CATECHETICAL SUNDAY 2018

Witnesses for Christ

A Catechesis on the Icon of the Ascension of the Lord

In John 20:21, Jesus says to the disciples in the Upper Room after His resurrection, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you." In other words, Jesus was sent by the Father to redeem the world through His life, death and resurrection. Now as He was about to return to His heavenly Father through His ascension into glory, He sends forth His disciples to be missionaries, to be apostles (Gk. apostolos, "one who is sent") so that they might make disciples of all nations (cf. Matthew 28:18-20).

The icon of *The Ascension of the Lord* reveals the mystery of our Lord's ascent into heaven forty days after his resurrection (cf. Luke 24:36-53; Acts 2:1-12) and the divine commissioning of the whole Church to spread the Gospel to all peoples in the power of the Holy Spirit to form through word and sacrament a true *Church of the Nations*.

Christ Enthroned as High Priest and King

In the upper register of the icon we see Christ enthroned in glory. His garments are the color white, signifying the radiance of His glory and divine light. Yet while being fully God, He is also fully human, and as our Great and Royal High Priest, He enters the throne room of His Heavenly Kingdom and Temple to rule and to make intercession for us in His mercy. He sits enthroned on a rainbow (cf. Revelation 4:2-3), with the clouds as His footstool, enveloped within a *mandorla* – an almond shaped object that reveals a great mystery that can only be seen and fully understood through the eyes of faith. His left hand contains the scroll, since He is the Word of God sent by the Father (cf. John 1:1-18) and the Prophet and Lawgiver who is greater than Moses (cf. Deuteronomy 18:15-19; John 1:17). His right hand is raised in blessing and commanding authority, since He has

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been glorified as both King and Priest (cf. Hebrews 4:14-16). The principle icons of the Byzantine iconostasis follow the same pattern of the left hand (Gospel Book) and right hand (Blessing) of Jesus. Christ is flanked by two angels on His throne supporting His throne and facing towards Him, since He is the King of all Creation – visible and invisible. His figure is one of both ascending to His heavenly Father and returning in glory, as He promised at the end of the age (cf. Acts 1:11).

Virgin Mary, Ark of the New Covenant and Mother of the Church

The Virgin Mary is in the center of the lower register of the icon, directly below that of Christ, her Son in glory. She is dressed in a red inner tunic (signifying that she is full of grace) and a blue outer tunic (signifying that she as the Birthgiver of God – *Theotokos* – is more spacious than the heavens). Three stars are seen on her – one on her forehead and the other two on her shoulder, signifying that she is a Virgin before, during and after the birth of Christ Her Son. She is facing us and her hands are raised in the *orans* position, showing that she prays continuously for the Church, her spiritual offspring as members of the Mystical Body of her Son (cf. Revelation 12:1-17). She too is flanked by two angels, reminiscent of the two angels who were atop the Ark of the Old Covenant containing the Ten Commandments, the Jar of Manna, and the Blossoming Rod of Aaron the High Priest. Her womb contained through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit Jesus who is the Word of God, the Bread of Life and the Great High Priest. Jesus the High Priest has entered the Holy of Holies in heavenly glory to make atonement and intercession for His Church and the Virgin Mary is the Ark of the New Covenant which was, in its Old Testament form, in the Holy of Holies. The two angels are facing in an outward direction since they are speaking to the apostles telling them that Christ who is entering glory is to return in glory in the same way.

The Commissioned Apostles on the Mount of Olives

On either side of the Virgin Mary are the Twelve Apostles – those whom Jesus is commissioning to go out into all the nations to make disciples. On the left side we have Simon Peter directly across from the Virgin Mary and on the other side we have Paul the Apostle. Although St. Paul was not there for this event since he was still Saul the Pharisee and persecutor of the Church, nevertheless the traditional iconography of this event places him there by faith, since as both a believer and an apostle, he is present with the whole Church in this mystery and witnessed the appearance of the Resurrected Lord on the Road to Damascus. The apostles have their hands raised to shade their eyes

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from the glorious revelation in the skies of the Son of God ascending in glory to the right hand of the Father. Jesus tells them to wait in Jerusalem where they will receive the power of the Most High through the overshadowing of the Holy Spirit in nine days so that they might be empowered to be His witnesses to the ends of the earth. He also promises to be with them until the end of the age. This icon represents a microcosm of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church founded by Jesus to live a common life of apostolic faith, worship and mission.

Conclusion

Like the Virgin Mary and the apostles, we should pray in hope for the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the Church so that we might be strengthened in our common life and witness to the world for Jesus Christ as His faithful missionary disciples. May we entrust ourselves to the intercession of both the Virgin Mary, the Queen of Apostles, and the Twelve Apostles, to fulfill our calling to serve as those who are sent to bring the good news of the Gospel to the world!

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