

# THE FIRST FRUITS OF THE FLESH AND THE FIRST FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT: THE MYSTERY OF THE ASCENSION

• José Granados •

“The Ascension is another step forward in the deepening bond of the flesh of Christ with the Church, and, through her, with the entire cosmos: ‘He ascended . . . that he might fill all things’ (Eph 4:10).”

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In the fourth century AD, a wealthy Roman patroness named Poemenia had a church built on the Mount of Olives, the place of Christ’s Ascension. The sanctuary had an open dome so that the faithful might contemplate the heavens during the liturgical celebration. At other sites of the Holy Land, pilgrims sought to follow in the footsteps of Jesus; here, they turned their gaze upward toward that part of the heavens where, according to Luke’s account, the Master departed at his Ascension. This separation from Jesus, as well as the “envious cloud” that took him from our sight, in the words of Friar Luis de León, permit a nostalgic reading of this mystery. The Augustinian dedicated a poem to the Ascension that expresses a reproach at Jesus’ departure: “And You, holy Shepherd, leave / Your flock in this valley, deep and dark / in loneliness and sorrow, / tearing asunder the pure air / You depart for realms immortal, safe and sure?” The poem continues, lamenting the

misfortune of those deprived of their Master, those who, poor and sorrowful, do not know where to turn. Péguy expresses the same sentiment in his *Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*. The churches of Christendom, with their great temples and renowned patrons, could never measure up to the peoples and places who were present at the very steps of Jesus, who could invoke him and even touch the hem of his garment:

To that parish was given what never was given to you, parishes of France, what never in all eternity will be given to any other parish. . . . Happy is she who poured on his feet the ointment of the amphora, she who poured on his head the ointment of the alabaster box . . . on his feet, on his very feet, on his body of flesh, on his very head, on the head of his body . . . . All saints, men and women, contemplate Jesus seated at the right of the Father. And there he has, in heaven he has his man's body, his human body in a state of glory, since he went up to heaven, as he was, on Ascension Day. But you, you alone, you saw, you touched, you grasped that human body in its humanity, in your common humanity, walking and seated on our common earth.<sup>1</sup>

And yet the gospels that testify to Christ's departure do not allow for a purely nostalgic reading of the Ascension. Luke, for example, highlights the joy with which the disciples return to Jerusalem, a great joy that evokes, and thus brings to completion, the birth of the Messiah (cf. Lk 2:10 and 24:52). This is the joy of those who have encountered the faith (cf. Acts 8:8 and 15:3), effectively anticipating that full joy of the Spirit, of whom Jesus speaks to his disciples at the Last Supper (Jn 16:24 and 17:13). The disciples did not understand the Ascension, then, as a loss; rather, they were to be given a new abundance. Jesus himself had assured them, "It is better for you that I go" (Jn 16:7). It is significant that, of all of the mysteries of the life of Jesus, the Ascension is closest to us; it is the point of departure for faith in Christ and for contemplating his person and work. Among the New Testament writings, as Romano Guardini has noted, Paul's letters are in fact the most accessible to the believer, in spite of their apparent complexity. Only with Paul's teachings as the necessary background can the believer

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Charles Péguy, *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc*, trans. Julian Green (New York: Pantheon Books, 1950), 52–55.

then approach the synoptics without fear of misinterpreting them.<sup>2</sup> As paradoxical as it seems, this fact has a profound meaning: Paul's experience is the most similar to our own. He neither saw nor touched Jesus, as others had done during his earthly life; rather, he knows him through the light of faith and the power of the Spirit. While Mary Magdalene wanted to cling to the resurrected Christ (cf. Jn 20:17) so that she might continue to relate to him in a way that was familiar, Paul says, "even if we once knew Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him so no longer" (2 Cor 5:16). It is no wonder that St. Augustine viewed the feast of the Ascension as the crown of the liturgical year.<sup>3</sup>

The very font of Christian life emerges here, in this distinct mode of Jesus' presence, which is inaugurated on the Mount of Olives. At the Ascension, the believer is given the cardinal directions for his life with Christ; the structure of the sacramental economy and of the meaning and mission of the Church; and the new character of the Christian era, in which the final age has begun. How are we to understand this simultaneity of presence and absence to which the Ascension bears testimony? In order to explore the response to this question, let us begin with a study of Luke's narrative.

### 1. *The account of the Ascension*

Saint Luke is not the only author who tells us of Christ's ascent into Heaven. The fact is attested to in one form or another throughout the entirety of the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> It is part of the first

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<sup>2</sup>Cf. R. Guardini, *Das Christusbild der paulinischen und johanneischen Schriften* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1987).

<sup>3</sup>Cf. J. G. Davies, *He Ascended Into Heaven: A Study in the History of Doctrine* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958), 170.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, chapter 2. The mystery appears in the gospel of John, when Jesus responds to Mary Magdalene, "Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. . . I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God. . ." (Jn 20:17). The conclusion of Mark recounts the event as well (Mk 16:19), emphasizing the fact that the one who has ascended continues to be present and active in the preaching of his disciples. In Eph 4:8–10, we are given an exegesis of Psalm 68, which likewise refers to the mystery of the Ascension: "He ascended on high . . . he gave gifts to men . . ." Saint Paul, interpreting this passage, continues, "What does 'he ascended' mean except that he also descended into the

kerygmatic narratives that set out the life of Jesus and it enters later into the Creed. Nevertheless, it is the third evangelist who narrates the event in the most detail and gives it a decisive importance in his work's composition.<sup>5</sup> The scene unfolds in view of Jerusalem, which was Jesus' destination and the point of origin for the Church's mission. For this reason, Luke could both close his gospel with this event, and then recount it again as a kind of overture for Acts. The Ascension is a mystery that, like the god Janus, looks both backward and forward.

First, the mystery extends into the past, bringing Christ's journey to its conclusion. Luke presents the scene as the end of a long inclusion, which begins with the infancy narratives.<sup>6</sup> Here again, Luke speaks of that "great joy" that first characterizes the Annunciation (cf. Lk 2:10 and 24:52). Everything is situated close to the Temple, where the disciples return to pray, and where the story of Zechariah took place, with which Luke begins his gospel. We are told, moreover, of the final blessing given by Jesus, which the Baptist's father had been unable to bestow upon the people because of his lack of faith.

It is particularly important to keep in mind the connection between the Resurrection and Christ's appearances. The Lucan account gives us the impression that Jesus is resurrected, appears to the disciples, and ascends on the first day of the week. The account thus highlights the intimate connection between all of the paschal events. The Ascension, therefore, puts an end to Christ's appearances. The same Jesus who accompanied the disciples on the road to

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lower (regions) of the earth? The one who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things." The confession of faith in 1 Tim 3:16 also highlights the importance of the exaltation of Jesus, in the context of the proclamation of the Gospel and of its reception in faith: "proclaimed to the Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory." The Letter to the Hebrews, too, contains a theology of the Ascension: the high priest has passed through the heavens (cf. Hb 4:14) in order to offer there his definitive sacrifice, through the tent of his glorified body (cf. Hb 9:27): confidence in so magnificent an intercession makes it possible for Christians to be firm in their faith.

<sup>5</sup>For a bibliography of sources that discuss these passages, see F. Bovon, *Luke the Theologian: Fifty-Five Years of Research (1950–2005)* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 192–203.

<sup>6</sup>Cf. H. Schlier, "Jesu Himmelfahrt nach den lukanischen Schriften," in *Besinnung auf das Neue Testament* (Freiburg, 1964), 227–41.

Emmaus and appeared to the disciples in the Upper Room, who let himself be seen and touched, and who had eaten and drunk with the disciples (Acts 10:41), now concludes this mysterious time of appearing in his resurrected flesh. This fact distinguishes the mystery of the Ascension from other pagan narratives of being taken up into heaven, and from other ascensions that, like that of Elijah, can be found in the Old Testament<sup>7</sup>: he who here ascends to heaven has been resurrected; his body already possesses the extraordinary character of spiritualized flesh, full of glory. The flesh that vanishes behind the cloud is the flesh that has already triumphed over death.

In the second place, the Ascension is also bound up with the subsequent history contained in the Acts of the Apostles. Let us recall here the great blessing at the close of Luke's gospel, a blessing that coincides with the Ascension itself, and is thus immortalized in the minds of the eyewitnesses (Lk 24:50). Jesus departs in a striking pose, with his arms extended over his disciples. Let us consider that, in the Old Testament, a blessing is a form of the continuing presence of God with his people amid the ebb and flow of life's events, particularly insofar as this presence bestows life: Yahweh pours out the blessings of the rain and the sun, making the fields fertile, giving seed to animals and men.<sup>8</sup> It would be a mistake, then, to understand the Ascension as an end. Rather, it marks the

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. Davies, *He Ascended*, chapter 1. It is not difficult to discover figures in the Old Testament that announce this episode, nor to find parallels in pagan stories. They have to do with holy men who have been taken up into heaven in a state of rapture, Elijah being the most well-known. The ascension of the prophet, who will later bestow two-thirds of his spirit upon his disciples, provides the background for the explanation in the gospels, and later will be commented upon at length by the Fathers. It is important not to forget, moreover, that Elijah himself caused fire to descend from heaven down upon the sacrifice on Mount Carmel, an event that allows him to be connected to Pentecost. In addition to these parallels with the accounts of other ascensions, the Old Testament proves to be essential for expressing the mystery of the Ascension of Christ. It is the sequence of Psalm 109 that allows us to penetrate and explain the Ascension, which could then be given a definitive inclusion in the Creed: he is seated at the right hand of the Father, until that time when his enemies will be placed beneath his feet like a footstool, and will receive the royal scepter (cf. Ps 110 and Acts 2:30–35). Other psalms (especially 24 and 68) likewise clarify the theology of Jesus' ascent into heaven.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. C. Westermann, *Der Segen in der Bibel und im Handeln der Kirche* (Munich: C. Kaiser, 1968).

beginning of a new stage of growth and fruitfulness. Thus, the opening chapter of Acts is not a superfluous repetition: though it recounts the same mystery, it does so under a new light, with a view toward the future, toward the effects this mystery will have in the life of the Church. When Christ takes his place at the right hand of the Father, the event that marks the culmination of the Ascension, it becomes clear that we ought to understand the Ascension as the mystery of the continuing presence of the Master among his disciples throughout all of history. Mark highlights this in the conclusion to his gospel: upon ascending into heaven, the Lord works with his disciples (Mk 16:20). And in Acts, the theme of the reign of God and his definitive lordship over history (cf. Acts 1:6: “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?”), is disassociated from an excessive concern with calculating the day and hour of the end of the world, so as to be understood in light of the coming of the Holy Spirit, who will impart his power to the apostles: “It is not for you to know the times or seasons . . . . But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you” (Acts 1:7).

The particularity of this mystery, situated as it were like a ridge that separates the two slopes of a mountain range, gives rise to many questions. In the first place, there is the question of the relation between the Ascension and the Resurrection. Does the Ascension bring something new? Or is it simply another aspect of the Resurrection, the exaltation of Jesus to the Father’s glory? And what is the significance of the forty days of appearing to the disciples, which, according to Luke, conclude with Christ’s Ascension into heaven? On the other hand, we also have to inquire into the connection between the Ascension and the time of the Church: what manner of new presence does Jesus have among his disciples, that they can be filled with such joy at seeing him go (Lk 24:52)? Why was it necessary that he depart, that his mission be extended with this time in which “we love Jesus, although we have not seen him” (cf. 1 Pt 1:8)? Let us turn first to the connection between the Ascension and the Resurrection.

## *2. Resurrection and Ascension*

Today there is a widespread exegesis interpreting the Ascension as simply one aspect of the Resurrection. Many passages

in the New Testament present the Resurrection as, at one and the same time, a return to life and an exaltation or glorification on high. It follows from this that, if the Resurrection itself is already an elevation to the Father, the concrete historical event of the Ascension adds nothing essential to Easter. In effect, Christ does not need to ascend into heaven—that is, to enter into the realm of the Divine—for this is precisely what has already happened in his anastasis in the flesh.

In support of this view, it must be said that the Resurrection of Jesus cannot be conceived simply as a “return to life.” Something essential distinguishes it from other miracles such as the raising of Lazarus or the widow’s son in Nain. The flesh that comes forth from the tomb of Jesus is not corruptible; his glorified body participates in the very life of God and has thus attained an insurmountable mode of existence that is generated anew for God through the Spirit of holiness (cf. Rom 1:4).

Yet this raises the problem: what is specific to the mystery of the Ascension? There are several possible answers. We can dismiss from the outset any theories that see here an illegitimate transformation of Christian truth into myth, in the manner of the Greek religions of the time. In fact, what stands in the background of the New Testament accounts is the testimony of the Old Testament, which reflects the history of a people journeying toward Yahweh; and the purpose of the scene of the Ascension is the utter concreteness of the history of salvation, in radical opposition to myth. As Walter Kasper puts it, here *mythica antimythica dicunt*; myth is destroyed with the language of myth.<sup>9</sup>

However, even rejecting this latter hypothesis, one could still maintain that Luke simply invents a theological theory with which to explain what happened at Easter, isolating various aspects of the mystery in order then to elaborate his own understanding of salvation history.<sup>10</sup> The time of Christ is followed by the time of the Church; and the Ascension ensures the continuity between them. The Ascension itself would have no place but for the fact that it

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<sup>9</sup>Cf. W. Kasper, “Christi Himmelfahrt: Geschichte und theologische Bedeutung,” *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 12 (1983): 205–13; 211–12.

<sup>10</sup>This is the thesis of G. Lohfink, *Die Himmelfahrt Jesu: Untersuchungen zu den Himmelfahrts- und Erhöhungstexten bei Lukas* (Munich: Kösel Verlag, 1971).

gives concrete expression to a fundamental truth. If the logic of this view were to be drawn out, it would mean the denial, not only of the truth of the Ascension as a concrete historical event, but of the post-Resurrection appearances as well. This would expose the faith to the error of the Docetists, for whom the Resurrection was an entirely interior event.

Another possibility is to accept that these appearances took place, but to see them as a kind of accommodation for the disciples. The disciples needed time to come to comprehend Easter, which had turned on its head their understanding of the world, of man, and of God. They needed to be assured of the truth of Jesus' Resurrection, to touch him in the flesh; and this requires nothing less than the patience proper to the flesh. This reading takes account of an important fact, and gives due weight to the corporeality of the Resurrection. However, what is noteworthy here is that the Ascension is not viewed as relevant for Christ himself. It is simply the final post-Resurrection appearance, merely one more in a series, distinct simply because it serves to conclude the period of time necessary for establishing the pillars of the Church. That is to say, this interpretation does not distinguish between the Resurrection and the Ascension with respect to Jesus himself, but only in terms of the reception of the paschal events by the disciples. The point of the Ascension in this view is simply didactic.

The question about the difference between the Resurrection and Ascension is a delicate one. It is difficult enough to try to comprehend what a glorified body might be like, let alone to allow for a kind of intermediate state, a gradual glorification of Jesus in his flesh, and to admit any kind of increase for him who enjoys the fullness of the eschaton—that is to say, a fullness that is definitive and insurmountable. Before attempting to solve the difficulties involved in such concepts, however, it would be worthwhile to study the terms of the problem, to see better what is at stake.

On the one hand, it is essential to emphasize the close connection between the two mysteries. The Lucan account does not separate them, though it does distinguish between them. A single dynamic emerges out of the Easter Vigil, extends through the time of the apparitions, and culminates in the Ascension. We can say that when the risen Christ appears to the disciples, it is always as one who is “on the way,” progressing toward the Father; we cannot “cling” to him. It is difficult to recognize his face because it is a face

that is in movement toward the Father on high; his face has changed, as a sound does when its source is moving away from us.<sup>11</sup>

It is essential, then, to maintain the unity of the two mysteries—as the gospels themselves do, repeatedly presenting the Resurrection as an exaltation, or as an ascent into heaven, although not always explicitly mentioning the Ascension. This unity, furthermore, prevents us from losing sight of the truth of the Resurrection, which is not simply a return to life, but rather the fullness of the relation with the Father; immortality is understood as a new filiation of man in God.

On the other hand, the two events still have to be distinguished. Even as we must defend the unity of the Resurrection and Ascension, so must we avoid simply glossing over the unfolding of Christ's presence among his followers and the fact that his appearances to his disciples take place over the course of time. According to Walter Kasper's work on this problem, our question is bound up with the very historical character of Christianity. Salvation takes place within history and therefore possesses the novelty and irreversibility proper to an event; such, in fact, is what safeguards salvation's gratuity, the impossibility of seeing it as something God owes to man, as something to which man has a "right," as an exigency demanded by the nature of creation itself.<sup>12</sup> As we have already indicated, to maintain the historical character of the Ascension is thus to reject any interpretation that would render it a mere myth. The narrative of an event that appears under the guise of a myth destroys the mentality of the mythical, which views history as a repetitive cycle of a pattern of events decreed from all eternity, which must take place according to a kind of tragic necessity.

This idea, upon which Kasper insists, is essential: the Resurrection of Jesus does not take away the temporality of his human nature; once glorified, Jesus does not pass into some kind of sphere outside of history. As the German theologian says, "The fact that Luke describes Jesus' ascension to the glory of God as a path signifies, in our perspective, that Jesus, in and through his Resurrection, has taken not only space but also time to himself and has hidden it in God, in order to bring to light the fullness of times and

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<sup>11</sup>Cf. H. Schlier, *On the Resurrection of Jesus Christ* (Rome: 30 Giorni, 2008).

<sup>12</sup>Kasper, "Christi Himmelfahrt: Geschichte und theologische Bedeutung," 211.

to unite them in himself.”<sup>13</sup> Kasper does not elaborate further on the distinction between the Resurrection and the Ascension, though he does conclude that the distinction made by Luke between the two mysteries expresses a fundamental aspect of Easter, and is therefore justified.

A recent study by D. Farrow insists upon the difference between the two mysteries and notes the dangers involved in blurring the line between them.<sup>14</sup> Farrow mentions, for example, the risk of spiritualizing the Resurrection. If the Ascension did not really happen, then the value of the period after the Resurrection when Jesus appears to his disciples is likewise lost; for it then becomes possible to interpret these appearances simply as subjective experiences on the part of the disciples. This leads easily to the idea that what happened at Easter is an extra-historical event, rather than the very ground and fullness of history itself. This is to say: if we lose the Ascension, then this could lead to a kind of “eschatological Docetism” (we lose the weight and solidity of the glorified body of Jesus). The more we are able to safeguard the realism of the post-Resurrection appearances, and of the Ascension, the more difficult it will be to fall into such confusions.

Farrow has also pointed out that blending the two events into one can lead to an ecclesiological error. In effect, the Ascension allows us to recognize the fact that Jesus has left us. By so doing it safeguards the distinction between Christ and the Church. Jesus is not simply present in a complete manner in the body of the Church. Seen in this light, the lamentations of Friar Luis de Leon, with which we began this study, do not appear to be completely unfounded. If we do away with the Ascension, argues Farrow, this can lead to an absolutization of the Church, as if the presence of Jesus were consummated by her, as if she could somehow substitute for her Master. By distinguishing between these two modes of encountering Christ, that of the first witnesses and that of the rest of believers, the Ascension reminds us that our way of finding Jesus is not simply through Easter, but through all that follows upon the Ascension; we are they who “believe without seeing” (Jn 20:29). What are we to say to this proposal? Even granting the validity of

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<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 212.

<sup>14</sup>D. Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999).

Farrow's concerns, we nevertheless must say that he does not give sufficient weight to a point of particular importance, to which we will turn our attention later: the manner in which Christ is now present to us after the Ascension is, in fact, more perfect than his manner of being present to his disciples prior to it, and its invisibility does not make it less corporeal.

How are we to reconcile the need to maintain the unity of these two mysteries with the need to distinguish between them? An exploration of the forty days that Christ spent with his disciples after the Resurrection will help us in this regard.

### *3. The forty days following the Resurrection of Jesus*

After his Resurrection, Jesus allowed himself to be seen and touched by the disciples, eating and drinking with them (Acts 10:41) until the day he ascended into heaven. The difficulty, which we have discussed above, is how to understand the fullness already present at Easter in light of the gradual glorification of Jesus that took place afterward. Is it possible that, during the period following the Resurrection, the Master himself experienced an increase in his glory, such that what was seen on the Mount of Olives actually corresponded to what was experienced by the Son of God?

Any answer to this question must begin with the resurrected flesh of Jesus, which, when glorified, does not become a kind of ethereal corporeality that could only loosely be called a body. Rather, it is the fullness of everything that we understand by bodily existence. If this is the case, then, given the link between body and time, the temporality of the resurrected body cannot simply vanish. On the contrary: the body must now be "temporal" in an even more profound way. The resurrected Jesus continues to "have" time for mankind and with mankind.

This dimension, which we have already explored through Kasper's research, has also been highlighted in the theology of history developed by Hans Urs von Balthasar, for whom the forty days between Easter and the Ascension are an important period in the history of salvation.<sup>15</sup> What is the meaning of this time period?

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<sup>15</sup>Cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologie der Geschichte: ein Grundriss* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1950), 35–45; Eng., *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius

Balthasar highlights the fact that the Risen One did not live “outside” of time, in an a-temporal eternity. On the contrary: he now possesses a new kind of time, a time that has been made complete, and which is therefore free of the deficiencies that mark the time measured by our calendar. The very point of appearing to the disciples would be to confirm for them his continuing presence in history, which is made more complete by his having risen.

The theologian from Basel insists upon Christ’s ability to accompany us within our own time, and sees in the forty days the clearest evidence of this ability. As Balthasar explains, because the fullness of time in which Christ lives after Easter cannot change, the post-Easter appearances help us to understand his real manner of being present to us after the Ascension. Thus the Church can be assured that, despite the invisibility of her Master, Jesus nevertheless accompanies her on her earthly pilgrimage. For Balthasar, however, there is an important difference: while Jesus allowed himself to be seen and touched by his disciples during the forty days, he is now present to us in the sacraments. Still, there is fundamentally an identity between the two stages:

And since it is not possible that the mode of time belonging to the risen Christ should have altered with his Ascension (this being rather in the nature of a signing-off gesture, purely for our benefit), it is necessary to grasp that the mode of time revealed during the forty days remains the foundation for every other mode of his presence in time, in the Church, and in the world. His manner of being, revealed during those days, is the ultimate form of his reality. His Ascension did not make him a stranger to our world. He inserted those forty days between his Resurrection and Ascension in order to show his disciples in a direct and tangible way the reality with which he is to remain with them “all days even unto the consummation of the world” (Mt 28:20).<sup>16</sup>

We must underscore with Balthasar the fullness enjoyed by the risen Jesus, as well as the continuity of his presence both before and after his Ascension. We must still inquire, however, and in greater detail, what the difference is between Christ’s appearances

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Press/Communio Books, 1994).

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 38 (Eng., 87).

after his Resurrection, and the sacramental presence of the ascended Jesus. Is it not the case that a change in the way in which the disciples perceive Christ points to a change in the existence of the Master himself? In order to answer this question, we must deepen our analysis of the nature of time for Jesus after Easter.

How should we describe the new way in which Christ experiences time? In the first place, there can be no characteristics of this experience that are “negative.” The time of the resurrected Christ is time most fully realized, the fullness of time. Therefore, Jesus does not “suffer” the succession of time; rather, it is completely at his disposal. Given the abundance of life with which his time after the Resurrection is suffused, we can say that the Master determines the manner in which he pours out his presence in history, in lordly dominion. This time is not imposed upon Jesus as a kind of weight, nor is it a kind of open wound through which existence slips away. It is a time that admits of neither boredom nor haste. Our task, then, is to rethink our experience of time and see it in a new light, purified of the chaff of alienation that came to us after the Fall.<sup>17</sup>

If our ideal of salvation is absolute control over our own life, then we would like to be liberated from time, since its flow is not under our dominion. This gives rise to an idealized view of salvation, a flight from the accidents of history. Of course, our experience of time can also be seen in another way. Time itself seems to contradict the illusion of the monadic subject in complete control of his capacities and his relation to the world. He who recognizes that his identity is bound to time must always contend with elements outside of his own designs: the past is already beyond his control, and the future remains in a state of uncertainty. Thus, time obliges us to understand life as something open, as something relational. In such a horizon we can see time as an opening to others, as a form of personal existence that is open to communion, and that in this way rises above itself. For example, time gives rise to an opening for relation with those who have gone before me in life, from whom I have received the conditions in which my history unfolds. To exist within time is, moreover, what permits the novelty and the gratuitous surprise of each encounter, which cannot be deduced from any past premise. Or again: living within time

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<sup>17</sup>José Granados, “Risen Time: Easter as the Source of History,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 37, no. 1 (Spring 2010): 6–33.

convinces us that only love, through the experience of a promise, can respond to our need for unity and overcome the division of our existence in the past, present, and future.

This provides an opening for a positive account of time. In the first place, time, casting its gaze toward the past, is an awareness of having one's origin in another. On this basis time is the discovery that God is the source of life, and the opening to listening to God's call and his plans for us. Can this help us to understand how Jesus lived this dimension of temporality? The Risen One lives his time in its filial transparency, as the occasion for receiving the gift of the Father; his past is the recognition that the Father is the Origin who never ceases to generate him, who is always present and always active. Second, in its future dimension, time can be seen as the openness of life to something that, coming from us, is greater than us: this is the experience of fecundity, as the capacity for bringing forth life, for bestowing upon others what has been received from God. To live toward the future means that our existence is open to bearing fruit. Again, Jesus lived this dimension in its fullness. Through his Resurrection, Jesus is the complete donation of life, a wellspring that communicates itself to the Church and gives birth to her for God. Third, in its present flow, our time is unity in diversity, a continuous succession of past, present, and future. This rupture between the past and the future, between the future and the present can only be overcome on the basis of a promise given and kept, for the promise is the assurance of the continuity of our identity in time. And so at Easter Jesus lives his time according to God's promise, as time that has been brought into unity thanks to the faithfulness of the Father and to the faithful response of the Son.

With the Resurrection, then, the time of Jesus has already passed the threshold of death and has become a new time, lived fully in love for the Father, who is recognized as Origin and Destiny. The Resurrection brings a time that is spiritual, which is to say, a time that is lived as the fullness of openness in relation (with the Father and with man). In this sense one could say that time has entered into eternity—eternity understood as the continuous and dynamic exchange of love between the Father and the Son in the Spirit. Resurrected time, or spiritual time, is that in which the past is interpreted in the manner of filiality, as the generation from the Father; the future, as the capacity for giving life; and the present, as a being-bound to the faithfulness of a promise, in which the total

response of the Son corresponds to the gift of the Father. The distinctions proper to time do not disappear; indeed, they are essential if we are to respect the order and the dynamism of the communion of persons. From this fullness of time, Jesus becomes the Lord of time: of the past that came before him, even back to the time of Adam, and of the future, which unfolds between his Resurrection and his second coming in glory.

At this point we can return to our question regarding the distinction between the time before and the time after the Ascension. We have said that the spiritual time of Christ has become the fullness of power of relationality. It is not a state of absence from human time, but in fact means that Christ accompanies the rhythms of our time far more closely. Hence, the Resurrection does not remove Christ from time, but is what allows for a more complete immersion in it. In truth, it is we who do not live in time's fullness; it is we who experience at moments that time has passed us by. It is we to whom it seems, as it does to the character in Vassily Grossman's novel, that our time has already passed, that we are now merely "stepchildren of time."<sup>18</sup>

I think that this relational character of human time, which is brought to fulfillment in Jesus, opens up the possibility of several stages in Christ's glorification. Here I am not asserting that Christ's time, in itself, has yet to attain unity and plenitude. Rather, I am considering Christ's time in relation to the rest of his fellow men—a relation that is intrinsic to this very temporality. As such, only when history is fully consummated can the time of Jesus itself be consummated.<sup>19</sup> This conception of time makes it possible to affirm that the Ascension might constitute an increase in the Son's glorification. Such an increase need not imply, therefore, a lack in Christ's lordship over time; rather, it indicates the humble love of him, who, while living in glory, conforms himself in everything to the humility of his disciples who are still living in the flesh. In sum: if the mode in which the Church lives her time varies, this variation is reflected in Jesus, as well. And thus it is the relational dimension of Christ's time that enables the succession of distinct stages in his existence

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<sup>18</sup>Cf. V.S. Grossman, *Life and Fate* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985), 51.

<sup>19</sup>Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Eschatologie: Tod und ewiges Leben* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet Verlag, 1990); Eng., *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007).

after Easter, foremost among which are the Ascension and his coming again in glory, given the important changes that these two events imply for the life of the disciples.

In order to explore these different stages in greater detail, we must turn our attention to the changes in the manner in which Jesus was present to his followers after Easter Sunday. The gospel texts distinguish the time of Christ's appearances from the time that follows his Ascension to the right hand of the Father: they are two ways of the Master's being and acting. On the one hand, the second is the perfection of the first; it is a more profound presence, in which the Christian can touch Jesus (cf. Jn 20:17), feel his very feelings (Phil 2:5), and be of the same mind (cf. 1 Cor 2:16), having received of his Spirit. On the other hand, this contact takes place through faith, and not through sight (cf. Jn 20:29: "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed"): there is a distance between the believer and Jesus, such that the forty days can also be seen as an anticipation, an advance of a future perfection, of a fulfillment that will come at the parousia, which the final appearance of Jesus represents (Acts 1:11: "[He] will return in the same way as you have seen him going").

This view of the forty days as an anticipation of the eschaton has been emphasized by Karl Barth in his treatment of the Ascension.<sup>20</sup> Barth says that the Risen Lord is accompanied by two inseparable signs: the empty tomb, on the one hand, and his ascent into heaven, on the other. The first is a sign that is pointed downward, as it were; this is, therefore, a negative sign, which proclaims that he is no longer among the dead. Without this sign, the resurrection of the body would be indistinguishable from the immortality of a spiritual soul; the resurrection would have to be interpreted along Gnostic lines. But together with this sign is another: the Ascension, a sign that directs our gaze upward and onward, toward that heaven to which Jesus ascended and toward the future, when he will return. This sign makes it clear that the resurrection of the body cannot be understood merely as a return to earthly life, even if this life is conceived of as being superior to one's previous life, lacking any discomfort and rich in possibilities. Rather, the life of the Resurrection is God taking possession of the flesh, its

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<sup>20</sup>Cf. A. R. Burgess, *The Ascension in Karl Barth* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2004), 24–27.

total immersion in the divine. The sign of the Ascension likewise means (in its onward-looking dimension) that the Resurrection is not an escape from history: for the Resurrection establishes the ultimate future of time, it proclaims that the life of Jesus includes within it the consummation of the centuries, and that, because of this, it is the Christian who knows the future, and does so through the memory of his Master. What, then, is the relationship between the Ascension of Jesus and the life his disciples live out in time?

#### 4. *The Ascension and the time of the Church*

Our question about the meaning of the Ascension must be understood in light of the time that it inaugurates. For an essential part of this mystery is Jesus taking his place at the right hand of the Father, which the New Testament associates with the mission of the Church. The understanding of the gospels and of patristic theology closely follows the sequence of the psalm: “Take your throne at my right hand, while I make your enemies your footstool. The scepter of your sovereign might the Lord will extend from Zion” (Ps 110:1–2). The Fathers understood this “scepter” as the unconquerable power of the missionary Church, the preaching of the word that begins in Jerusalem with the purpose of spreading the Gospel over all of the earth.<sup>21</sup>

Thus the Ascension has to do, not principally with Christ’s absence, but rather with his powerful presence among his people. The liturgical context of the Lucan narrative highlights the connection between the Ascension and the Church. In the gospel, Jesus leaves while imparting his blessing, with arms raised—a gesture that calls to mind the priestly blessing of Sirach (Sir 50:20–21). For this reason, Heinrich Schlier can say that, for Luke, Ascension and blessing coincide: the gesture with which Jesus departs is the final image that remains with the disciples; he departs *while* giving his blessing, *not* after.<sup>22</sup> We have already noted that in the Old Testament, the divine blessing brings the continuing presence of God, which is interior to that which is created, bestowing upon it fertility

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<sup>21</sup>Cf. J. Daniélou, “La session à la droite du Père,” in *Studia Evangelica*, ed. K. Aland and F. L. Cross (Berlin: T & U, 1959), 689–98.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. Schlier, “Jesu Himmelfahrt,” 229–30.

and growth. It is understandable, then, why this act grounds the existence of the Church. Luke's account is thus in accord with the conclusion of the gospel of Matthew: "I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt 28:20).<sup>23</sup>

This blessing is followed by the presence of the disciples in the Temple. Afterward they come together to pray together with Mary, who for Luke is the image of the new Zion. Here Luke again repeats the names of the Twelve, as if they were being established anew as the pillars of the Church. If their original calling flowed from the prayer of Christ (Lk 6:12–16), this calling now is united with his ascent into heaven. The Christian liturgy is born of this prayer that follows Jesus' departure. According to Daniélou, the Christian way of praying toward the East stems from Psalm 68, which explains the Ascension, and where we read, "He ascends above the heavens, unto the East" (Ps 68:34).<sup>24</sup> This exegesis of the psalm highlights the cosmic implications of the mystery of the Ascension. We will return to this point below.

Can we articulate further this relationship between Christ and the Church, to which Luke's account bears witness? The importance that Luke gives to the Temple provides a clue. Luke's gospel concludes with the disciples praising God in the sanctuary, and the beginning of Acts takes place here as well. Later, in chapters seven and eight of the Acts of the Apostles, we are told of the death of Stephen, the first martyr. Before he is killed, he directs a long speech at the Jews who are about to apprehend him. The charges against him have to do with his alleged desire to destroy the Temple and to subvert the Law. In response, Stephen offers an account of salvation history, which centers on the Sanctuary.

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<sup>23</sup>The ecclesial dimension of the Ascension likewise emerges as important, if we consider in this context the passage from Daniel concerning the Son of Man, by which Daniel represents the "holy people of the Most High" (Dan 7:27; Dan 7:18).

<sup>24</sup>Cf. Jean Daniélou, *Bible et liturgie: La théologie biblique des Sacrements et des fêtes d'après les Pères de l'Église* (Paris: Cerf, 1951). Daniélou references the *Didascalia apostolorum* II, 57, 5, which cites Psalm 68:34: "He ascends above the heavens, unto the east . . . (*ascendit super caelum caeli ad orientem*)." For its part, the east mentioned in Psalm 68:5 (*ascendit super occasum*) is seen in certain texts as the descent of the Incarnation, in which the sun of divinity is veiled. The west (*occasus*), signifying death, is the place where Christ descended.

The land that God promised to Abraham, that holy ground upon which Moses walked when he witnessed the burning bush, is worthy of being inhabited because it is where God pitched his tent. The lines of Stephen's speech tell the history of Moses and Solomon; these lines point to Jesus, whom the first martyr sees sitting at the right hand of the Father among the clouds of heaven (Acts 7:56). The charge of blasphemy takes on a particular significance when compared with the charge against Jesus in his trial before the high priest. The Master, who is likewise accused of trying to destroy the Temple, spoke of the Son of Man who was to come, seated at the right hand of the Father among the clouds of heaven (cf. Mt 26:64, Lk 22:69). Stephen and his Lord are condemned because the Jews perceive the intolerable identification between Jesus and God. They understand that to be seated at the right hand of the Father is to be equal to him. In the background is the claim that God is building a new Temple, one not made by human hands—that is, the glorified body of Jesus.<sup>25</sup> This is what Stephen beholds when he turns the gaze of contemplation on high: the One who is exalted, who sits at God's right hand, is himself the definitive "holy land." He is the consummation of God's dwelling among men, and the place of worship for Christians.

Paul's reflections allow us to deepen even further these insights outlined by Luke. Here we have in mind an important passage from the Letter to the Ephesians, which is centered on the mystery of the Ascension. Paul cites a verse from Psalm 68 (Ps 68:19), which the apostle applies to Christ's ascent to the heavens and to the subsequent gift of the Spirit to the Church. "He ascended on high and took prisoners captive; he gave gifts to men" (Eph 4:8).<sup>26</sup> The passage from the psalm is in the second person, and is applied to Yahweh: "You ascended . . . received the gifts of men . . ." Yet even in rabbinic exegesis, this Scripture passage is applied to Moses, and is read as "giving gifts" instead of "receiving gifts," having the gift of the Law to the people in mind.<sup>27</sup> The apostle, in order to make Christ the subject, and to prove the difference

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<sup>25</sup>Cf. José Granados, *Teología de los misterios de la vida de Jesús* (Salamanca: Sígueme, 2009), chapter 4.

<sup>26</sup>Cf. Schlier, "Jesu Himmelfahrt," 234–35.

<sup>27</sup>Cf. H. Schlier, *Der Brief an die Epheser. Ein Kommentar* (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1968), 192.

between him and Moses, comments that it was necessary for him to descend, before he could go up: “What does ‘he ascended’ mean except that he also descended into the lower regions of the earth?” (Eph 4:9). It seems justified to see here a reference to the Incarnation (the “lower regions” are the earth: the exegetical genitive), which corresponds to the Ascension to the heavens in order to fill believers with his gifts. These are the gifts that build up the Church, which the apostle will go on to speak about shortly (Eph 4:11–13).

While the apostle thus corroborates the accounts of Luke, at the same time he also adds an important fact: the purpose of the Ascension was so that Jesus “might fill all things” (Eph 4:10). Here Paul uses a verb that is dense in meaning, coming from the same root as the noun *pleroma*, which appears earlier in the letter (cf. Eph 1:22–23), and will appear again below (Eph 4:13: “the maturity of the fullness of Christ”). At the beginning of his letter, Paul affirms that the Church is the Body of Christ, “the fullness of the One who fills all things in every way” (Eph 1:23). Here we see a mature theology of the Church, the Body of Christ, that receives the very life of her Head, Jesus.<sup>28</sup>

However, it is important to complete the organic image of the body with the spousal image that complements it (cf. Eph 5:21–32). The Church is one with Christ, not only in terms of the unity of her members among themselves, but in terms of the one-flesh communion of Adam and Eve. Eve is the fullness of Adam, both because she becomes one flesh with him, and also as the one who is to bear his descendants, who will people the earth. Here the body appears as the dimension of relationality for human life, and therefore as that which allows the individual to go beyond the boundaries of himself: the union between man and woman that brings forth new offspring is the ultimate foundation for understanding the corporate personality of the People, which Christ raises to a new level with his Incarnation and Ascension.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 59.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Hilary of Poitiers, “Agnoscit ergo post somnum passionis suae caelestis Adam resurgente ecclesia suum os, suam carnem non iam ex limo creatam neque ex inspiratione vegetatam, sed ad crescentem ossi et in corpus ex corpore spiritu aduolante perfectam” (*Myst.* V, SC 19bis, 84); cf. L. F. Ladaria, *La cristologia de Hilario de Poitiers* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1989), 261–62. Cf. A. Sicari “Christentum aus dem Geheimnis der Himmelfahrt,” *Internationale*

Christ's fullness is thus what acts through the Church to constitute and extend her presence through the world, as his spouse. In this light, Ephesians 4:10 (the Ascension as the moment at which Christ fills all things) is the foundation for Ephesians 1:22–23 (the Church as the fullness of Christ, whom the Father has constituted as Head).<sup>30</sup> Because the Body of Christ is in God, because Christ has ascended above the heavens, even unto the very center of divine life, he can now fill all things, through his Body, the Church, including the cosmos itself.

Clearly, then, Christ's ascension into heaven does not make him remote from the world. Now the Savior enters into the depths of the divine Being, from which all the world is accessible to him. This does not mean that he dissolves into the omnipresence of a pure spirit: he retains his bodily character forever and for this reason his new manner of being present must likewise be corporeal, neither reducible to the divine omnipresence nor disconnected from space and time. Such a corporeality implies, rather, a transformation of space and time, which are now bound to the body and the time inaugurated at Easter.

Now we can understand the specific contribution of the mystery of the Ascension. As we indicated, the Resurrection, seen in light of the supreme filiation of Jesus in the flesh (Rom 1:4, Acts 13:33), is already an "entrance into" God. To possess a spiritualized body is possible only because the definitive time, the eschaton, has been inaugurated. This reality makes it difficult to imagine that anything new could happen to Jesus, be it in his appearances, or in the Ascension. Everything seems principally to be a pedagogic exercise, an adaptation to the needs of the disciples. A didactic explanation, however, is not the only possible one.

We have said that the body, which is immersed in time, is the ground for relationality in human life. The flesh of Jesus, therefore, is never his alone, but rather bears in itself a bond to all of humanity and all of creation. The absolute plenitude of his flesh, a glory that admits of no further increase, would only be accomplished when the body of Jesus, in its glory, would have assumed the body of the Church, and, in this body, the entire cosmos.

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*katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 12 (1983): 232–37; 235.

<sup>30</sup>Cf. Schlier, *An die Epheser*, 193.

With the Resurrection, Jesus Christ is fully in relation with his Father, possessing a glorified body that efficaciously communicates the divine transcendence. And yet this body has not yet filled everything with his presence; his life-giving power is not yet extended throughout the universe. This should not be attributed to any lack in Jesus, but rather to the patience he bears toward that life in the flesh still lived by his disciples, and by all of the Church. For the followers of Christ have first to be assured of the truth of Christ's Resurrection, to see that his body is not foreign to our own. They have yet to realize that this body has assumed all of creation. Therefore, the glorification of Christ's body does not automatically entail the transformation of the world.

Even after the disciples have been prepared, two things have yet to take place before the transformation of the cosmos: first, the cosmos must be conformed to the glorified body of Christ, and second, a participation in the Spirit of Jesus must be given to the cosmos. The first took place with the Ascension; the second, at Pentecost. The two mysteries remain intimately bound to one another.

The forty days thus express—as Balthasar points out—the pedagogy of the flesh of Jesus. This pedagogy fills the disciples with faith, enabling them to touch him, to see him, to listen to his voice anew. It is precisely this that constitutes them as the pillars of the faith of the Church. The Ascension is another step forward in the deepening bond of the flesh of Christ with the Church, and, through her, with the entire cosmos: “He ascended . . . that he might fill all things” (Eph 4:10). With this movement, Christ reaches into the depths of reality, precisely because he attains the height of God. It is not, then, that he was not already in God when he ascended to the heavens (his Resurrection is already his totally being in the Father), but that in the Ascension the relation that his flesh bears to the Father acquires a cosmic dimension. This means that in the Ascension Christ receives from the Father a new gift: through the flesh of Christ, God is made present in all of creation; he takes possession of it, enlightening those places still in darkness, intensifying the divine presence.

This had yet to come to pass on Easter Sunday, and therefore Jesus' presence among his disciples was characterized by different features. On the one hand, it was less profound, less embracing of the totality of existence. On the other hand, it was more manifest,

more palpable, as an anticipated presence of the end, an expression that Jesus already had the fullness of life and that his hiddenness refers to his humble love for man.

Let us address a possible objection. It is true that with the Incarnation Jesus' body was in union with the body of all human beings; to be in the flesh means to be one with his brothers and sisters, children of the same family. However, the modes in which a union can take place in the flesh vary greatly, depending upon the particularities of personal relationships. The union of mother and child is different from that between brothers, and both are different from the one-flesh union between man and woman. The union of those who are born of the same flesh is different from the union of those who must face bodily death together. In this way we can understand a new kind of unity of the body of Christ with the bodies of all men on the basis of the Ascension, with reference to the Father as final destiny of human existence. This enables us to make the following distinction. From the Incarnation onward, the body of Jesus is united to all men *in terms of its origin in the Father*, a fact that is made visible in the virginal birth from Mary. From the Ascension, he gains a new kind of union, which now has to do with a connection with the Father *as final destiny*. Christ associates to himself, to its final consummation toward God, the body of creation. This is the basis for the bond upon which the Fathers insisted between the Ascension and the Incarnation; some give this as the reason why the Feast of the Ascension was first celebrated in Bethlehem.<sup>31</sup>

Only when he has accomplished this twofold union with us, in our origin and our destiny, can Jesus send us his Spirit, who is the One who can accomplish the conformation of history to the eternity of God. The close union between the Ascension and Pentecost stems from this. Because Christ, from within the heart of God, has touched the heart of the universe, because his flesh has communicated to the cosmos a new destiny in the Father, he can now send his Spirit to the world to bestow his gifts upon men. Christ and the Church thus constitute one flesh and one Spirit (cf. Eph 4:4, regarding the union among Christians). Tertullian, calling to mind the first fruits of the Spirit, of which St. Paul speaks, and which were

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<sup>31</sup>J. G. Davies, "The Peregrinatio Egeriae and the Ascension," *Vigiliae Christianae* 8 (1954): 93–100.

granted to believers at Pentecost, speaks of the first fruits of the flesh, exalted by Christ at the Ascension: “Thus, as he left us with the first fruits of the Spirit, so did he receive from us the first fruits of the flesh . . . .”<sup>32</sup>

### *5. He offered the flesh to the Father: Ascension and sacraments*

Precisely because the body opens up the relational sphere of the person’s existence, Jesus’ bodily Ascension transforms the life of the Church, and through her, the dynamism that animates the cosmos. To say that Christ fills everything with his presence is to say that life in the body is now new, because it has been elevated in Christ. This is how St. Hilary of Poitiers interprets the Gospel image of the city set on the hill that cannot be hidden.<sup>33</sup> This city is the flesh of Jesus: just as a city contains many inhabitants, so too does he contain all of humanity in his flesh. The exaltation of the flesh of Christ implies, then, the exaltation of the Church, whose work and preaching is the light of the world. In the Church, in her action and in her history, the capacity of the flesh to reveal the divine as the end of all things is taken to new heights. This is the sacramental economy to which we now turn our attention.

A central element of faith in the Ascension is the bond between the flesh and God. This claim strikes us as odd, in that we often understand the body as an obstacle to our relation to the divine, in the manner of Socrates’ debate in the *Phaedo*. For the Bible, however, the flesh is the privileged place wherein God

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<sup>32</sup>Cf. Tertullian, *De resurrectione carnis* 51 (CCL I, 993–994): “Hic, sequester dei atque hominum appellatus ex utriusque partis deposito commisso sibi, carnis quoque depositum seruat in semetipso, arrabonem summae totius. Quemadmodum enim nobis arrabonem spiritus reliquit, ita et a nobis arrabonem carnis accepit et uexit in caelum pignus totius summae illuc quandoque redigendae. Secura estote, caro et sanguis, usurpastis et caelum et regnum dei in Christo!”

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Hilary of Poitiers, *In Matthaeum* 4,12 (SC 254, 130): “Ciuitatem carnem quam adsumpserat nuncupat, quia, ut ciuitas ex uarietate ac multitudine consistit habitantium, ita in eo per naturam suscepti corporis quaedam uniuersi generis humani congregatio continetur. Atque ita et ille ex nostra in se congregatione fit ciuitas et nos per consortium carnis suae sumus ciuitatis habitatio. Abscondi ergo iam non potest, quia in altitudine positus celsitudinis Dei admiratione operum suorum et contemplandus et intelligentus omnibus efferatur.”

manifests himself.<sup>34</sup> The resurrection of the body, the goal toward which Christian life points, confirms this aspect. The fullness of the body takes place when it is filled with the Spirit and becomes a spiritual body. This means that the flesh is not opposed to the Spirit, but is rather his companion, the fitting place within the world for his work and abode.<sup>35</sup>

This is possible because the body itself is that place where life, by becoming open to the world and to humanity, discovers within itself a relation to God the Creator.<sup>36</sup> Only in the body can

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<sup>34</sup>Cf. José Granados, *La carne si fa amore: Il corpo nella storia della salvezza* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2010), chapter I.

<sup>35</sup>As St. Paul writes, “I urge you . . . to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice” (Rom 12:1). Or again: “Glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:20). It is essential to remember these words, as the temptation to spiritualism always weighs upon the Christian conscience. The believer, who has discovered just how close God is to man, is exposed to a related danger: to attempt to escape from the concrete world in which he lives, thinking that the heights of grace are opposed to the lowliness of life in the world. And is it not in fact the case that he no longer belongs to this world? Is he not exhorted to seek out that which is above? Quite to the contrary: such a contemplation of what is above, of Christ seated at the right hand of God (Col 3:3) does not consist in a flight from the world. Christ, who descended so that he might assume all things into himself, has ascended in order to fill all things, always bearing the flesh that he took upon himself. Therefore there is no grace that can be conferred upon man that does not come to the flesh through the flesh. Moreover, the flesh remains defined, in the Ascension, by a tending toward the Father. In the body and in the history of man, space and time are opened to God, who comes to them. To attempt to seek him beyond space and time, on the margins of those concrete encounters that life offers us, is an illusion. The spiritual man, as St. Irenaeus says, is not the one who deprecates materiality in order to enter into a realm of pure spirit, but rather the one who has allowed the Spirit completely to take over his entire being, body and soul. A corollary: the Christian can find no sure refuge for his faith apart from interacting with things. If these affect the results of his historical and scientific investigations, how much less could these be cut off from life’s most important discoveries? Everything is of interest to him, because in all things Christ’s call and his response is at stake. Here lies the ground for the catholicity of the Church, for her vocation for the sake of the whole.

<sup>36</sup>Romano Guardini has written forcefully against the idea that God is absent from the world. The German theologian has put forth great efforts to demonstrate the visibility of God, who is not merely accessible to the purely interior eye of the spirit, but to the very capacity of the physical organism for sight: God allows himself to be seen, yes, in this creation, with the eyes of the flesh. For Guardini, this is the only form in which faith in God can become real in men’s lives. Cf. R.

God be made manifest. In the body God appears, not as some external object placed before our eyes for our control, nor as some remote horizon of man's desire, which could be mistaken for a mere projection or mirage. The flesh bears testimony that we are created and welcomed into existence by a love that precedes us. The transcendent can now be understood to be the spring from which all life flows, like that originating love that gives birth to us. In order to discover the mystery of love, the flesh, moreover, sets in motion a dynamism that carries man beyond himself, toward communion with the transcendent.

What is the role of the Ascension in the history of this bond between the flesh and the divine? The body of Christ, already glorified, is now bound to the rest of creation in a new way. This mystery communicates to the cosmos the state of the glorified flesh of Jesus, insofar as it places the definitive goal toward which all of creation is tending in the Father himself. A new horizon is thus opened within creation: all created being is already in heaven, because all things are now moving toward the very heart of God. On the basis of the Ascension, therefore, the body acquires a new language; the body's capacity for proclaiming God is raised to a new level. This is the language of the sacraments, in which material creation expresses a more fulfilled relation with the transcendent.

We hear frequently of the sacramental meaning of the cosmos: everything in the world is a sign of the divine presence. Certainly this view has its dangers: taken to the extreme it could lead us to forget the novelty brought by Christ.<sup>37</sup> In effect: if the entire world is a sacrament of salvation, then the work of Jesus would redundantly pave roads; it would forge a path where one already existed. Yet to speak of the sacramentality of the world is necessary, in spite of the dangers, in order to recover an understanding of the created order opened from within to the mystery of the encounter with God. Moreover, without the ability to speak of the sacramentality of the world, it would be impossible to understand the ultimate destiny that the universe acquires in Jesus, which would be rendered external to the course of things. In truth, the modern

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Guardini, *Die Sinne und die religiöse Erkenntnis: Drei Versuche* (Würzburg: Werkbund, 1958).

<sup>37</sup>Cf. G. Colombo, "Dove va la teologia sacramentaria?" *La Scuola Cattolica* 102 (1974): 673–717.

view of nature, which excludes its symbolic or sacramental character, is the opposite of the view of the universe found in the Bible and Christianity: the mechanistic body of modernity could only have been assumed by the Logos in the manner of a marionette that is manipulated by the puppeteer.

In this delicate equilibrium between the sacramentality of creation and the novelty that is encountered in Christ, corporeality discloses to us, as it were, the proper balance. As we have indicated, it is here in the body that the world (especially through the interpersonal encounter) is opened to God.<sup>38</sup> In corporeality there is, therefore, an initial transparency to mystery, an initial reception of saving grace, communicated through the experience of love. Such a presence is without doubt still quite tenuous, incapable of remaining kindled for long (it is inevitably shattered upon the rocks of death) nor with sufficient strength (it is rendered impotent by the sin of indifference or egoism).

It is Christ who, in his Incarnation, his life and death among us, granted a fullness to the language of the body, giving it a continuity beyond death, and a consistency in spite of human frailty. Now the body is made capable of manifesting the presence of God, who is revealed as the origin and destiny in this pilgrimage of history. In his Ascension, Christ associates to himself in a new way the materiality of creation, by revealing the origin of all flesh in the Father and by establishing its ultimate destiny in God. What is inaugurated is the properly sacramental form of presence in the flesh. The Ascension becomes the foundation of sacramentology, because it reconfigures the symbolic capacity of the body.<sup>39</sup> The Venerable Bede, for instance, comparing the ascension of Elijah with that of Jesus, says that the Lord left the sacraments to the Church, just as the prophet handed over his cloak to Elisha upon his own ascent.<sup>40</sup>

To insist upon the bond between the Ascension and the sacraments is to place them in the proper perspective. The sacra-

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<sup>38</sup>Granados, *La carne sifa amore*, chapter I.

<sup>39</sup>This permanently characterizes the body, as a patristic axiom says. As Antonio Orbe formulates this insight of the Fathers: *quod semel asumpsit nunquam dimisit* ("that which He once assumed, He will never abandon"); cf. A. Orbe, "Al margen del misterio: los axiomas cristológicos," in *Entorno a la encarnación* (Santiago de Compostela, 1985), 205–21.

<sup>40</sup>Cf. Bede, *Hom.* II, 15 (CCL 122, 280–89); cf. Davies, *He Ascended*, 158–159.

ments appear in this light, in the first instance, not as the action of the Church, but as the work of Christ, through which he generates the ecclesial Body. Let us recall that Ephesians 4:10, in which Jesus ascends so that he might fill all things, is the foundation of Ephesians 1:22–23, where the Church is seen as the fullness of Christ. This highlights the fact that the Church is born of the sacraments and that it is only for this reason that the sacraments are able to arise within the Church.

It is important in this sense to recall the sacrificial import of Christ's ascent into heaven.<sup>41</sup> This is already highlighted in the Letter to the Hebrews, which presents the Ascension as the culmination of Christ's offering: "we have a high priest who has passed through the heavens" (Heb 4:14), and has offered his sacrifice through the tabernacle not made by human hands (Heb 9:11), and which is the glorified flesh of Christ.<sup>42</sup> A patristic tradition has likewise connected the Ascension with sacrifice. Hippolytus says, in effect, that Jesus, as the One who ascends, carries his flesh to the Father and offers man as a gift.<sup>43</sup> Christ presents his glorified flesh to God as the first fruits of the new creation, in which all men are contained.

What is the significance of the offering that Jesus makes of his flesh to God, which Jesus makes in heaven? Augustine's explanation of sacrifice is helpful in this regard. Sacrifice does not consist in the destruction of the victim, but rather in the mutual indwelling of God and man, in the unity that is achieved in the fullness of love. Through his death on the Cross, Jesus became totally one with the love of God, in a perfect sacrifice. The disciples, too, by their union

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<sup>41</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 173.

<sup>42</sup>Cf. A. Vanhoye, "Par la tente plus grande et plus parfaite," *Biblica* 46 (1965): 1–28.

<sup>43</sup>Cf. A. Zani, *La Cristologia di Ippolito* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1983), 674–75, which cites *Contra Noeto* 4, 8–9: "For there is a flesh (in Heaven), that which the Word brought as a gift (as an offering) for the Father; it is that flesh which perfectly made the Son of God manifest, born of the Spirit and of a Virgin. It is therefore clear that He offered His very self to the Father. Before this, Heaven did not know flesh." For a consideration of this theme in other authors, cf. A. Orbe, *Introducción a la teología de los siglos II y III* (Salamanca, 1988), 913–18: "Christ ascended into Heaven so that he might make an offering to God of his own *sarx*, assumed in his Incarnation, anointed by the Spirit in the Jordan, sacrificed on Calvary, and raised as the firstborn of the dead."

with Christ as one body, participate in the unity of the Master with his Father. Thus, Augustine can conclude, “This is the sacrifice of Christians: that the many are of one body in Christ.”<sup>44</sup>

Hilary of Poitiers says that, after the forty days of appearing to the disciples, Christ experienced the same thing as he did after the forty days of fasting in the desert: he was hungry. Without a doubt it was a singular hunger: it was a hunger for the salvation of humanity, which was quenched when Jesus, ascending to the Father, made the offering of the human being to God and brought his salvation to consummation.<sup>45</sup> The sacrifice of the Ascension signifies, then, the complete communion between the flesh and God in the first fruits of the flesh of Jesus. The result of this is that it is now possible for man to receive the first fruits of the Spirit. History thus becomes a process in which the Church, the Body of Christ, becomes configured, little by little, in the Spirit to her Spouse, the Son of God. The fullness of this configuration will be completely achieved when the words of St. Irenaeus are fulfilled: “the flesh has possessed its inheritance through the Spirit; it has forsaken itself so that it might assume the quality of the Spirit; it is conformed to the Word of God.”<sup>46</sup>

On this basis we can establish a bond between the Ascension and the sacrament of the Eucharist, which is the offering of the body of the Son to the Father. Calvin already makes the connection between the two mysteries. The reformer explains that, because Christ’s body is now in heaven, it cannot be made present on the altar; however he adds that whoever receives Communion would certainly receive his strength, through the action of the Spirit.<sup>47</sup> Calvin thus powerfully highlights the pneumatological component. Yet underlying his view is a too-narrow understanding of corporeality: because Christ’s body is in heaven, it could not possibly also be on earth. We have seen, however, that the presence of Jesus in heaven (that is to say, in the realm of God) is precisely that which

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<sup>44</sup>Cf. *De civitate Dei* X, 6 (CCL 47, 279): “Hoc est sacrificium Christianorum: multi unum corpus in Christo.”

<sup>45</sup>Cf. Ladaria, *La cristología de Hilario de Poitiers*, 120–21.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. *Adv. Haer.* V, 9, 3 (SC 153, 112–14): “caro a Spiritu possessa, oblita quidem sui, qualitatem autem Spiritus assumens, conformis facta Verbo Dei”; concerning this text, cf. A. Orbe, *Espiritualidad de San Ireneo* (Rome, 1989), 286ff.

<sup>47</sup>Cf. Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 175–80.

enables him to “fill all things”; it is this that grounds the possibility of his body becoming present under the eucharistic species.

The Ascension is the mystery of presence and absence. How might it be possible to unite these two dimensions? If we affirm his bodily presence, does this not lead, as we said above, to an excessive identification with the Church? Ought we not to say that Jesus is absent in body, but present in the Spirit, in order to avoid the possibility of the Church replacing Jesus? On the contrary, it seems clear that the real, bodily presence of Christ in the Eucharist constitutes the key to this chiaroscuro of presence and absence.

We must distinguish, in effect, between that kind of presence of an object that, once placed before me, can be explored under every possible angle, and a kind of presence that invites me into itself in order to come to know it, allowing me to be enveloped in its light, and which, for this reason, can never be subjected to domination by the one who beholds it. It is this latter type of presence that corporeality makes possible. The body can never be placed before us; we see the world always from within the body, which is to say, from within that very reality that encircles us, from within a place where we have always already been received. In that presence which takes place in and through the body, we are able above all to recognize an original gift, a primary presence that has always been there, even before the very presence of the person to himself. Precisely because it is original, this presence can never be seized; this is the reason for the mystery of its closeness, as well as of the sense of absence it produces in us. In this way the body speaks the language of filiation, which reveals an original presence that precedes and surrounds us.

Moreover, bodily presence opens a space wherein the encounter between persons can take place, and also unfolds a horizon toward transcendence. Again, the presence of love, which opens up within the body, can never be set before us, as an object might be set under a spotlight, precisely because it touches us from within and defines who we are. It can only be recognized if we participate in it and journey toward the horizon that it opens. In this way the body speaks the language of nuptiality, open to fecundity.

The sacramental presence of Christ is a bodily presence and therefore includes within itself this sense of absence: it cannot be placed before our eyes; it goes before us with an original grace (the filial dimension) and invites us to journey toward a horizon that

always remains ever-farther away (the dimension of sponsality and fecundity). The body opens a filial perspective for us because it unveils the presence of the Father, which always precedes us. It unveils a nuptial horizon in which the one flesh of Christ and his Church is always an encounter in freedom, in need of maturation within time, lived out toward an ultimate promise, open toward the “ever greater,” tending toward a definitive encounter.

Consider, by way of analogy, a caress or a bodily embrace: that which the hand or arms desire to take hold of is always beyond what is touched. There is a depth to which the body opens us, and which is in fact the ultimate background of our action: communion with the beloved.<sup>48</sup> The encounter with Christ in the sacraments bears an analogous structure, that of a real presence that is revealed as an originary love and that points toward our ultimate eschatological destiny.

Without a doubt the sacraments also bear a great newness. The result of the Ascension is that the structure of bodily presence has been transformed: the origin that is indicated in the body is in the very bosom of the Father, linked to the eternal generation of the Son; the end toward which we are directed is the right hand of the Father. Thus, we encounter a new dynamism, which widens the boundaries of bodiliness, so that the body might host within itself the eternal weight of divine love. Such a transformation requires time, the time in which Spirit and Spouse cry, “Come!” The Son’s journey makes it possible for the Church to traverse the trajectory between the two coordinates of her origin and her destiny. Presence in the body thus opens up a wound, which drives us to seek out complete union, as St. John of the Cross sings: “Where have you hidden, / Beloved, and left me moaning? / You fled like the stag / after wounding me; / I went out calling you, but you were gone. . .” (Spiritual Canticle, I).

This wound does not only affect the believer, but must be reflected in Christ as well, given his closeness to humanity in his body. The time after the Ascension, the concealment of his face,

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<sup>48</sup>In this respect, it is interesting how Lévinas studies the connection between the body that is loved and transcendence, through a phenomenology of the caress. The body offers a presence that summons one beyond it, which cannot be grasped at because it is the opening to mystery. Cf. E. Lévinas, *Le temps et l’autre* (Paris: Quadrige / PUF, 2001), 82–83.

ensures that Jesus is not cut off from our sufferings, which the Master constantly unites with his glorified wounds.<sup>49</sup> We can accompany him, therefore, during the mysteries of his life in the flesh and make ourselves his contemporaries. A patristic text from Justin Martyr highlights this aspect:

For when the rulers of heaven saw him of uncomely and dishonored appearance, and inglorious, not recognizing him, they inquired, “Who is this King of glory?” And the Holy Spirit, either from the person of his Father, or from his own person, answers them, “The Lord of hosts, he is this King of glory.” For every one will confess that not one of those who presided over the gates of the temple at Jerusalem would venture to say concerning Solomon, though he was so glorious a king, or concerning the ark of testimony, “Who is this King of glory?” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 36, 5–6)

The sufferings of persecuted Christians made a great impression on Justin. For this reason he saw Christ ascend, not under the aspect of the glory of King Solomon, but rather under the appearance of the disfigurement of his wounds and his death. This is why the angels do not recognize him, and ask, “Who is this King of glory?” The mystery of the Ascension safeguards the link between the flesh of Jesus and the Church, which guarantees that the Master continues to share in our sufferings. It is as if all of history were gathered up into the wounds of Christ, which the Resurrected One safeguards, ascending with them into heaven.<sup>50</sup>

Let us take a brief look back upon our principal conclusions. With the Ascension, something new follows the events of Easter: the glorified flesh of Jesus associates the body of the Church to himself, and, through this body, the entire cosmos. A new mode of living out corporeality appears in the world, which is therefore a mode proper to the Resurrected One. If in his Incarnation Jesus binds the origin of history to his own origin in the Father, now he unites his definitive return to the Father with history’s movement toward God. It is like a course correction that drives the centuries toward a new goal. Everything is therefore prepared for Pentecost, that moment

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<sup>49</sup>Cf. Burgess, *The Ascension in Karl Barth*, 97.

<sup>50</sup>Cf. J. Granados, *Los misterios de la vida de Cristo en Justino Mártir* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 2005), 479–81.

when the Spirit will be poured out over the Church. It is the role of the Spirit to guide the Church throughout history, conforming her course to the origin Christ established when he descended and to the goal that he set in his return to the Father. Throughout this process, Christ is present corporeally through the sacraments, which extend the capacities of the body to be a dwelling place for God. His flesh creates the space wherein an encounter can take place in freedom, in which the Christian can recognize his true origin and journey toward his ultimate destiny: from the Father, to the Father.  
—*Translated by William Hamant.* □

**JOSE GRANADOS, DCJM**, is vice-president of the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family at the Lateran University in Rome.