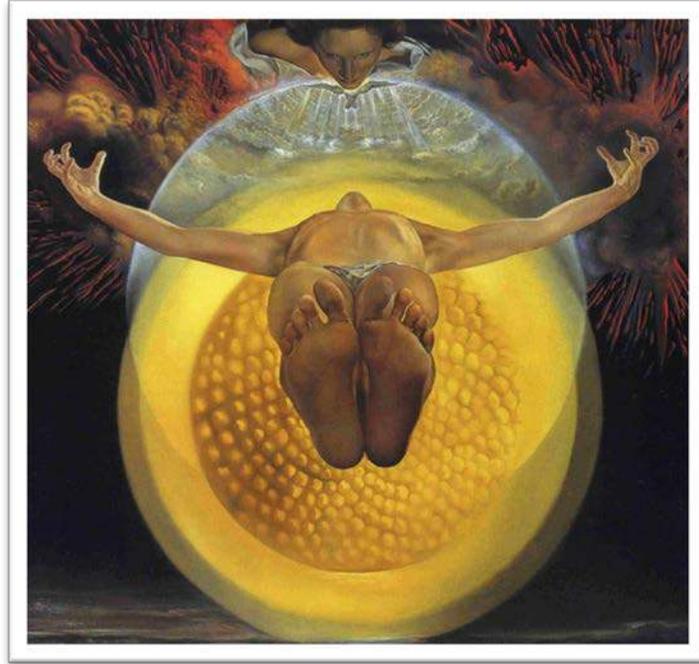

GANZ #32 – A VERY PRIVATE CONSOLATION



Salvador (Domènech) Dali (1904-1989),¹ “The Ascension of Christ” (1958).

¹ See: <http://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.001.0001/oao-9781884446054-e-7000021196?rskey=oiIMOM&result=2>. **Salvador Dali** - “Spanish Catalan painter, draughtsman, illustrator, sculptor, writer and film maker. One of the most prolific artists of the 20th century, his fantastic imagery and flamboyant personality also made him one of the best known. His most significant artistic contribution, however, was through his association with Surrealism.” In regards to this particular painting, see <https://www.dalipaintings.com/the-ascension-of-christ.jsp> - “Dali said that his inspiration for **The Ascension of Christ** came from a ‘cosmic dream’ that he had in 1950, some eight years before the painting was completed. In the dream, which was in vivid color, he saw the nucleus of an atom, which we see in the background of the painting; Dali later realized that this nucleus was the true representation of the unifying spirit of Christ. The feet of Christ point out at the viewer, drawing the eye inwards along his body to the center of the atom behind him. The atom has the same interior structure as the head of a sunflower. As with most of Dali’s other paintings of Christ, his face is not visible. Above the Christ is Gaia, her eyes wet with tears. The figure of the Christ, from his feet in the foreground to his outstretched arms, forms a triangle. Dali had used the same geometry for his Lapis-lazuli Corpuscular Assumption. He used a triangular structure first in the 1951 painting Christ of St. John of the Cross. The inspiration for this form came from a drawing by Spanish mystic St. John of the Cross, where Christ is depicted as if seen from above.”

Dear Peregrinus (12 Noon, Friday):

My goodness it has been some weeks since last we communicated - it was before Lent began on February 14th. My time was taken up with writing the Lenten *Meditations* each week, which I hope that you read. They are some of my best work.

We both have been fully deployed, which is our practice of *kenōsis* – the daily emptying of our lives of what does not matter, making room for God *within* us (a grace that God effects), so that He may be more nimbly *through* us for His purposes. I think that my mom is the one who taught me this long before I recognized how (and why) she was doing so.

87.70 κενόω^b: [*ken-AH-oh*, the Greek verb meaning] to completely remove or eliminate elements of high status or rank by eliminating all privileges or prerogatives associated with such status or rank—‘to empty oneself, to divest oneself of position.’ ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσε ‘he emptied himself’ Php 2:7.²

Donald Senior, C.P. is the New Testament scholar whom I credit with opening the New Testament to me. I read a book of his in 1979 while teaching at Bellarmine Prep in Tacoma, WA. It was called *Jesus: a Gospel Portrait* (1975).³ Concerning the biblical word *kenōsis*,⁴ he writes:

There is a strong consensus among most recent interpreters, however, that kenōsis here does not mean that Christ stripped himself of his divine attributes in becoming human, but that “emptying” refers to the manner of self-transcending love that led Christ, not to claim his rightful lordship, but to take on a human existence marked by humility and servanthood, ultimately expressed in his death for others. Paul uses the hymn in part to urge the Philippians to take on the same self-transcending and mutually loving attitude (Philippians

² Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, [*Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*](#) (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 739.

³ This was the book through which I was introduced to Christ as the One spoken about in the New Testament, as He who was revealed in the Gospels. I had from my youth associated Christ with God, whose holy Presence I was conscious of feeling regularly as a boy, and about whom I heard spoken at my parish church – St. Augustine in Spokane, WA. But it was because of this book that I gained my first entry into knowledge of the New Testament as meant for me personally to understand, rather than a source from which the Church got its information, and then told me, well or badly, about Christ.

⁴ The Greek adjective *kenos* specifies a person who is “empty”, given over to vanity, whose ground is habitually unstable because of his (the adjective form here is masculine), of his taste for “empty” things. In the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*: “The literal sense occurs in Mk. 12:3; Lk. 1:53; 20:10–11. In Lk. 1:53 (cf. 1 Sam. 2:7–8) we have the thought of the great reversal when the rich go away empty (cf. Mt. 5:3ff.)” The Greek noun formed from this adjective is *kenōsis* means a person having been stripped clean of “vain, empty” things or concerns, or a person who deliberately chooses to set aside “vain, empty” things or concerns.

2:1–5). For some modern spiritual writers, *kenōsis* has been used as a term to refer to the process of self-transcendence called for in authentic conversion of heart.⁵

As I think of things “emptied out”, I cannot help but notice things “filling up”. Do you see how much of significance is packed into this coming Sunday, May 13?

Sunday will be the seventh and concluding Sunday of Eastertide.⁶ Sunday is also the anniversary of the day in 1373 when the profound visions – or “showings” – given to Julian of Norwich (c. 1342-1416),⁷ from 8-13 May 1373, concluded. And this Sunday is Mother’s Day.

⁵ Michael Downey, *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 584, under the entry “Kenosis” written by Donald Senior, C.P (born 1 January 1940). That “C.P.” after his last name refers to the Religious Order to which he belongs, and in which he gave his life for the past sixty years. He is a member of the “Passionists” (Latin: *Congregatio Passionis Iesu Christi*), founded by St. Paul of the Cross (1694-1775).

⁶ “**Eastertide**” (aka “the Easter season,” or “Paschaltide”) begins each year on Easter Sunday and concludes fifty days later on the Solemnity feast of **Pentecost** (which name means “fiftieth day”; Greek *pentēkostos heméra*). So, Pentecost each year should land on the Monday after this 7th Sunday of Easter – seven times seven weeks plus one day = fifty days. When I was a boy the feast of the **Ascension** of Jesus was observed on “Ascension Thursday,” just before Pentecost Sunday three days later, and set aside for Catholics as a “holy day of obligation” (meaning that all Catholics needed to get themselves to Mass). But the Catholic Church in the USA almost universally observes today the Solemnity of the Ascension of Jesus on the 7th Sunday of Easter. And so it removes the Solemnity of Pentecost to the following Sunday (which is actually the 56th day after Easter). More important than getting the numbers of days just right is the desire that all Catholics show up at church for both of these Solemnity feasts: the Ascension of Jesus and Pentecost.

⁷ See at <http://juliancentre.org/about/about-julian-of-norwich.html> – “**Julian of Norwich** (1342-c.1416) is known to us almost only through her book, *The Revelations of Divine Love*, which is widely acknowledged as one of the great classics of the spiritual life. She is thought to have been the first woman to write a book in English which has survived.” Of all of the theologians, from all periods, that I have read over the course of my life, I would still insist that Julian of Norwich is the most profound of any of them. **Thomas Merton** called Julian “one of the most wonderful of all Christian voices,” and agrees with many others that she is the greatest of the English theologians, and with **Pelagius** (360-420 CE, born in Roman Britain; died in Palestine) who is, I would argue, the second most significant English theologian as to his impact on Christian theology and Christian misunderstanding (!) even to today.

Did you notice the spelling of Mother's Day?⁸ It is not meant to be a day that honors *all* mothers as a group,⁹ which would be spelled *Mothers'* Day (notice the placement of the apostrophe after the final "s"). Rather, it is a day set aside for each of us to honor *our own* mother, spelled *Mother's* Day. I sure miss being able to talk with my mom, Peregrinus.

But I want to mention to you yet another significance we find packed into this coming Sunday, whose date each year is set by the Liturgical Calendar.

*The Christian liturgical calendar is the result of centuries of development. Based upon a combination of the Jewish Lunar calendar, which sets dates according to the cycles of the Moon, and the more generally employed Solar calendar, the Christian calendar arranges feasts and seasons of the year according to two types of cycle.*¹⁰

It is the solemnity-level feast¹¹ of the **Ascension of Christ**, and it is about this that I wanted to share with you one insight that is mattering to me.¹²

⁸ See this explanation published in 2011 at <https://www.history.com/topics/holidays/mothers-day>. "The origins of Mother's Day as celebrated in the United States date back to the 19th century. In the years before the Civil War, **Ann Reeves Jarvis** of West Virginia helped start Mothers' Day Work Clubs to teach local women how to properly care for their children. These clubs later became a unifying force in a region of the country still divided over the Civil War. In 1868 Jarvis organized Mothers' Friendship Day, at which mothers gathered with former Union and Confederate soldiers to promote reconciliation. Another precursor to Mother's Day came from the abolitionist and suffragette **Julia Ward Howe** (1819-1910, she was the one who wrote the poem, "the Battle Hymn of the Republic"). In 1870 Howe wrote the "Mother's Day Proclamation," a call to action that asked mothers to unite in promoting world peace. In 1873 Howe campaigned for a "Mother's Peace Day" to be celebrated every June 2."

⁹ The same website explains: "The official Mother's Day holiday arose in the 1900s as a result of the efforts of **Anna Jarvis, daughter of Ann Reeves Jarvis**. Following her mother's 1905 death, Anna Jarvis conceived of Mother's Day as a way of honoring the sacrifices mothers made for their children. After gaining financial backing from a Philadelphia department store owner named John Wanamaker, in May 1908 she organized the first official Mother's Day celebration at a Methodist church in Grafton, West Virginia. That same day also saw thousands of people attend a Mother's Day event at one of Wanamaker's retail stores in Philadelphia. Following the success of her first Mother's Day, Jarvis - who remained unmarried and childless her whole life - resolved to see her holiday added to the national calendar. Arguing that American holidays were biased toward male achievements, she started a massive letter writing campaign to newspapers and prominent politicians urging the adoption of a special day honoring motherhood."

¹⁰ Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane, [*The New Dictionary of Theology*](#) (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 148.

¹¹ In the Catholic Church we have three "degrees" of feast day, here listed in order from the most important to the less important: Solemnity feasts, Feasts, and Memorial feasts.

¹² The English verb "**to ascend**" has its source in the third conjugation Latin verb *ascendere*, literally meaning "to climb towards." It originally contained the idea of going up *gradually*. I am intrigued by the idea that our Christian feast of the Ascension of Jesus be understood as the *concluding moment* of the "forty days-long" process happening from the moment Jesus was brought forth from His grave until He judged it "time" (*kairos*) for Him finally to be completely gone to His Father in Heaven. What if the "ascension" of Jesus describes an arc of

Even as a boy (and all the way up to today), I recognized that the Ascension lacked the “juice” of other feast days, that it failed to command the attention of Christians in the way, say, Christmas and Easter did. Never once have I heard someone exclaim, “I *love* the Ascension. It’s my favorite feast day of all!”¹³ Why is this the case?

My assumption is that we have never really thought about the Ascension, looking deeper into it than what we conclude about it as a transition: Jesus is *here* ... now Jesus is *not here* – He went *there*. What is of “solemnity-significance” about that? Over the years I looked for understanding. Then one day (in the last couple of years) I got my “clue,” when it occurred to me to ask about it in the following way.

I found myself wondering which “moment” of the Paschal Mystery¹⁴ meant the most to the risen Christ. Which of the five “moments” of the great Mystery meant the most to Him, I wondered, but Him considering it all from His present perspective at the right hand of the Father?¹⁵ I wanted to ask Him, and so I did.

Was it His *passion* (I could not imagine that it could be that!), or his *death* (it could be this – the profound relief of being done with intense suffering!), or his *resurrection* (maybe, but this meant a return to “work” among His disciples), or his *ascension* (I’m liking this), or his *taking His seat* at the “right hand of the Father” (finally His mission done and Him able to abide in His divine life ... but now as a God-Man constitutive of the Trinitarian life)?

I “saw” that it had to be that the Ascension was His favorite! The Ascension was, and only *could* be, an intensely personal grace meant for Jesus alone, a grace that only He could feel. *The God-Man was going home:*

Time – **of eternity functioning inside of Time** – but which concludes – at the feast of the Ascension - whatever it was that Jesus was *doing* with His disciples ... and perhaps with so many others during those forty days? What if each day of that “forty days” was the resurrected Christ *in the process of returning to* His Father?

¹³ Yet, the Liturgical Calendar still designates the Ascension as a highest-level feast: a *solemnity*, of the same level of significance as Christmas and Easter.

¹⁴ The *New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality* notes this about the fullest meaning of the term “Paschal Mystery” – “The term *paschal mystery* is best understood in connection with the entire gamut of salvation history. Humankind and the cosmos have been redeemed, and the mystery (the “secret”) of this divine plan of salvation was revealed and brought to fulfillment in Christ, our Pasch. Christ is the revelation of God’s mystery, and in and through him it is finally and fully made manifest (Empereur, p. 745).” However, in normal usage the “paschal mystery” refers to Jesus’ Passion, Death, Burial, Descent among the Dead, Resurrection, Ascension, and Sitting at the Right Hand of the Father.

¹⁵ Jesus’ perspective – Jesus pondering all of this after the fact of those intense days in and around Jerusalem, and from His place of victory in Heaven – as the God-Man in glory would necessarily open in Him a profoundly different understanding about the Paschal Mystery, than His grasp of all of this during His earthly life when, famously, He predicted three times to His disciples His passion, death, and resurrection.

John 13: 2-3 - So, during supper,^{b 3} fully aware that the Father had put everything into his power and that he had come from God and was returning to God,^{c 4} he rose...¹⁶

Only someone far from home, and for long, knows what it feels like finally to be able to return home. Only someone who has given himself completely to a Great Work, sent to accomplish it, knows the intensity of his desire to share the Story with those back home who sent him. Only someone who *knows* that those back home *are* waiting for him to return, who knows that they will recognize him (even though He looks so different now, bearing scars, surprisingly mirthful, and with wiser eyes), and that they will be able to share with him a common joy – “We did it! It is accomplished. *Consummatum est!*”¹⁷

Luke 15: 22-24 - ²² But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³ And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴ for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’ And they began to celebrate. ¹⁸

I think, Peregrinus, that the reason we Christians have not considered the Ascension a feast of major significance is that it is the one moment in the Paschal Mystery that is not *for* us, or *about* us, or to some advantage *to* us (as far as we can figure).¹⁹ It is about a **very private consolation** that Jesus alone experiences.²⁰

Most paintings of the Ascension place Jesus in the midst of his disciples, and usually always with Mary, His Mother, placed there among them. So, we conclude, the Ascension is about Jesus ... and everyone else there. It is not. Salvador Dali (see the painting at the head of this Letter) paints Jesus as *the only one* able to experience the specific grace that was His Ascension, and so Dali leaves out the crowd.

^b 6:71; 17:12; Mt 26:20–21; Mk 14:17–18; Lk 22:3.

^c 3:35.

¹⁶ [*New American Bible*](#), Revised Edition. (Washington, DC: The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2011), Jn 13:2–4.

¹⁷ The Latin *consummatum est*: “it is accomplished/finished”. See John 19:30.

¹⁸ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Lk 15:22–24.

¹⁹ Jesus did clearly say, in John’s Gospel, that unless he left them the Holy Spirit would not be sent “to explain all that I have told you.” Obviously, the Ascension is about Jesus leaving them. But I don’t think that future gift of the Spirit was anywhere in Jesus’ mind at this moment, or in the mind of the disciples who watched Him depart. Jesus was going home, and He felt all that this meant to Him, vividly, intensely, and with surpassing joy.

²⁰ By contrast, we sense that His disciples felt sad, disconsolate, because Jesus was “leaving them orphans”.

The incomparable joy of the Ascension can only be experienced by us when the risen Christ Himself gives us *to feel it with Him* – to experience His (not our) sense of accomplishment, of completion, of something won for His Father who sent Him, of a self utterly given in love, and of the surpassing joy surging up in Him at knowing that they are waiting for Him *there*. The long ache is now over; He is going home.

Luke 15: ²⁰ *So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him.*²¹

I have much more to explore in all of this, old friend. So let me know your thoughts, OK? It would sure be a fine thing if you and I could arrange to meet up somewhere this summer. We have much to talk about.

I am your old friend and fellow pilgrim who remembers you in Christ,

Rick, SJ

FOOTNOTES -

²¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#) (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), Lk 15:20.