CHAPTER 17

Paschal Joy Continued

Exploring Leo the Great’s Theology of Christ’s Ascension into Heaven

Joris Geldhof

1 Point of Departure: One Famous Sentence from Homilia 74

The starting point for the present reflections is that one renowned sentence from Saint Leo the Great’s fascinating homily nr. 74, the second one on the Ascension in the corpus which has come down to us. Saint Leo most probably held it on the Feast of Ascension on 17 May 445 in Rome. In Latin, the sentence reads as follows: Quod itaque Redemptoris nostri conspicuum fuit, in sacramenta transivit.1 The English translation – I will further use the one published in The Fathers of the Church series of The Catholic University of America Press – is: “What was to be seen of our Redeemer has passed over into the Sacraments.”2

There is little doubt that this sentence is among the most famous of this well-known fifth-century pope, who was the bishop of Rome when the council of Chalcedon gathered. His sermons certainly deserve to be studied more closely,3 not only by patrologists, but also by liturgical scholars and systematic theologians. The present article attempts to fill that gap and to contribute to interdisciplinary reflections about the valuable and eminently theological


heritage of this peculiar Latin church father, who continues a line of development which began with Saint Ambrose and Saint Augustine.

According to the detailed investigations of Bernard Green, who delivered an encompassing chronological commentary and systematic interpretation of Saint Leo’s homilies, the two sermons on the Ascension are to be situated at the end of Leo’s development in the first and formative period of his papacy (441–445). The first of these sermons Leo added to his already existing and circulating collection of sermons in the spring of 444 and he did likewise with the second Ascension sermon one year later.

It is striking that they are the only two Ascension sermons in the whole corpus. This leaves one with the impression that, for Leo, this solemnity may not have been as important as other feasts of the paschal cycle as one knows it in today’s Roman rite. At the time of Saint Leo, the Feast of the Ascension was indeed of comparatively recent vintage. However, it had already acquired a stable position in the calendar as a major feast between Easter and Pentecost and was celebrated forty days after the former and ten days before the latter.

This observation needs to be nuanced, however, since Leo himself said that “[t]he days […] between the Resurrection of the Lord and his Ascension, did not pass by in useless flow. They provided the opportunity to confirm great mysteries, to reveal great secrets.” That means that the forty days between the Feast of the Resurrection and the Ascension are replete with dense mysteriousity and, maybe, that that density is concentrated or elevated, or that it in one way or another culminates, in the Feast of Christ’s Ascension into heaven. That is quite something: much more than a footnote to Easter or a merely contingent historical development. Easter itself is stretched over a longer period of time.

It is interesting to take a closer look at the way in which Leo expresses himself in the sentence quoted above. As a matter of fact, the proposed English translation can be questioned because of its use of the word “secret.” Contemporary French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy quite rightly says about the Christian sense of mystery:

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4 Many scholars agree that there is a considerable influence of, above all, Augustine, on Saint Leo. See Green, *The Soteriology of Leo the Great* (see note 3), 186.

5 Green, *The Soteriology of Leo the Great* (see note 3), 173; 186.


7 Leo, *Hom. 73.2* (*FOTC* 93, 323).