

What does the Ascension of Jesus mean for us? To help answer that question, I want to go to a concept I learned long ago. Like many kids, I was fascinated by dinosaurs as a young boy. I read all the books, knew all their names. I even had a pretty good grasp on the process of fossilization – a part of every dinosaur book that wasn't super exciting, but by repetition made its way into my brain. It's that process of fossilization that's central to my Ascension Day homily, so I'll remind those who may have forgotten what it is.

When life-forms, such as dinosaurs, die they occasionally are quickly covered in the sediment of a riverbed or the ocean as their soft tissues start to decay. The hard parts, bones, teeth, shells, remain buried in the earth. And if the conditions are just right, over the course of many years, millions of years, the hard parts are gradually altered as the original matter is slowly replaced by minerals from the earth. The original shape of the skeleton remains because the exchange is so

gradual, but eventually the organic matter is completely replaced by rock. (Hold onto that thought for a moment).

In our Gospel we hear Jesus giving the Apostles the Great Commission just before His Ascension. But today I want to note the Eleven's reaction to seeing the risen Christ. "When they saw him, they worshipped, but they doubted." This might seem strange, if we assume that after the resurrection of Jesus the Apostles received instantaneous and perfect faith. But as these words show, this wasn't the case. Even while looking at the risen Jesus there were doubts! Faith and questions can co-exist in us. Holiness usually takes time.

That's where fossilization comes in. Like fossilization, the course of the human person in the Christian faith is also a gradual process – a process of transformation. But there's this crucial difference. Our lives are supposed to follow the exact opposite course of fossilization.

What do I mean? The Catholic conception of the universe is hierarchical. Creation has different levels. At the bottom there's

inanimate matter, then natural life, plants, animals, then human beings, a mixture of animal and spirit, and finally, angels – pure spirit.

With fossilization, organic material over the course of a long, long time, becomes (you might say descends) into inanimate rock. It changes while retaining its old shape. But for us human beings, the proper course of a life, while also a gradual process of change that retains some of the former reality, is an ascension up the hierarchical scale. We are meant to experience a transition from purely organic life to the deification of the person, the slow filling up of each of us with the very life of God. As the divine grace that God gives us with our acts of charity, the sacraments, prayer, slowly transforms the fallen humanity in us, we are changed. The fully formed Christian goes from being merely biologically alive --- to being divinely, alive. This is heaven.

This possibility of deification is connected to the Ascension. The theme of this Holy Day is to remind us that we are all meant to follow where Jesus has gone, and become transformed into what and who

Jesus is – so filled with God that our humanity is translucent to the grace within us. We become marvelous “anti-fossils,” fit, not for the dirt, but for heaven. Do not be discouraged by the slowness of our individual journeys to heavenly life – or the doubts that nag us sometimes. Don’t give up. Heaven is our destiny. This may not happen all at once, but with faith and resolution the heavenly life is possible.

To inform and aid every person in this process of human reverse fossilization, our sanctification, is why the Catholic Church exists. It’s why we’re called to contribute to her mission. I’ll finish by returning to last week’s Annual Catholic Appeal witness talk. Please help the larger Church continue to aid God’s work of sanctifying people into the divine life of heaven. That’s the purpose of the Appeal, although it’s sometimes lost behind all the numbers and verbiage.

We’re in hard times. My own immediate family has experienced job loss due to the coronavirus. I’m sure some of yours have too. It’s not an easy time to donate to the Archdiocese of Seattle. The

Archbishop knows that. The Chancery has basically committed to a 10% reduction in its own budget by promising that 10% of all donations to the Annual Appeal this year will go to a fund to help out parishes that are in financial crisis at this time. But the work of the larger Church needs to go on. In these strange times the Archdiocese has been hard at work coordinating services to the sick and vulnerable. It has also been coordinating responses to the coronavirus within the parishes, ensuring that we Catholics work and stay together in the crisis.

I say this by way of requesting that, if you are able (some of us have been spared the worse of the financial blows), please pledge to the Appeal this year. In fact, if you are able, pledge enough to cover for those who can't at this time. I know that I will increase my pledge this year out of gratitude for all that God has done for me, and in me. Thank you for your generosity in these times of doubt and uncertainty.