The disciples made their way back to Jerusalem. It was either their decision, or they were told to go there. After they arrived, their risen Lord appeared to them once more to give them instructions and to say goodbye. It would be the last time He would appear to them.

The Gospel accounts do not give any special emphasis to this final meeting. However, Matthew, Mark, and Luke preserved some of the last words Jesus spoke to His disciples before He ascended into heaven. Among these are the closing verses of Matthew's Gospel, where we read: “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (Mt. 28:18-20). Mark, at the close of his Gospel, gives an abbreviated version: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation” (Mk. 16:15). In Luke's narrative, the last words Jesus spoke to the Eleven (Acts 1:7-8) are interwoven with the ones He spoke to them on the evening of the day He rose from the dead (Lk. 24:47ff.). Without the supplementary material which Luke provides in the book of Acts, we would have never imagined we were looking at two different accounts and would not have known where to draw the line between them. When we compare the two, however, we can see that, even though the words were spoken at two different times, they really form one continuous discourse. And we have no great difficulty determining what belongs to the first appearance and what belongs to the last. According to the book of Acts, when Jesus had His last conversation with His disciples, He spoke to them about their apostolic duties. They were to be witnesses to Him and preachers of His gospel. He also spoke to them about the promise of the Spirit, whose coming would prepare them for their work. The Holy Spirit would be the One who would instruct them about what they should do until the promise was fulfilled. Now these are the topics addressed in the verses that are cited in Luke 24: First, there is the apostolic commission to preach repentance and the remission of sins in the name of Jesus among all the nations, beginning in Jerusalem. Second, Jesus lays on the disciples a virtual injunction to be faithful witnesses to everything they had seen and heard in their Lord's company, especially His resurrection from the dead. Third, there is a renewal of the promise, which is here called the "promise of My Father" (vs. 49). Finally, they are given instructions to wait for the promised blessing in the holy city: “You are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Lk. 24:49).
Because of the way in which Jesus’ instructions fit the situation, all of them provide internal evidence that they are His final words. It was natural and necessary for Jesus to speak to His chosen men when the time came for Him to depart. He needed to give them instructions to guide them in their new work as Apostles and to let them know what to do during the short period of time before their labors began. He was brief and to the point in these last words, making it obvious that this was the occasion when He spoke to them. Our first thought about this encounter is that we probably expected Him to be more sympathetic in His remarks to them since this is their last meeting. But, when we really think about it, we believe any expression of sentimental emotion would have been beneath the dignity of the situation. In His farewell address before His sufferings and death, emotion was present, but in these farewell words just before the ascension, it would have been out of place. Before His death, Jesus was a like a parent speaking His last words of counsel and comfort to His sorrowing children. After His resurrection, He was “like a man, away on a journey, who upon leaving his house and putting his slaves in charge, assigning to each one his task, also commanded the doorkeeper to stay on the alert” (Mk. 13:34). So the way He spoke was adapted to His frame of mind.

And yet, in this last meeting with the Eleven, Jesus did not really come across as if He was aloof. He was not only their Master; He was still their Friend. He spoke kind words as well as commands to His servants. What could be kinder and more encouraging than these words: “And lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age”? (Mt. 28:20b). Here is another example: Jesus is about to ascend into glory and seems to anticipate the time when He would once again put on the robe of divine majesty which He had laid aside when He became man. Is there not a hint of friendship in His words, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth”? (Mt. 28:18). Why does He say that now? Certainly He does not say it to exalt Himself. Nor does He say it to create a gap between Himself and His former companions and, as it were, demote them from the position of friends to that of mere servants. No. He desires to encourage them on their way through the world, as the messengers of the kingdom, to make them feel that the task assigned to them was not an impossible one (though they might feel it is). In essence, this is what He was saying, “I have all power in heaven and jurisdiction over all the earth. You go, therefore, into all the world and make disciples of all the nations. Do not doubt for a moment that all spiritual influences and all providential means will be provided for you so you can accomplish the great errand on which I am sending you.”

**The Ascension**

When Jesus left, He offered kind actions as well as kind words to His friends. There was no farewell kiss, shaking hands, or any other gesture that people use when they tell each other “goodbye.” But the way in which He ascended was most gracious and kind toward those whom He left behind. Jesus moved upwards as if He was being lifted from the earth by some celestial power. His face looked downward on His beloved companions, and His hand was stretched out
as if He was pronouncing a blessing on them. Therefore, the Eleven did not grieve when their Lord disappeared. Yes, they were amazed. They gazed eagerly with wonder toward the sky, as if they were trying to penetrate the cloud which had received their Master. But the parting left no sadness behind. They bowed their heads in worship toward the ascended Christ and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, as if they had gained, not lost a friend; and as if the ascension were not a sunset, but a sunrise - as it truly was, not only for them, but for the whole world.

We are unable to comment on that miraculous moment when our High Priest passed through the veil into the celestial sanctuary. Like the Transfiguration, it is a topic about which we do not know what to say. It cannot be explained. But we can whole-heartedly and joyfully believe in it. And we can align ourselves with the truth that was declared by the two men in white garments who said to the disciples, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). With this being said, we now move from the ascension in order to make some observations on the Great Commission that was given by our Lord to His Apostles for the last time, just before He was taken up into glory.

**The Great Commission**

The Commission appropriately came from Christ, whether we regard Him as the Son of God or as the Son of Man. “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to all creation” (Mk. 16:15). Surely this is the language of a Divine Being. What mere man ever conceived of such a plan that would include the whole human race in its scope? Who, except One who possessed all power in heaven and on earth, could dare to hope for success in such a gigantic undertaking? Note how the Commission is so full of grace and love! Jesus sends His Apostles on an errand to preach repentance and forgiveness of sins in His name and to peacefully conquer and reconcile the world to God through His death. This kind of philanthropy demonstrates that it is divine and intensely human. Notice something that is especially characteristic of the Gracious One - notice the instructions: “Beginning in Jerusalem.” The words indicate that He has a plan of operations that has been adapted to the circumstances of the world and to the capacities and idiosyncrasies of those who would be bearing the message. But they do more than that. They open a window into Jesus’ heart and show Him to be the same person who prayed on the cross: “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing” (Lk. 23:34). Why begin in Jerusalem? Because “Jerusalem sinners” are the ones who most need to repent and be forgiven. Also, Jesus would demonstrate, from the very beginning, the full measure of His patience with them. This would be an encouragement for those in Samaria, Antioch, and the uttermost parts of the earth who would later believe.

In every way, it was a commission that Jesus, as the Son of God and Savior of sinners, was worthy to give. But what a commission for poor Galilean fishermen to receive! What a burden of
responsibility to lay upon the shoulders of any poor mortal! Who is adequate for these things? Jesus knew the inadequacy of His men. Therefore, after He had endowed them with His official authority, He proceeded to speak about investing them with another kind of power. Without this power, the official authority would be totally ineffective. He said, “And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (Lk. 24:49).

*Power From On High*

“Power from on high.” The expression has a mystical sound to it. It seems difficult to define. Yet, the general meaning is clear enough. This power He is talking about is not primarily a power to perform miracles. Rather, it was just what Jesus had spoken about in great detail in His farewell address before His death. “Power from on high” means the Apostles were going to gain many things from the mission of the Comforter, including the enlightenment of their minds, the enlargement of their hearts, the sanctification of their talents, and the transformation of their characters. These things would make them sharpened swords and polished spears for subduing the world to the truth and, when used together, constituted the power for which Jesus directed the Eleven to wait. The power, therefore, was a spiritual power, not a magical power. It was an inspiration, not a possession. It was a power which was not intended to act as a blind fanatical force. Rather, it was to manifest itself as a spirit of love and of a sound mind. After the power descended [at Pentecost], the Apostles were to be more rational, not less; not mad, but sober-minded; not excited enthusiasts, but calm, clear, dignified expositors of divine truth. This, in fact, is the way they appear in Luke's history of their ministry. In a word, they were to be less like their past selves and more like their Master, no longer ignorant, childish, weak, and carnal but initiated into the mysteries of the kingdom and habitually under the guidance of the Spirit of grace and holiness.

This was the power that was promised. It was evident that it was indispensable to success. Official titles were empty, such as apostles, evangelists, pastor-teachers, leaders. Clerical robes were powerless, unless the garment of divine power clothed the souls of the Eleven. They were powerless then and are still powerless today. The world is to be evangelized, not by people who have been invested with ecclesiastical power and who wear multi-colored robes, but by people who have experienced the baptism of the Holy Spirit and are visibly endowed with the divine power of wisdom, love, and zeal.

The promised power was indispensable. By its very nature, it simply had to be waited for. The disciples were directed to wait until it came. They were not to attempt to do without it, nor were they to try to *work it up.* And they were wise enough to follow their instructions. They fully understood that the power was necessary. But it could not be worked up; *it had to come down.* Everyone is not equally wise. Many virtually assume that the power Christ spoke about can be
disregarded. They believe that, in fact, it is not a reality, but a delusion. Others who are more
devout believe in the power but also believe people can give it to themselves. They try to get the
power by working themselves and others into a frenzy of excitement. Sooner or later, failure
convinces both parties of their mistake. The first one begins to realize that producing spiri-
tual results takes more than eloquence, intellect, money, and organization. And the second one
realizes that true spiritual power cannot be produced, like electric sparks, by the friction of ex-
icitement. It must come down from on high, sovereignly and graciously.