

**Homily for June 1, 2003  
Ascension of the Lord**

**By Father Charles Bowes**

**Acts 1:1-11  
Ephesians 1:17-23  
Mark 16:15-20**

## *We acknowledge Jesus as Lord and go forth to live in his name.*

He had been with them for 40 days. They had been very glad to see him again, but something had changed. There are no reports of miracles worked by him during that time – those 40 days. Nothing at all, except the way in which he appeared suddenly through ceilings and floors, unopened windows and locked doors.

He spoke to them, that's true. But when he spoke to them, he only spoke about *them*. He told them that he was giving them power. The power to forgive one another. The power to cast out evil. The power to handle snakes with their bare hands, animals that had always been the symbol of sin. He told them that they would drink the deadly poison of this corrupt world without harm. He told them that he would send them his Holy Spirit.

As for the rest, no news. Nothing happened until the 40th day, when they met on a mountaintop. It seems to have started with their question, a question that had been burning on their lips and in their minds for such a long time: "Lord, has the time come? When are you going to restore this world?"

The more they insisted, the more distant he became. Then, from above, he said, "Let us not discuss times and dates. Let us not discuss when it all will be finalized. Let us discuss how you will receive the Spirit. How you will have to go out proclaiming the Good News from here till the end of the earth, baptizing those who believe, casting out devils, picking up snakes, using your gift of tongues, laying your hands on the sick. Start moving. You, not me."

You and I are so empowered by the Lord Jesus – empowered by the Lord's spirit, nourished by the Lord's glorified flesh and blood. It is for that reason that we can say with Saint Paul in his letter to the Philippians chapter 2, "At the name of Jesus, every knee shall bend, in the heavens, on the earth, and under the earth – and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father: Jesus Christ is Lord."

Because we Catholic Christians believe that Jesus is Lord, we pay special reverence to those things we use in our church tradition which represent Jesus Christ to us. It is for this reason that, when we enter or leave the church, we Catholics pay special reverence to the altar, or the tabernacle if the tabernacle is located in the sanctuary and not in a separate chapel. The gesture we make in our church, because the tabernacle is located in the sanctuary, is to genuflect when we enter

or leave the building. Most folks do that before they enter their pew, upon their arrival or their departure. If the tabernacle is not in the sanctuary in a church you visit, the appropriate gesture of reverence is to bow toward the altar – a profound bow – toward the altar which represents Christ. The tabernacle, of course, contains the consecrated bread kept between Masses to be taken to those who are dying or sick, and also retained for private devotion apart from Mass. The glorified flesh and blood of Jesus, the Christ under the form of bread, is thereby always present in Catholic churches – but present for a purpose: to be consumed as nourishment for the journey to the kingdom, or to be adored as the Lord ever present in our midst.

Genuflecting toward the tabernacle and bowing toward the altar are physical gestures which remind us that our religion is incarnational – and enfleshment – that since Christ became “like us in all things but sin,” all aspects of our humanity are to be involved in praising God. Let our bodily gestures used during prayer continually remind us that human beings worship God, not merely through words and thoughts, but with their entire bodies as well – once again bringing home Saint Augustine’s great statement that the liturgy, our public prayer, makes the play actor into the true believer. We go through the motions of devotion to become truly devout.

A few weeks ago I spoke of bowing the head when we come forth to receive Holy Communion as a common sign of reverence for us all. This week we’re reflecting on the gesture of genuflection upon entering and leaving the church here, since the Blessed Sacrament is reserved in the tabernacle. We also genuflect toward the cross between the solemn

veneration on Good Friday and the beginning of the Easter Vigil. The priest celebrant genuflects during Mass at the narrative of institution in the Eucharistic Prayer after he has shown the consecrated host to the assembly, as well as after showing the chalice, and then he also genuflects after the exchange of peace, just before he shows both the consecrated bread and wine to the assembly when he invites them to come to communion.

I realize that, as we age, it’s not always possible for everyone to genuflect upon entering or leaving the church – especially those of us encumbered by arthritis. In such cases, it is appropriate to make a profound bow toward the tabernacle – you keep in mind the purpose: that we worship God not merely through words and thoughts but with our bodies as well.

So, in an effort to reflect on this gesture, I’ll invite you to stand and either to genuflect or bow toward the tabernacle together with me. Please be seated as I ask you this question: What was it like for you to make such a reverence? Here are some responses others have made in other settings:

“I just never before thought about such a gesture, since it is so foreign to anything I ever do.” Another response: “It reminds me of when I go down on one knee to tie the shoe of my youngest child.” Another response: “I guess I feel humbled by it – and that’s not a feeling I like to feel.” And another response: “It’s the first time I’ve ever reflected on doing this sort of thing in church – it makes it clearer in my mind.”

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