



IN THE ASCENSION EVENT, JESUS COMES FULL CIRCLE. UNBAPTIZED PERSON BECOMING A BISHOP

“Why do you stand here looking up at the skies?” With this question, the two men dressed in white (Acts) enunciated the significance of Jesus’ ascension and the consequences thereof for those to whom Jesus entrusted the continuance of his mission. With the ascension of Jesus, the multi-faceted mystery of the Christ-event has come full circle. Jesus, who was sent to humankind from his rightful place at God’s right hand in glory . . . Jesus, who emptied himself in order to fill us with grace and goodness... Jesus, who became incarnate, in flesh and blood, in time and space... Jesus, who ministered among us, who suffered and died for us... Jesus, who rose from the dead as the conqueror of sin and death... Jesus is now returning to the glory that was his from all eternity. With the mystery of our salvation have come full circle, it may seem like the end of the story. However, and as today’s feast reminds us, it is the beginning of a new chapter in the story of our salvation.

How a Catechumen became a Bishop

Today the Pope is the one who selects every bishop. He is usually given three names by the Papal Ambassador to the country which needs a new bishop. But it was not always this way as the following story shows.

In 374, the bishop of Milan, Italy died, and people gathered to choose his successor. (In those days, bishops were chosen by the local laity and clergy.) It was a disquieting time in Milan. The Church was bitterly divided between Nicene Christians (who believed in the divinity of Christ) and the Arians (who taught that Jesus was only human). Hot tempers raised the specter of violence and bloodshed.

Ambrose—who in 370 had left the practice of law to become the governor of the Western Empire—arrived on the scene and addressed the crowd, calling for order and peace. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, a voice was heard, chanting: “Ambrose for bishop!” This chant was taken up by the people. Ambrose was horrified. At the time he was a catechumen, not yet baptized. Still, the people insisted, and in short order he was baptized, ordained and made bishop of Milan.

Rising to the task

There were not then (and, it would seem, still are not) wise courses on “How to Be a Bishop.” but Ambrose was a quick learner. He listened to credible teachers and steeped himself in the Scriptures and in the writings of early Christian teachers, such as Origen, Basil, Athanasius and others. Even though Ambrose is now a Doctor of the Church, he is less remembered for his writings than for the striking model he offered of a truly pastoral bishop ministering generously to all, and especially to the poor.

His was no easy task; his career as bishop was a stormy one. He had troubles with the Arians, whose request for a church building in Milan he had to refuse. He had trouble with the Roman Emperor Theodosius, who, in reprisal for the death of the governor of Thessalonica, had ordered the merciless massacre of thousands of men, women and children in that city. Ambrose ordered the emperor to do public penance—and the emperor obeyed. Ambrose told Theodosius: “The emperor is in the Church, not above it.”

A legacy of peace and wisdom

In 476, less than a century after Ambrose’s death, the Roman Empire fell into the hands of invaders from the north. In his day, Ambrose had already seen signs of decline, as violence and lawlessness crept through the empire. The only defense against the increasing chaos was the army, for there were no police or courts of law to defend human rights and work for peace.

In this critical context, it is quite understandable that Ambrose became one of the architects of the just war theory that was destined to become the classic Catholic attitude toward war for centuries. Only in our day—times were very different from Ambrose’s—has this approach to war been widely questioned.

His wisdom and deep learning helped prepare St. Augustine—that intellectual giant of the Western Church—to accept Christian faith. This may well be Ambrose’s most enduring gift to the Church.

Who Am I?

I was born 1,400 years before the World Wide Web became a household word, but it’s been suggested that I could be the patron saint of Internet users. That’s because I wrote so many books, including an encyclopedia and a history of the world. I was a human database!

Born in Spain in the middle of the sixth century, I was taught by my older brother, who went on to become the archbishop of Seville, he was tough on me, but I loved learning. I followed in his footsteps and, at the start of the seventh century, was named archbishop of Seville myself.

My goal as a bishop was to focus on holiness, charity and humility rather than authority. I lived during a time of conflict and growth in the Church in Spain. The Visigoths had invaded 150 years earlier and established their own capital. Although they were Christian, they followed the heresy of Arianism, which denied the divinity of Christ. But I was able to convert many of them.

With the help of a least some of my writings, Spain became a center of culture and learning. The encyclopedia I wrote served as a textbook for nine centuries and covered topics ranging from grammar to medicine to mathematics to history. (No wonder I was called the schoolmaster of the Middle Ages!)

But my writings also focused on the spiritual, and I took great interest in guiding my flock. I was convinced that a broadly educated clergy was key: men prepared in the liberal arts, medicine, language and law as well as philosophy and theology. I presided over two important Church councils that dealt with core beliefs of the faith—the Trinity and the Incarnation. I also contributed to the Mozarabic Rite, still used today in parts of Spain.

Throughout my life and my 36 years as a bishop, the poor held a very special place in my heart. As death drew near, I gave away all my possessions and publicly asked for forgiveness from anyone I had ever injured or offended. Weak and unable to walk, I was carried into the cathedral. Ashes were placed on my forehead, and I publicly confessed my faults, after receiving Communion I was taken back to my room where I died several days later. The year was 636.

I was canonized in 1598 and declared a Doctor of the Church a little over a century later.

Who am I? Turn to page 4 of the bulletin for the answer.

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Reflection Questions

- Is God calling me to some new responsibility in the church or in society at this time?
- What struck you most about the “Who Am I?” Person? What can we learn from his life?

Church History - a Fascinating Story

The history of Catholicism is a fascinating read. Recently, I purchased a book called: *People of God-The History of Catholic Christianity* by Anthony Gilles. Thus far, I have only read bits and pieces of it. It is a great read. Its twenty-one chapters give one a good sense of the great struggles that the church has gone through since its birth 2,000 year ago. I was ready to make the book one of ‘Eamon’s Book Club’ when I found out that it was out of print. But, I am sure one could get a copy of the book through the internet.

“He descended into hell”

The Apostles Creed states that Jesus “descended into hell”. What does this mean? The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has a helpful commentary on this question. It says:

Scripture calls the abode of the dead, to which the dead Christ went down, “hell”- Sheol in Hebrew or Hades in Greek - because those who are there are deprived of the vision of God. Such is the case for all the dead, whether evil or righteous, while they await the redeemer: which does not mean that their lot is identical, as Jesus shows through the parable of the poor man Lazarus who was received into “Abraham’s bosom”. It is precisely these holy souls, who awaited their Savior in Abraham’s bosom, who Christ the Lord delivered when he descended into hell.” Jesus did not descend into hell to deliver the damned, nor to destroy the hell of damnation, but to free the just who had gone before him. (CCC 633)

So the phrase “descended into hell” means that Jesus really, died and rested among the dead for some time.

In addition, Jesus in his spirit went to preach the good news to all who had died prior to his resurrection (1 Peter 3:18-19). Commenting on this strange verse in Peter’s letter, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (634) states:

“The gospel was preached even to the dead.” the descent into hell brings the Gospel message of salvation to complete fulfillment. This is the last phase of Jesus’ messianic mission, a phase which is condensed in time but vast in its real significance: the spread of Christ’s redemptive work to all men of all times and all places, for all who are saved have been made sharers in the redemption.

Have a blessed week.

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