Mary with Elizabeth, from the encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* by St. John Paul II. 1**

Immediately after the narration of the Annunciation, the Evangelist Luke guides us in the footsteps of the Virgin of Nazareth towards *a city of Judah* (Lk 1.39). Mary arrived there *in haste*, to visit Elizabeth her kinswoman. The reason for her visit is also to be found in the fact that at the Annunciation Gabriel had made special mention of Elizabeth, who in her old age had conceived a son by her husband Zechariah, through the power of God: *your kinswoman Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible* (Lk 1.36-37). The divine messenger had spoken of what had been accomplished in Elizabeth in order to answer Mary's question: *How shall this be, since I have no husband?* (Lk 1.34). It is to come to pass precisely through the *Power of the Most High*, just as it happened in the case of Elizabeth, and even more so.

Moved by charity, therefore, Mary goes to the house of her kinswoman. When Mary enters, Elizabeth replies to her greeting and feels the child leap in her womb, and being *filled with the Holy Spirit* she greets Mary with a loud cry: *Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!* (cf. Lk 1.40-42)... While every word of Elizabeth's greeting is filled with meaning, her final words, would seem to have fundamental importance: *And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord* (Lk 1.45). These words can be linked with the title *full of grace* of the angel's greeting. Both of these texts reveal an essential Mariological content, namely the truth about Mary who has become really present in the mystery of Christ precisely because she *had believed*. The fullness of grace announced by the angel means the gift of God himself. Mary's faith, proclaimed by Elizabeth at the Visitation, indicates **how** the Virgin of Nazareth **responded to this gift**.

As the Second Vatican Council teaches, The obedience of faith must be given to God who reveals, an obedience by which man entrusts his whole self freely to God. This description of faith found perfect realization in Mary. The decisive moment was the Annunciation, and the very words of Elizabeth: *And blessed is she who believed* refer primarily to that very moment.

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Indeed, at the Annunciation Mary entrusted herself to God completely, with the full submission of intellect and will, manifesting the obedience of faith to him

who spoke to her through his messenger. By accepting this announcement, Mary was to become the Mother of the Lord, and the divine mystery of the Incarnation was to be accomplished in her.... This fiat of Mary *let it be to me* was decisive, on the human level, for the accomplishment of the divine mystery [of the Incarnation. Mary uttered this fiat in faith. In faith she entrusted herself to God without reserve and devoted herself totally as the handmaid of the Lord to the person and work of her son. And this Son, as the Fathers of the Church teach, she conceived in her mind before she conceived him in her womb: precisely in faith! Rightly therefore does Elizabeth praise Mary: *And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord.* These words have already been fulfilled: Mary of Nazareth presents herself at the threshold of Elizabeth and Zechariah's house as the Mother of the Son of God. This is Elizabeth's joyful discovery: *The mother of my Lord comes to me.*

**A reading about the reasons for martyrdom, from the *First Apology* of St. Justin Martyr.**<sup>1</sup>

We do not desire to live by lying. We are desirous of an eternal and good life; we strive for the abode of God, the Father and Creator of all; we make haste to profess our faith; we believe with firm conviction that they can attain these things who have shown God by their works that they follow Him and love to make their home with Him where there is no sin to cause disorder. In brief, this is what we look for and what we have learned from Christ and, in turn, teach to others.

We do not worship with many sacrifices and floral offerings the things human hands have made, set in temples, and called gods. We know that they are inanimate and lifeless and have not the form of God (for we do not think that God has that form which some say they reproduce in order to give honor to Him). Why should we tell you, who already know, into what different shapes the artisans fashion their material, by carving, cutting, molding, and hammering? From vessels destined for vile purposes, by merely changing their shape and by skillfully giving them a new form, they often make what they call gods. Thus, His name is applied to corruptible things that need constant care. This, we think, is not only stupid but also disrespectful to God, who is of ineffable glory and form.

But we have learned from tradition that God has no need of our material gifts, since we see that He is the Giver of all things. We have been taught, are convinced, and do believe that he approves of only those who imitate His inherent virtues, namely, temperance, justice, love of neighbor, and any other virtue proper to God who is called by no given name. We have also been instructed that God, in the beginning, created in His goodness everything out of shapeless matter for our sakes. And if we by our actions prove ourselves worthy of His plan, we shall be found worthy to make our abode with Him and to reign with Him, free from all corruption and pain.

When you hear that we look forward to a kingdom, you rashly assume that we speak of a human kingdom, whereas we mean a kingdom which is with God. This becomes evident when, being questioned, we openly profess to be Christians, although we know well that for such a profession of faith the punishment is death. If we expected a human kingdom, we would deny that we are Christians that we might not be put to death, and we would try to hide from you, that we might attain what we expect.

That all these things should happen was foretold, I say, by our teacher, Jesus Christ, who is the Son and Apostle of God, the Father and Ruler of all, and from whom we have received our name of Christians. Hence, we are convinced of the truth of all the things He taught us, because whatever He foretold would happen is actually happening; this, indeed, is the practice of God, to speak of something before it takes place and then to show it taking place just as He predicted.

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<sup>1</sup> Saint Justin Martyr, *The First Apology* (Fathers of the Church series), New York: , 1948, chapters 8-10, pp. 42-43.

**The Various Ways of Ascending** - A Sermon by St Bernard of Clairvaux <sup>1</sup>

Today the Lord of heaven passed into the heights of heaven with heavenly power; dissipating the weaknesses of the flesh as if they were clouds, he put on the robe of glory. High is the sun in its rising; it has grown hot and gathered strength; its rays are far reaching and multitudinous over the earth; and there is >no one who can hide from its heat=. The Wisdom of God has returned to the land of wisdom where everyone both understands and seeks the good: their understanding is exceedingly acute, and their inclination is exceedingly intent >on heeding the voice of his word=.

We, however, are in this land where there is great wickedness and little wisdom, for >the perishable body presses down the soul and the earthly dwelling burdens the mind that ponders many things=. I think that Amind@ here means understanding, which is in fact pressed down when it ponders many things, when it does not gather itself together in the single exclusive meditation that takes its beginning from that city >which is banded together in unity=. This type of understanding must necessarily be pressed down and distracted by many things in many and diverse ways. I think that our inclinations are called Asoul@ here, for in a perishable body they are influenced by the different passions, which can never be mitigated, much less quieted, until the will seeks one thing and is directed toward one thing.

There are two parts of ourselves then, understanding and inclination, that must be purified: the understanding, that it may know; and the inclination, that it may will. Fortunate, truly fortunate, were those two men, Elijah and Enoch, from whom every cause and occasion which might shackle either their understanding or inclination was removed. Living for God alone, they know nothing but God and desire nothing but God. We even read of Enoch that >he was carried off, lest wickedness impair his understanding or deceit beguile his soul=.

Our understanding was disordered, not to say blinded; our inclination was tainted, and very tainted. But Christ enlightens our understanding, and the Holy Spirit purifies our inclination. For the Son of God came. He worked so many great and wondrous deeds in the world, that with good cause he called our understanding away from all worldly matters. Thus we could ponder, and never have enough of pondering, that he has done wondrous deeds. Truly he left very extensive fields for our discerning to roam, and the river of these ponderings is so very deep, that, in the words of the prophet, it cannot be crossed. Who can sufficiently ponder how the Lord has come before us, come to us, come to our assistance; and how this unparalleled Majesty willed to die that we might live, to serve that we might reign, to live in exile that we might be brought home again, and even to stoop to the most menial actions so as to set us over all his works.

The Lord of the Apostles presented himself to the apostles in such a way that they would no longer perceive the invisible things of God as understood by the things that are made, but that the very Maker of all things would himself be seen face to face. Because the disciples were

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<sup>1</sup> Sermons for the Summer Season - Bernard of Clairvaux - CF53 - Cistercian Publications - Kalamazoo, MI - 1991

beings of flesh and God is spirit, and spirit and flesh are not easily brought together, he adapted himself to them with the shadow of his body, that by the intervention of his life-giving flesh they might behold the Word in flesh, the sun in a cloud, light in an earthen jug, the candle in the lantern.

For this purpose the Lord set his flesh before them, to turn their every thought away from human matters and attach it to his flesh, which was saying wondrous things and performing wondrous deeds. Thus he would turn their attention from flesh to spirit, because >God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and in truth=. Does it not seem to you that he enlightened their understanding when he opened their minds to understanding of the Scriptures, making known that the Christ had to suffer these things and rise from the dead, and so enter into his glory.

Still, having grown accustomed to that most holy flesh of his, they could not listen to a word about his departure: that the one for whom they had left everything would leave them. What is the reason for this? Their understanding was enlightened, but their inclination was not yet purified. Whence their kind Teacher gently and tenderly addressed them, saying: AIt is for your good that I go. For if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you@. ABut because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts@. What does it mean, that while Christ abides on earth, the Holy Spirit cannot come to them? Was the Spirit shrinking from any involvement with Christ=s flesh? From the Spirit and by the Spirit was Christ conceived in the Virgin, and born of a virgin mother. It was nothing of the sort! Christ was showing us the path which we were to walk, and putting before us the form with which we were to be impressed.

And as they wept, Christ was lifted up to heaven. He sent the Holy spirit, who purified their inclination, that is, their will; or rather he transformed it, so that those who at first wanted to detain the Lord, now preferred that he ascend. What he had foretold to them was fulfilled: AYou shall be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy@. In this, then, was their discerning enlightened by Christ, and their will purified by the Spirit, so that just as they knew the good, they would also will it. This only is perfect religion and religious perfection.

From the Homily at the Canonization of the martyrs of Uganda by BL. Pope Paul VI <sup>1</sup>

The African martyrs add another page to the martyrology – the Church’s roll of honor – an occasion both of mourning and of joy. This is a page worthy in every way of being added to the annals of that Africa of earlier times, which we, living in this era and being people of little faith, never expected to be repeated.

In earlier times there occurred those famous deeds, so moving to the spirit, of the martyrs of Scilli, of Carthage, and of that “white robed army” of Utica commemorated by Saint Augustine and Prudentius; of the martyrs of Egypt so highly praised by Saint John Chrysostom, and of the martyrs of the Vandal persecution. Who would have thought that in our days we should have witnessed events as heroic and glorious?

Who would have predicted to the famous African confessors and martyrs such as Cyprian, Felicity, Perpetua and – the greatest of all – Augustine, that we would one day add names so dear to us as Charles Lwanga and Matthias Mulumba Kalemba and their twenty companions? Nor must we forget those members of the Anglican Church who also died in the name of Christ.

These African martyrs herald the dawn of a new age. If only the human mind might be directed not toward persecutions and religious conflicts but toward a rebirth of Christianity and civilization!

Africa has been washed by the blood of these latest martyrs, the first of this new age (and God willing, let them be the last, although such a holocaust is precious indeed). Africa is reborn free and independent.

The infamous crime by which these young men were put to death was so unspeakable and so expressive of the times. It shows us clearly that a new people needs a moral foundation, needs new spiritual customs firmly planted, to be handed down to posterity. Symbolically, this crime also reveals that a simple and rough way of life – enriched by many fine human qualities yet enslaved by its own weakness and corruption – must give way to a more civilized life wherein the higher expressions of the mind and

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<sup>1</sup> The Liturgy of the Hours – vol II – Catholic Book Publishing Co. – New York – 1976 – p 1860