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The Ascension of Christ and Permanent Ecclesiogenesis: A Contribution to Pneumatological and Eschatological Ecclesiology

Abstract: What is the Ascension? Is it merely a narrative of a post-paschal community? In what spatio-temporal reality has it been fulfilled? How should we understand its placement in time: forty days after the Resurrection, and ten days prior to the Descent of the Holy Spirit? The Ascension should be analyzed integrally in connection with the mystery of death and the Resurrection. This paper presents an attempt at deepening New Testament ecclesiogenesis while also moving away from the narrowed understanding that the Church emerged solely as a result of the words, deeds and person of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, it is a reference to the five stages of the Church's emergence as an event of the entire Holy Trinity in the still-unfinished history of salvation. On the other hand, it is a presentation of the Ascension, typically ignored, which is usually reduced to the event of the Resurrection of the glorious Lord. Analysis of the Ascension – performed in the light of ecclesiogenesis – leads to uncovering the pneumatological and eschatological components, which are most interesting in reference to the multi-dimensional establishment of the Church and its mission.

Keywords: Ascension, ecclesiology, pneumatology, ecclesiogenesis, eschatology

1. Substantive Intent

This paper is aimed at enhancing New Testament ecclesiogenesis as based on an analysis of the event of the Ascension of Christ. It appears that the Ascension constitutes one of the least explored ecclesiogenic acts of the Divine Master of Nazareth. Nevertheless, as it should be clearly stated in the beginning, Christ Ascension shall be discussed in the context of the entirety of His paschal mystery, it shall not be treated in isolation from the mystery of His death, Resurrection,

and the descent of the Holy Spirit.¹ In the presented scope of interest, the primary objective of the article is to isolate the pneumatological and eschatological dimensions in ecclesiology.

What is the course of the analyses that follow? First, the biblical foundations of the event of Jesus's Ascension into Heaven are recalled. Subsequently, the stages of the Church's establishment are recounted, and an attempt to define it is made. The penultimate and ultimate stages (out of the five stages that shall be listed below) of the establishment of the ecclesial *communio* are inscribed with the pneumatological and eschatological dimensions. At the end, conclusions are presented which are used to elicit a deeper understanding of the emergence of divine-human community, the process which has not yet been finalized. The Church must be seen as a reality that is constantly being shaped and that is unfinished.²

2. The Scripture on Ascension

New Testament writings explicitly refer to Christ's Ascension in at least four places (Mark, Luke, Acts, Ephesians). The first time we can find this event is in the Gospel of Mark: "After the Lord Jesus had spoken to them, he was taken up into heaven and he sat at the right hand of God" (Mk 16:19, New International Version). A similarly short statement can be found in the last chapter of the Gospel of Luke: "When he had led them out to the vicinity of Bethany, he lifted up his hands and blessed them. While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven" (Luke 24:50–51). He also penned a slightly longer account of this fact in the Acts of the Apostles: "After he said this, he was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as he was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. 'Men of Galilee,' they said, 'why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into

¹ There is ample literature on paschal subjects. It is well worth to explore the arguments of, among others, H.U. von Balthasar, J. Buxakowski, W. Hryniewicz, W. Kasper, T.D. Łukaszuk, J. Ratzinger, Ch. Schönborn, B. Sesboüé.

² Cf. A. Napiórkowski, *Od Arki Jahwe*, 65–93.

heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven” (Acts 1:9–11). After His Ascension, the exalted Lord resided with His disciples for several weeks in a different “modality,” only to enter a different spatio-temporal dimension by His own power on the Mount of Olives and disappear from their earthly sight. “Then the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the hill called the Mount of Olives, a Sabbath day’s walk from the city” (Acts 1:12). We can also find an account of the Ascension in the writings of Paul of Tarsus. He observed the following: “He who descended is the very one who ascended higher than all the heavens, in order to fill the whole universe” (Eph 4:10).³

Most exegetes are of the opinion that the Ascension took place at the moment of the Resurrection. Joachim Gnilka wrote that Luke introduced “an artificial number of forty days (Acts 1:3).”⁴ This is why the Bible scholar from Głubczyce interpreted the Ascension as a correction of the parousia. The Catholic scholar argued that expecting a coming end, combined with an escape from the world – which was to be visually expressed by the scene on the Mount of Olives – was revised in Jesus’s admonishing words: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?” (Acts 1:11). The image of the Ascension is a counterpoint of a parousia that should not be currently expected. The promise given to the lonely Apostles that was soon to come, was not the parousia of the Resurrected, but the Descent of the Holy Spirit. The author of the Acts of the Apostles, by presenting Jesus’s Ascension in combination with the Resurrection, wanted to state that paschal epiphanies had come to an end. And the gift of the Holy Spirit was their finalization.⁵

As argued by Gisbert Greshake, not only do the Resurrection and Ascension happen simultaneously, but the moment of death as well. According to Luke 23:43, the “exaltation” of Jesus takes place “today.” We should adopt a “temporal” unity of Jesus’s death, His Resurrection and Ascension. The Spirit of resurrection corresponds to this boundless obedience of the Son as a “reverse gift” of the Father.

³ Cf. H.J. De Jonge, “The Chronology of the Ascension”, 151–171.

⁴ J. Gnilka, *Teologia Nowego Testamentu*, 273.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 272–274.

Through this, the relationship – which continuously takes place between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, when the human life of Jesus ended in its space and time – gained a new “modality.” From that moment on, Christ started to fulfil His filiality not in the space of the world and the conditions of creation and sinfulness, but in “the glory of the Father.”⁶

Similarly, Gerhard Lohfink stated that we should not see the Ascension in Luke 24:50–53 and in Acts 1:9 as a historically palpable event, but instead as an unforgotten illustration of the Christological understanding of Jesus’s Ascension.⁷ The same train of thought was followed by Austrian Bible scholars like F. Kogler, R. Effer-Wenzel and M. Ernst, although they referenced Paul’s letters (cf. 1 Thess 1:10; Rom 8:34; 1 Cor 15:47–49). The Apostle of Nations did not know the term “Ascension.” As the wait for the second coming of the Lord extended, the Resurrection and the parousia, as the coming of Christ for the Final Judgement, became separate. As a result of this process, His Ascension is “introduced.”⁸ As a consequence, accounts of Christophanies are to the christian communities a literary expression of the revelation of the Resurrected who descended from Heaven. According to these arguments, the meeting at the Mount of Olives was the last such appearance of the resurrected Jesus, wherein every previous visitation by Him had been a descent from Heaven, as the actual Ascension had already taken place, at the same time as the Resurrection.

The proponents of this interpretation, which has been gaining increasingly wider acceptance, make also a reference the words of Jesus, dying on the cross, to the Penitent Thief: “Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Furthermore, it is a fact that the Resurrected appeared suddenly in multiple places: He revealed Himself to Mary Magdalene near the grave, several times to the Apostles and maidens, He went through the walls of the Cenacle, travelled to Emmaus with two disciples, for whom he broke bread at an inn or ate broiled fish with disciples who were fishing in the

⁶ Cf. G. Greshake, *Trójjedyny*, 316–317.

⁷ See G. Lohfink, *Die Himmelfahrt Jesu*.

⁸ Cf. *Nowy Leksykon Biblijny*, 790.

Sea of Galilee. The nature of these Christophanies can be considered proof of His return from the eschatic aeon into earthly reality, instead of some wandering or residence within an intermediary aeon or in separation from trinitarian relations. Despite the double work of Luke (Luke 24:50; Acts 1:9ff) – which mentions a visible Ascension – it produces an appearance of some intermediate state, in which Jesus neither returned to His old life, nor did He ascend to His ultimate worship.⁹

Insofar as the view presented above has already gained widespread recognition, it also has its detractors. Those who negate the simultaneity of the Resurrection and the Ascension reference writings of the New Testament that reveal a clear awareness that the Ascension was fundamentally something different than the Resurrection and that the two were separated by a period of 40 days. One proof of this can be found in Jesus's words to Mary Magdalene: "Do not hold on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father" (Jn 20:17).¹⁰

What conclusions can be drawn from these rather laconic accounts by inspired New Testament authors? Any attempt at understanding these descriptions should account for the Semitic specificity of the literary genre used by Biblical authors when describing post-resurrection Christophanies.¹¹ It is difficult to clearly define the literary genre of Ascension accounts. Certainly, the Ascension of the Lord should not be interpreted literally. Terms like *rose*, *ascended*, and *disappeared in the clouds* should be understood as biblical metaphor that indicates He transitioned into a reality outside of earthly time and space. Similarly, the term *rose* is a symbolic expression, and should be understood as the Resurrected entering closeness with the Father in the Holy Spirit, attaining the condition of a love of the human body. This is indicated by the "cloud," a biblical sign of Divine presence. Christ disappeared from the eyes of His disciples,

⁹ Cf. J.M. Nützel, "Himmelfahrt Christi", 122; cf. A. Kelly, *Upward: Faith, Church, and the Ascension of Christ*.

¹⁰ Cf. M. Kowalczyk, "Wniebowstąpienie", 5–21; cf. W. Kasper, *Jezus Chrystus*, 146–162.

¹¹ We have substantial Polish-language Bibliography on literary genres: cf. M. Bernacki, M. Pawlus, *Słownik gatunków literackich*, 95–143; see J.S. Synowiec, *Gatunki literackie*; T. Jelonek, *Wprowadzenie do lektury Biblii*.

entering the transcendental “world” of the invisible God. The Son of Man returned to the glory of His Father. He introduced a human corporeality, transfigured in the Spirit, into this heavenly sanctuary. Thus, we should link the Ascension not only with an indication of attaining a new state of corporeality by humans, but also with the mystery of the entire Holy Trinity.¹²

Therefore, we should not lose sight of the dimension of Ascension as a deed of God the Father who, through this act, provided an answer to a previous *kenosis* of His beloved Son. The absolute consent to the degrading and humbling death of the Son of God on the cross found its culmination. The belittling descent to the bottom of human existence by God incarnate was revealed and paradoxically illuminated in His elevation to Divine heights and His recognition as the Lord in the glory of the Heavenly Father. In His love-borne answer, God the Father gave Him a place at His right hand, above all superiority, might, power, and lordship (cf. Eph 1:20). By entering the Heavens, the Son of God returned to a state that preceded the descent, yet in a different state, with a deified human nature.¹³

We should remember that this event is a mystery of the faith. This intentional placement of the Ascension between the Resurrection and the Descent of the Holy Spirit requires that we perceive them integrally, i.e., in the light of the entire paschal event. Furthermore, this is the beloved corporeality of Christ, and as such the Ascension should be tied with the mystery of the Incarnation, which is at the center of Christian belief. Therefore, the Ascension to Heaven by the Resurrected is a culmination of the entirety of His messianic message, as He had come to earth – enacting the will of the Heavenly Father – to perform the deed of redeeming humanity and the world.

3. Pneumatological Consequences of the Ascension in Ecclesiogenesis

The emergence of the Church is a long-term process in which all the Divine Persons take part. The Church was created by the will of

¹² Cf. M. Botner, “A Sanctuary in the Heavens”, 310–334.

¹³ Cf. T. Dola, “Wniebowstąpienie”, 818.

God the Father and was established and initiated by the Son of God, but it manifests itself to the world and exists in it by the Holy Spirit, and by sanctifying itself, the Church sanctifies also its surroundings.

Let us place the Ascension under a separate analysis in relation to the Descent of the Holy Spirit. We shall do so by referencing the penultimate stage of the emergence of the Church of the Triune God. An integral view of the event of the Ascension, which – looking from the perspective of human perception – took place after the Resurrection but before the Descent of the Holy Spirit, ensures and guarantees the correctness of its interpretation. We do not lose sight of the statement that Jesus did not establish the Church directly and personally. Catholic theology has clearly departed from this stance in the post-conciliar period. The Church was not created in a single, specific moment. Its creation can be called a long-term process that began ages ago and which shall continue up to its ultimate fulfilment. The latest biblical and patristic achievements do not allow us to ignore Old Testament ecclesioGenesis (the timeless idea of God the Father and the continuation of the chosen people as Israel).¹⁴

Which stage of the Church's establishment is discussed here? The magisterium of the Church teaches us of five stages of the emergence of this Divine-human community.¹⁵ These stages include: 1. The timeless idea of God the Father, which flows from His desire to constitute a community that is a better version of the community of creation, and which, by the sin of disobedience, was destroyed by the first humans. The causes of the emergence of the Church should be sought in the ageless and loving will of God, who wanted humans to achieve redemption not individually, but as a community; 2. The calling and gathering of the people of Israel in the Old Covenant;

¹⁴ See A. Napiórkowski, "Reinterpretacja integralnego powstawania i rozwoju Kościoła", 21–36.

¹⁵ An outline of this teaching is in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The first stage of the Church's establishment was an intent born in the heart of God the Father (cf. CCC 759) and which had been expressed in various signs since the beginning of the world (cf. CCC 760); the stages that followed were: preparation during the period of the Old Testament (cf. CCC 761–762), its establishment by Jesus Christ (cf. CCC 763–766) and its revealing to the world during the Descent of the Holy Spirit (cf. CCC 767–768). The final stage is its eschatic nature.

3. Jesus's ecclesiogenic deeds that constitute, in His body and blood, the New Covenant; 4. The general community of the redeemed that has been manifesting itself since the Descent of the Holy Spirit; 5. A community of faithful brothers and sisters that pursues an eschatological fulfilment.¹⁶

Christological ecclesio-genesis outright requires a trinitarian reference. The Persons in the Holy Trinity are equated with the Divine being, and thus seeing the Person of Jesus means that one sees the Divine being. The Divine Person of the ageless Son expressed itself in the humanity of Jesus of Nazareth and with that Person and in It – in the Person of the Son – God the Father expressed Himself as well, up to a sufficient degree that Jesus stated: “Don’t you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (Jn 14:9). As accurately observed by T.D. Łukaszuk, Jesus was not surprised that Philip, seeing the Person of the Son in human form, had not seen the Person of the Father in His Person. And thus, as the Divine Persons are relational references to the Divine being, then, as a consequence, when one sees the Son, they see the Father and the Holy Spirit. Wherever Jesus Christ is, the entire Holy Trinity is most certainly there as well.¹⁷

Departing from institutional and hierarchical reductions of defining the Church that we express in superficial and closed notions, we should see it as a living organism, a dynamic space for redemption that extends between the Holy Trinity and the sinner. The Church is a mystery of a community in the bosom of which the Triune God lovingly self-communicates to sinners so that they can themselves go on from death to life while also testifying about a Love that is greater than any senselessness. Therefore, the Church should be described integrally, namely from inside (*ad intra*) and from outside (*ad extra*), so that it can ultimately be seen as a *mysterion* that expresses itself in realities both earthly and heavenly, material and spiritual, sinful and saintly, fulfilled and incomplete, pilgrim and eschatological.¹⁸

¹⁶ Cf. A. Napiórkowski, *Proegzystencja Kościoła*, 65–93.

¹⁷ Cf. T.D. Łukaszuk, 230–231.

¹⁸ Cf. A. Napiórkowski, “Kościół i człowiek”, 249.

What are the pneumatological consequences of Jesus's elevation to Divine glory? This is a presentation of theological conclusions that stem from an analysis of the third and fourth stage of ecclesioGenesis. Jesus ascended to Heaven so that the Divine Spirit could begin its work. Let us quote a rather long passage from the Gospel of John that features the words of Jesus as he said farewell to His disciples. "But now I am going to him who sent me. None of you asks me, 'Where are you going?' Rather, you are filled with grief because I have said these things. But very truly I tell you, it is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. When he comes, he will prove the world to be in the wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment: about sin, because people do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and about judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned. I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (Jn 16:5–13).¹⁹

On the one hand, the Ascension closes the process of Jesus's work in creating the Church, on the other hand, it initiates its next stage, that is the Descent of the Holy Spirit and the start of a series of later moments of ecclesioGenesis. Namely, without Jesus, the apostles themselves, but together with the Holy Spirit, became the continuators of His redeeming mission. "Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear" (Acts 2:33). The Ascension to the Heavenly Father ends the period of Christ's teaching about the Kingdom of God. This is why the apostles and other witnesses to Christophanies received their mission so that they would go on to spread the good news. In this sense, the Ascension began the history of the Church and its spread of the Gospel. Christ shall be in its message and work "always, to the very end of the age" (Mt 28:20), yet it is different than it had been before the Ascension. The mission

¹⁹ Cf. M.T. Farrell, "Christ in Glory", 30–33.

of Jesus's disciples has become a mission of God in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Paraclete made them active continuators of His work, equipping them with the necessary means to fulfil their mission.²⁰

In *Redemptoris missio*, John Paul II described this process: "The mission of the Church, like that of Jesus, is God's work or, as Luke often puts it, the work of the Spirit. After the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus, the apostles have a powerful experience which completely transforms them: the experience of Pentecost. The coming of the Holy Spirit makes them *witnesses* and *prophets* (cf. Acts 1:8; 2:17–18). It fills them with a serene courage which impels them to pass on to others their experience of Jesus and the hope which motivates them. The Spirit gives them the ability to bear witness to Jesus with 'boldness.'²¹ Henceforth, the communities of Jesus's sisters and brothers enter a permanent state of mission, which would embolden John Paul II to state that "the Church is an incarnated mission."²²

The Ascension should therefore be viewed as a farewell Christophany of a resurrected Jesus after the forty-day preparation of the community of His followers for a mission of preaching about Him "to the ends of the earth," and ten days prior to the Descent of the Holy Spirit. This time should primarily be viewed from the perspective of his disciples. It is their time of maturation in faith, and not the time and space of the resurrected Lord, who would not be in some intermediate state between the Resurrection and the Ascension. These time periods would ultimately be conditioned solely by the means of human perception, of maturation to the ecclesial communion, and a reference to the Jewish festival of Pentecost (*Shavuot*). The Descent of the Holy Spirit, which initiated the ecclesial conferment of redeeming gifts earned by Christ, brought with itself both a continuation of the Hebrew Harvest Festival and an absolute novelty. This testament shall be realized by the power of the Holy

²⁰ Cf. J.A. Fitzmyer, "The Ascension of Christ", 409–440.

²¹ John Paul II, *Redemptoris missio*, no. 24.

²² John Paul II, "Messaggio per la giornata missionaria mondiale, 1980", 398: "[...] la Chiesa sia la missione incarnata."

Spirit (cf. Luke 24:48–49; Acts 1:3–8) up to the moment of His second coming.²³

In the symbolism of “40 days” – between the Resurrection and the Ascension by the reminding and anticipatory celebration of the sacraments, primarily the Eucharist – in which this Lord, already exalted in His Resurrection, could be experienced by His followers in an “earthly” and “sensory,” manner, features “sacramentality”: time and eternity, earth and the Heavens. Luke expressed this experience, which included a singularity of the historical and transcendental exaltation and the actual historicity of Christ’s presence as an origin event for and the permanent mission of the Church.²⁴

By the gift of the Spirit, the community ceases to be an anonymous group of the Master of Nazareth’s followers but reveals itself in front of the world as a Church, which publicly begins preaching the Gospel. From that moment, the task of this community “orphaned” by Jesus and directed by the Spirit, is to lead all people to salvation. The human abilities of the followers of this community – which consisted of Jews and representatives of other nations – was clearly not enough to effectively spread the Good News. This is why the third Divine Person ceaselessly bestows upon them supernatural gifts by which the Gospel can be preached all over the world.²⁵ Jesus’s words: “Go into all the world” (Mk 16:15), “go and make disciples of all nations (Mt 28:19) have become the core of the ecclesial community.

The Descent of the Holy Spirit ensures the continuity of the history of redemption, as it ensures an incessant presence of God amongst His people and enables giving testimony and the evangelization of humanity and the world. The third Divine Person becomes not only a guarantee of the inalienable deposit of faith, but also the first Hermeneutist. By the Descent of the Holy Spirit – by the “Church of the Spirit” – began the bestowment of gifts of redemption, earned by the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ. This ecclesial message leads to the sanctification of believers and the world. “But we ought always

²³ Cf. S. Hareźga, “Wniebowstąpienie”, 816–817; cf. M. Kowalczyk, “Wniebowstąpienie”, 5–21.

²⁴ Cf. M. Kehl, “Himmelfahrt Christi”, 123.

²⁵ CCC 767–768.

to thank God for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because God chose you as first fruits to be saved through the sanctifying work of the Spirit and through belief in the truth” (2 Thess 2:13). We come to this world marked by the taint of the original sin. It is the Holy Spirit, by its grace of baptism, that makes people the children of God and heirs to Heaven. Ascension is a certain paradox. On the one hand, the exalted Lord abandoned us, on the other, He left us only so that He could be with us in a more complete way, to be able to communicate with us regardless of time and space. This communication is significantly ecclesiological, as it is performed sacramentally, and peaks at the Eucharist.

Therefore, the Ascension did not end Christ’s presence amongst His disciples but altered its manner and form. Thus, other possibilities of fulfilling the relations between believers and the Triune God became possible. From that moment on, the presence of the Resurrected in the Holy Spirit within the Church began to express in a number of areas. It is a presence in a community that gathers for prayer. The exalted Lord directly communicates Himself and acts through the sacraments and is present in His word.

4. Eschatological References to the Event of the Ascension

Let us discuss eschatological and eschatic references that result from Jesus’s Ascension during the process of the Church’s realization. The event of Jesus’s return to Divine glory is also tied to the start of His parousia. It even appears that the Ascension began His second coming as “judge of the living and the dead” (Acts 10:42), in which He gradually revealed His full redemptive power, ultimately overcoming all evil and transferring reign to God the Father (1 Cor 15:20–26).²⁶ The culmination of the paschal mystery denotes an enthronement in Heaven and introduction to Divinity and power: “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet” (Ps 110:1). Here it can be added that – from this position of “power” – the Resurrected

²⁶ Cf. S. Hareźga, “Wniebowstąpienie”, 817; cf. M. Kehl, “Himmelfahrt Christi”, 123.

intercedes with the Father on behalf of the pilgrim people of God (cf. Rom 8:34) and shall protect us during the final judgement (Rom 5:9 f).²⁷

Just as the Incarnation was a reality with permanent significance – namely the Son of God united with the people in the holy Spirit not only then, but He continues to be united with humanity of all times²⁸ – so too is the Ascension because Christ continues to participate in our earthly fate. Here we can reference Jesus’s declaration on identifying himself with those who share in suffering: I was hungry, thirsty, I was a traveler, I was naked, sick and in prison (cf. Mt 25:35–36). From this parable concerning the final judgement over the world we can glean a clear unity that extends beyond earthly time and space (cf. Mt 25:31–45). This is also confirmed by the ecclesiology of Paul the Apostle, which is presented in the image of the mystical Body of Christ, of which He is the head. “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it” (1 Cor 12:26), and thus the Head shares in the suffering.²⁹ The disappearance of Christian sensitivity as to the bodily presence of the resurrected Christ in the Church was noted by Anthony J. Kelly of the Australian Catholic University, who wrote about the permanent character of the incarnation. God is with us constantly in His beloved Son.³⁰

While reflecting on the death of Jesus, Eberhard Jüngel highlighted the link between His death, Resurrection and Ascension. Thus, this outstanding twentieth-century Lutheran theologian argued that the Resurrected, for all eternity, remains Crucified. The Resurrection is not an annulment of the Word of God on the True Cross (*logos tou staurou*), but its reinforcement. In Resurrection, the cry of the Crucified does not become silent.³¹ How should we understand this? The three sides of this single paschal reality that is the death of Jesus, His Resurrection and Ascension, do not mean that He became severed from the earthly community of His believers. His departure to the

²⁷ Cf. T. Dola, “Wniebowstąpienie”, 818.

²⁸ Cf. A. Napiórkowski, *Kościół Duchy*, 99–140, 141–204.

²⁹ Cf. G. Greshake, *Trójjedyny*, 331.

³⁰ Cf. A.J. Kelly, “The Body of Christ”, 792–816.

³¹ Cf. E. Jüngel, “Vom Tode des lebendigen Gottes”, 112.

Father cannot be seen as leaving the pilgrim Church and the world to fend for themselves. As sin and all of the darkness of being away from God continue and have not been covered in Resurrection, then the Ascended – who as the Resurrected is equivalent to the Crucified – takes on, in solidarity, the entire suffering of humanity and finds His ultimate fulfilment. As a consequence, this new “modality” of the Ascended means an even more intense relationship between us and God. Here it is sufficient to evoke the Eucharist once again. “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:20).³²

We can find similar thoughts in the writings of Catholic theologians. Johann Baptist Metz (1928–2019), a student of Karl Rahner, stated that those who had not heard the cry of the Crucified in the resurrected Jesus replaced theology with mythology, and replaced the Gospel with a pagan victory myth.³³ Karl Heinz Menke highlighted a more ecclesial aspect when he noted that the Ascended, after overcoming this earthly aeon, after His suffering and death on the cross, He entered the aeon of the Church. The glory of the Father to which the eternal Son of God was elevated to in a transfigured human body is the revealed glory of the Holy Trinity’s love that is always tied with the world, the cross and the Resurrection, and which shall continue to suffer with humanity for as long as it takes to imprint in it a dynamic of a new life and the ultimate *communio*. Christ, who ascended into Heaven, shall exist in agony until the end of the world.³⁴

The essential element of the Ascension is the ultimate faith that Jesus is the Lord who sits at the right hand of God with our humanity. On the one hand, this confirms Jesus’s divinity, while, on the other hand, it presents a future of our human nature, which – at the moment of our resurrection – shall become transfigured. The Resurrection, together with the Ascension, is a confirmation of the redeeming effectiveness of the work of the eternal Son of God in human form. The ascended Christ exists simultaneously on the side of God and on the side of humanity. This is perfectly expressed in the idea of mediation as found in the writings of Paul the Apostle, who professed:

³² Cf. G. Greshake, *Trójjedyny*, 318; cf. G. O’Collins, “Labor of God”, 485–486.

³³ Cf. J.B. Metz, “Theodizee-empfindliche Gottesrede”, 84.

³⁴ Cf. K.-H. Menke, *Die Einzigkeit Jesu Christi*, 169.

“For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). The idea of mediation also plays a central role in the Epistle to the Hebrews, where Jesus is directly called a mediator of the New Covenant (12:24).³⁵

The Ascension is also tied with preparing a proper state of existence for believers in Christ after their death. Therefore, He assured His followers: “My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am” (Jn 14:2–3). The Resurrected is preparing Heaven for us. Let us ignore analyses of the mythological notion of heaven and move directly on to the theological view of heaven. Heaven is a dimension that is created when the creation finally reaches God. To *go to Heaven* means to *go to God*; to *be in Heaven* means to be *at God’s side*. Thus, Heaven is first and foremost an eschatological phenomenon. Heaven is not: it is created when the first redeemed creation, in an eschatological and ultimate manner, attains God in the fullest. W. Kasper noted that the effect of Jesus’s paschal mysteries is the creation of Heaven. The exalted Lord is not merely taken to Heaven, but because He is ultimately taken to God’s side, this creates Heaven. Heaven is the spiritual body of the resurrected and ascended Christ.³⁶ This fulfils the earthly Church led by the Holy Spirit in its eschatological perspective. By creating a mystical body of Christ on earth, believers can be considered to have already partially entered Heaven.

Here we must note two elements which have already been signaled, but perhaps have not been thoroughly stressed, which requires us to see the trinitarian aspect of the eschatological Church. First, it is about linking Heaven with the exalted heavenly Christ in the personal dimension along with the deification of human nature. Heaven, when viewed Christologically, has an explicitly personal dimension. J. Ratzinger wrote: “One is in heaven when, and to the degree, that one is in Christ. It is by being with Christ that we find the true location of our existence as human beings in God. Heaven is

³⁵ Cf. G. Strzelczyk, *Traktat o Jezusie Chrystusie*, 280–287.

³⁶ Cf. W. Kasper, *Jezus Chrystus*, 153.

thus primarily a personal reality.”³⁷ The person of the eternal Son of God – by adopting a human nature in the mystery of the Incarnation – introduces the person of the believer into the trinitarian eschaton – by the One who is the Firstborn among them and the Onlyborn at the side of His Father in heaven.³⁸

Let us move on to the second element. As the heavenly reality is a personal event, which is the result of the fact that the Son of God became man, in Heaven, human nature is deified. “Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ” (Rom 8:17). As adopted daughters and sons – who enter Heaven in Christ – in eschaton we receive not only eternal life, but most importantly, a qualitative completeness. This new form of supernatural life begins sacramentally within the Church, and after death, our person, in its nature, is transfigured, as it shall be close enough to God (deification).³⁹

The exalted Lord becomes the principle of a new life for the post-paschal community. His parousia and second coming bring hope and lend a dynamism to the proper anticipation by His witness on earth. “When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory” (Col 3:4). Thanks to Him, Christians are “restored to life” already and sit with Him in heaven (Eph 2:5–6; Col 2:12–14), freed “from the rule of darkness,” they are transported by the Divine Spirit to the Father and “to the kingdom of the Son he loves” (Col 1:12–14). From then on, their life “hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3) fulfills itself. They focus on searching for that which is above, “where Christ is seated, at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1–2) and in pursuing a motherland that is in Heaven, so that in Christ they could attain complete redemption and eternal glory (cf. Phil 3:20–21; 2 Tim 2:10–13).⁴⁰

Attempting to describe the emergence of the Church and its realization cannot be performed while abandoning not only

³⁷ J. Ratzinger, *Eschatologia*, 254.

³⁸ Cf. T.D. Łukaszuk, *Ostateczny los człowieka*, 231.

³⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, 233–235.

⁴⁰ Cf. S. Hareźga, “Wniebowstąpienie”, 817.

eschatological dimensions, but also apocalyptic ones.⁴¹ And despite dealing with essential dimensions of existence, where humans are directed towards something that is beyond them and that gives them hope – as noted by Wolfhart Pannenberg or Jürgen Moltmann – they are completely unintelligible to contemporary people.⁴²

5. Conclusion

While presenting the death, Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus organically and in a single paschal event, we should see His Ascension as a finale of paschal Christophanies, which opens the Descent of the Holy Spirit. “And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age” (Mt 28:20). This assurance by the glorious Lord gives us lasting hope in His presence among the ecclesial community, thanks to the Divine Spirit. The Ascension of the Resurrected to Heaven is, on the one hand, God the Father elevating and exalting His eternal Son, who suffered the deepest humbling in a death on the cross, in human form. The path of obedient self-humbling for the redemption of man (cf. Phil 2:5–11) achieves its goal in the Ascension. On the other hand, it is also the beginning of Jesus’s parousia. In this exaltation, He, risen from the dead, does not wish to enrapture humanity, so as not to motivate the faithful to leave this world in any way, but He receives His share in the universal reconciliation that extends onto the entirety of creation. The exalted Lord leads all in the Holy Spirit to an ultimate goal that is the loving rule of God.

The truth of the Ascension that can be seen in the light of pneumatic ecclesioGenesis allows us to correctly interpret the expectation of the second coming of Christ. His disciples are not to look passively towards Heaven, but – strengthened by eschatological hope – to become missionary witness to the ends of the earth. The exalted Resurrected did not merely leave the community of his believers, but He entered into a new redeeming relationship with all of created reality so as to lead it to an eschatic fulfilment.

⁴¹ Cf. E. Käsemann, “Zum Thema der urchristlichen Apokalyptik”, 105–131.

⁴² W. Pannenberg, *Grundzüge der Christologie*, 78; see J. Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung*.

The pneumatic and eschatological aspects provide a correct basis for outlining permanent ecclesiogenesis. This reign of Christ that redeems in the Spirit is visible and publicly represented. By the power of the Holy Spirit, it manifests itself by the sending of witnesses who deliver the Good News, celebrate the sacraments – especially the Eucharist – and through their lives follow Jesus of Nazareth. This new community that emerged from the Synagogue, and which first called themselves “Christians” in Antioch, identifies itself as a community of the end times, in which the Divine renewal of creation has its beginning. It is marked by an awareness directed at the coming kingdom of God, bearing further and constantly following Jesus’s message. It is to continue to last until the moment when the kingdom of God shall be fully realized and, over the course of these times, it is to permanently renew itself and the world that surrounds it.

Wniebowstąpienie Chrystusa a permanentna eklezjogeneza. Przyczynek do eklezjologii pneumatologicznej i eschatologicznej

Abstrakt: Czym jest Wniebowstąpienie? Czy jest to tylko narracja popaschalnej wspólnoty? W jakiej rzeczywistości czasowo-przestrzennej się dokonało? Jak rozumieć usytuowanie go w czasie: 40 dni po Zmartwychwstaniu, a 10 dni przed Ześłaniem Ducha Świętego? Wniebowstąpienie winno być rozważane integralnie, czyli w łączności z misterium Krzyża, śmierci i Zmartwychwstania. W artykule podjęta została próba pogłębienia eklezjogenezy nowotestamentalnej przy równoczesnym odchodzeniu od zawężonego rozumienia, iż Kościół powstał jedynie w wyniku słów, działania i osoby Jezusa Chrystusa. Z jednej strony odwołujemy się do pięciu etapów powstawania Kościoła jako wydarzenia dotyczącego działania całej Trójcy Świętej i związanego z niezakończonymi jeszcze dziejami zbawienia. A z drugiej strony koncentrujemy się na pomijanym na ogół Wniebowstąpieniu, milcząco włączanym do wydarzenia Zmartwychwstania chwalebne Pana. Analiza Wniebowstąpienia – prowadzona w świetle eklezjogenezy – prowadzi do wyodrębnienia interesujących elementów pneumatologicznych i eschatologicznych w odniesieniu do wielowymiarowego i ciągle trwającego konstytuowania się Kościoła i jego misji.

Słowa kluczowe: Wniebowstąpienie, eklezjologia, pneumatologia, eklezjogeneza, eschatologia

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