I know that many people still mourn the movement of the celebration of the Ascension from Thursday to Sunday in many of the dioceses of the United States, including ours. And I certainly understand why. According to our reading from Acts, the risen Jesus appeared to his disciples for forty days and then ascended into heaven. The fortieth day would have been on a Thursday. This year it would have been this past Thursday. And I can see why people would want to celebrate the Ascension on that day. The trouble is that the majority of Catholics didn’t seem to feel that it was important enough to show up to celebrate it on a Thursday. This is why the bishops moved the celebration of the Ascension to Sunday, when they knew a larger number of people would be present. They did this because the Ascension is just too important not to celebrate.

So why is the Ascension significant enough to go through all the trouble of changing the day of its celebration? Well, for one thing, it marks the completion of Jesus’ earthly ministry and his being taken up to heaven. In and of itself, this should be cause for a grand celebration for all those who love Jesus. And when we add to this that Jesus ascended in order to prepare a place for us in his Father’s house, this makes it even more of a cause for celebration.

But there is even more to the Ascension than this. It was at the time of his ascension that Jesus gave the great commission that defines what we are to be about as his followers. In the gospel Jesus says it this way -- “go make disciples of all nations.” And in the reading from Acts he says, “You shall be my witness in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Both accounts agree that Jesus has entrusted to those who believe in him the monumental task of spreading throughout the world the good news he came to proclaim -- the good news about the love God has for us and the love we are to have for one another.

Now we might ask, “If this work is so important, then why didn’t the risen Jesus stick around to help us?” That’s a good question. Thankfully, in the readings we have heard recently from the Gospel of John and the Book of Acts, Jesus has given us the answer. And the answer is this: he had to get out of the way if the Holy Spirit was to be unleashed and provide the divine assistance necessary for carrying out the work he has given us to do.

But why was this necessary? Simply because in his human body, Jesus could not be everywhere at once. But the Holy Spirit, not being bound by the confines of a human body could. So the Holy Spirit was the right person of the Holy Trinity to guide and assist with the mission to spread the good news everywhere.

But there is something else about the Ascension that makes even more sense to me, though it doesn’t have much to do with Trinitarian theology. That is, that as long as Jesus had a physical presence among his followers, they would keep looking to him to do something for them, when it was now time for them to do something for him.

Why do I say this? Well, think about the reading we heard from Acts. After giving instructions to his disciples for forty days, instructions that would prepare them for their mission, the disciples gathered around Jesus on the day of the Ascension and asked, “Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?” “Are you going to . . .” they asked. Of course, we can understand why they asked this. They were used to him doing the really important stuff.
So as long as he was around they would always be asking, “Are you going to do this?” “Are you going to do that?”

I have to say that I understand how this goes very well. In most parishes, often when it is agreed that some important mission should be taken up, someone will say to the priest, deacon, or other church professional, “So what are you going to do about that?” And while there are certainly times when this makes sense and is the best way to go, this is not the case when it comes to doing the main work that has been entrusted to us by Jesus – that is, to be his witnesses – to make known to people everywhere how it is that we can come to life in the kingdom of God. I mean, compared to the number of people in the world, the number of church professionals is pretty small. There is no way we can reach out to everyone. So, simply put, the coverage is a lot better when everyone is involved.

But it’s not just as a matter of coverage. It is also a matter of effectiveness. The simple truth is that the witness of full-time church professionals doesn’t have nearly the impact on people outside the church as does the witness of those who aren’t being paid to promote the church’s agenda.

It’s like this. Being that we are in the Easter season and it’s the week of a big golf tournament in Columbus, I found myself remembering what happened at a golf tournament awhile back – something that had a profound impact on me. It was way back in 1993. Bernhard Langer had just won the Master’s Golf Tournament. And it happened to be Easter Sunday. Of course, he was asked to comment on this monumental accomplishment. And the first words out of his mouth were that it was so special to him because it happened on the day that his Lord Jesus Christ had risen from the dead.

Now at the time I played golf quite often. And I have to tell you that this simple witness from a man who had just won one of the most important golf tournaments in the world had a far greater impact on me than anything I had heard in church that day from those who spoke of the resurrection because it was their job to do it.

In other words, the person you have lunch with at work doesn’t care nearly as much about what a priest says about the difference Christ makes in one’s life as she does about what you have to say about what a difference Christ has made in your life. Your golfing buddies probably don’t care too much about what some theologian has to say about the Ascension. But one of them may want to know why you feel it’s so important that you are going to go to church to celebrate it instead heading out to the golf course with him that morning. Your classmates at school may not care what the Pope has to say about God’s mercy and love, but they may want to know how experiencing God’s mercy and love has changed you.

Now I know that many people feel that they don’t have a lot to offer when it comes to being a witness for Christ. But I was given a word about this a couple mornings ago when I was waking from sleep. This never happens to me and the words were as plain as day, so I have to believe that they are intended for someone. Now I realize these words may sound a bit strange when you first hear them, but bear with me. These are the words that came to me: “Everyone needs a good bunt story.”

“Is he nuts?” you may be thinking. But please bear with me. This is what the words mean to me. In the game of baseball, everybody likes to talk about hits and home runs. And they definitely are exciting. Laying down a bunt, on the other hand – not so much. But there are
times when laying down a bunt is the key to winning a ball game. Like, it’s the bottom of the last inning, the game is tied. There’s a runner on second and no outs. And you’re up to bat. Now if you get a hit, he runner may score and you will be the hero. But the coach gives you the signal to bunt because you’re not the best hitter in the world and he knows that the team has a better chance of winning if you bunt than if you were to swing. So that’s what you do. You lay down a decent bunt and get the runner over to third. The next person up hits a fly ball and the runner on third tags up and scores. And while you didn’t drive the winning run home, your bunt made it a lot easier for someone else to do it.

What this says to me is that sometimes there are little things we can do to help prepare a person to come to faith, whether it be a smile, an encouraging word, the promise to pray for someone, or sharing with a friend something that’s going on at church that you’re excited about. And while it may only be a bunt, that may be just what is needed to get the runner to the place where he or she can be brought home. Everyone does need a good bunt story. We need to remind ourselves that even the little things we do as witnesses for Christ can lead to something great.

Fr. Rod Damico
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