



# Encourage One Another

*The Ascension of Christ by Giotto, c. 14th century*

**T**HE FEAST OF THE ASCENSION of Jesus Christ into Heaven, celebrated 40 days after Easter, is a Feast of redemption and of victory; it calls us to our true homeland, that is, Heaven, where Christ awaits us. Our Lord “...Who is One in Being with the Father,” obtains for us a place in Heaven, by virtue of His human nature, for He said: “I will go to prepare a place for you.”

How wonderful it is that while we were made here on Earth, we are made for Heaven! But in order to reach our true homeland, we must live a deeply spiritual life which makes us strangers and sojourners in this world.

Embarking upon this spiritual journey to Paradise puts us on a very rough and narrow road. Quite unlike the only other road there is—the one that leads to perdition. However, we can’t successfully complete this journey on our own. For we all too easily lose hope when things get tough. We therefore need help.

The Good God knows this and provides everything that we need, including a particular help which is often underestimated in importance. That help is encouragement, and particularly encouragement in the midst of

affliction and trials. For encouragement is a key revitalizer of the virtue of Hope, which is the virtue that spurs us onward and upward to love of God. And if we don’t hope sufficiently, we will never reach the heights of spiritual perfection. So encouragement is far more necessary in the interior life than we usually think it is. It is like wind under our wings that raises us ever higher into the spiritual heights. Its ultimate source

is the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete. The spirit of discouragement, on the other hand, comes from the evil one.

What are some of the forms encouragement takes? God may directly encourage us through prayer and with what can be called touches to our soul, which

take many different forms: either pleasant, insensible, or painful, but all most beneficial.

He may do so through the Sacraments, which are sensible signs, established by Jesus Christ, by which invisible grace and inward sanctification are communicated to our souls.

He may also do so through miracles or apparitions, such as those at Fatima.

And, as a holy monk, Dom Mary Paul, observed:

“For encouragement is a key revitalizer of the virtue of Hope, which is the virtue that spurs us onward and upward to love of God.”

“God gave us Scripture for our encouragement”. Indeed, Peter Kreeft calls Holy Scripture a “Love Letter from Heaven.”

Encouragement also comes from the awe-inspiring witness of saints, who are given to us as exemplars to imitate. They are also encouragers, showing that we, too, can follow them to the heights of mystical union with Christ. They inspire us by their exemplary lives of heroic virtue, through their mystical experiences and miracles, in their mystical writings, and through their prayers for us.

Note that while only certain saints exhibit spectacular mystical gifts, like the stigmata, these gifts are given in order to manifest the extraordinary interior gifts given to all committed followers of Christ. For example, the extraordinary experiences of St. John of the Cross, St. Theresa of Avila and St. Padre Pio all resonate to some degree with our own experience of the interior life even if we haven't ourselves experienced such extraordinary manifestations of grace. Thus saints are hope-giving encouragers of perfection!

We are also enabled by the Holy Spirit to share our encouragement with others in need through intercessory prayer, through true friendship, by living exemplary lives of virtue, with charitable acts and works of mercy. Indeed, we are obligated to encourage one another, because we are indeed our brothers' keepers.

So let us do all things with charity, building others up and never tearing them down. One of our mottos in the spiritual life should be, “Do no harm.” St. Jean

Marie Vianney once said, “All I want is a little friendliness.” A smile or kind word could be just what is needed to rekindle hope in a suffering soul on the verge of despair.

To be sure, as the spiritual life is challenging, encouragement is regularly needed. Yet today the world is in

such a state of ferment, fear, and confusion that special encouragement is needed by

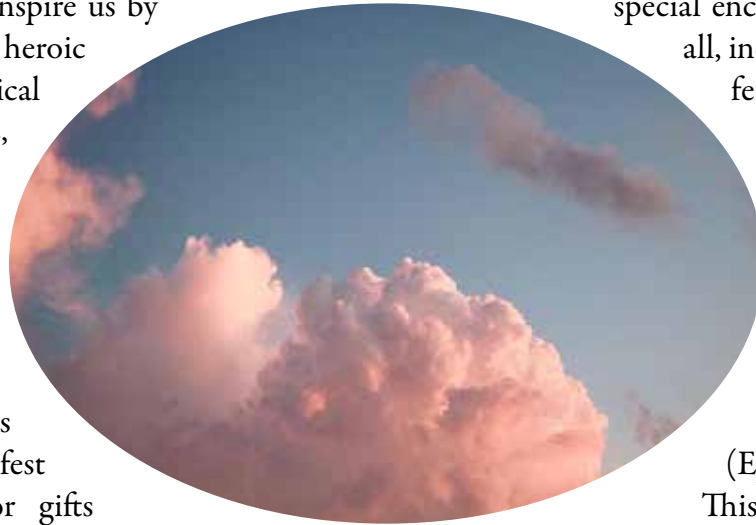
all, including those seeking perfect union with God. It is necessary to remind ourselves that “our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against . . . the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Eph 6:12).

This reality emphasizes all the more the necessity of encouragement.

For not only do we face the world's hostility; we are also caught in the midst of a raging spiritual war which won't end for us until the end of our lives. Encouragement revitalizes our hope and gives us the strength to put on our spiritual armor, trust completely in God's Providence, re-

main steadfast (Eph 6:10-18) and fight the good fight.

So let us strive to cooperate with God's grace in encouraging each other, enkindling each other's hope into full flame, so that during our sojourn on earth ... the Lord shall renew [our] strength, [so that we] shall mount up with wings like eagles... (Isa 40:31) and so ascend to our true home in Heaven, with humble thanksgiving and perfect joy. ✠



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# When Virtue Becomes a Vice

One of the abiding ironies of the life and ministry of Jesus is that He had His worst problems with good people. That is a strange thing. We, in the Church, and many others regard Him as the Best person who ever lived. We may suppose then that He would have been on good terms with good people and bad terms with bad people. But that was not the case. It seemed to be just the reverse. He clashed with respectable people and had friendly dealings with moral outcasts.

A good example of this is found in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 7:36-50) when Jesus is invited as a dinner guest in Simon the Pharisee's home.

While the meal was in progress an uninvited woman came into the room. This wasn't unusual; it was common for people, not invited, to sit along the walls and listen to the conversation. But this woman's behavior was a bit unusual. She stood behind Jesus, weeping, her tears fell on His feet, then she wiped them with her hair, kissed them, and rubbed them with a special oil. Simon observed all this with scornful eyes. The woman was known in the town to be "a sinner"—i.e. a prostitute. Simon said nothing but his silence spoke volumes. He felt nothing but contempt for the whole episode.

Jesus knew this and He refused to let it go unchallenged. He told a story of a money-lender who had two debtors. One owed him ten times as much as the other and neither was able to pay what they owed, so he cancelled both debts. Then Jesus asked Simon, "which of the two would be most grateful?" Simon answered: the one who was

forgiven the greater debt.

The point of the story seems too plain to miss. Jesus made the application of the story. He reminded Simon of his own half-hearted hospitality and contrasted it with the woman's. Jesus could see this and refused to let it pass. He met the issue head on. And before the party ended, that same familiar pattern evolved. Jesus had befriended an out



and out sinner and had openly alienated one of the town's most respected citizens.

We must ask ourselves what all this means. Did Jesus place some kind of premium on sin? Did He favor vice over

virtue? To Jesus were the loose morals of a prostitute more acceptable than the disciplined morals of a Pharisee? That was NOT the case. Jesus loved every sinner but hated sin for what it does to people. If He was talking to you and me today, He would encourage us to virtuous living and to avoid those vices that warp character and wreck relationships, but He would also remind us that virtue itself can become Vice.

Jesus had no quarrel with the Pharisee and his determination to live a clean life. That was commendable. The problem was that many had crossed that "invisible" line where virtue ceases to be virtue and becomes vice.

One symptom of this was they thought they were better than other people. Such was the case with Simon. He invited Jesus to his home and then was barely cordial to Him. He provided no water for His feet and gave Him no kiss of greeting (Both

were common courtesies; gestures of friendship like our handshake).

As for the woman, Simon regarded her as little more than trash. He was appalled that Jesus would touch such a person. He knew what sort of woman she was. To him, she was not a real person with real needs, she was beneath him. He was righteous and she was not. Though we need to try to lead good, clean, respectable lives, we need to be careful the moment we start thinking ourselves to be better than others, we have crossed the invisible line where virtue becomes a vice.

The major difference between Simon and the woman is she not only knew she was a great sinner but felt it deep down in her soul. Simon was a sinner too, and knew it in a technical way, but did not really feel it. The little story Jesus told of the two

debtors could be misunderstood. It seemed to suggest that the woman was a greater sinner than Simon by a ten to one ratio. That was not the meaning at all. It had two points: One, both debtors owed more than they could pay. Two, that the woman was ten times more aware of this than Simon was. She felt the need to be forgiven while Simon did not.

We have hurt people in our lives that we could not find any longer. We've hurt people in ways we are not even aware. The only thing we can do is confess our sins to God and then allow the miracle of forgiveness to do its healing work in our hearts.

To live good, clean, respectable lives is the right thing to do. But we need to be careful—if we ever stop feeling the need for God's forgiveness, then we have crossed the invisible line where virtue becomes a vice. ✠