

From the desk of Fr. Jim

The Feast of the Ascension

It is expected, of course, that the Church, even in the earliest centuries of her life, would recall all the events in the life of her Lord... just like those of a family remember key events and even celebrate many of them, such as marriage anniversaries and birth days.

Some even remember days when they moved from one city to another, or the events surrounding graduation or the conferral of a degree. For those in love, they include such events as the first date or the date of passing from this life to the next. They are moments of change and of new beginning. The events in the life of Jesus, the beloved spouse of the Church, are remembered with this kind of devotion and affection.

So, we find evidences of the Church's recollection of the event of the Ascension even in the earliest days. As the Church intensified her reflections on the meaning of these events, so the commemoration also took on a new purpose.

The cycle of such commemorations seem to have three main goals:

First, it is that loving remembrance of the faithful who recall each proceeding event in the life of Jesus. "This is what happened..." the scriptures seem to say.

Second, it is an opportunity to teach and to learn the meaning of such events.

Finally, there is an entering into the meaning itself, appropriating the meaning to our life, becoming part of the effect it has had on our world.

There is a period of time between the Resurrection and the Ascension in which several goals are accomplished. The Resurrection appearances of Jesus make known to the disciples the fact that this world's wisdom, assumptions and expectations are flawed.

While death seems to be the final page of a person's life, in God's plan this is not true. Of equal importance is that the victory of Christ is a gift to us. It is his by right because of his obedience to the Father, his acceptance of death and his victory over it. He is the one who has won the victory.

There is then a real sense of completion of the mission of Christ that is accomplished at the Ascension of Christ into glory. It is the fulfillment of the vision expressed by Daniel:

I was gazing into the visions of the night, when I saw, coming on the clouds of heaven, as it were a son of man. He came to the One most venerable and was led into his presence. On him was conferred rule, honor and kingship, and all peoples, nations and languages became his servants. His rule is an everlasting rule which will never pass away, and his kingship will never come to an end.

(Daniel 7:13-14)

Jesus is enthroned, taking his rightful place at the right hand of the Father. We need to hold on to the notion in this meditation that when we say that this is his "rightful place," it is so by nature.

As an analogy, fish by nature, live in the sea. We cannot live there and can only go down under the sea with some kind of temporary and artificial help. In the same way, it is not our nature to enter into heaven.

Our soul may endure death because that which animates us is indestructible. But our body, since the rebellion of Adam and Eve, has had no place in God's house.

Now, with the Ascension of the Lord, our physical nature, once in rebellion and cast out of the presence of God, have as their new home God's kingdom where Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father.

This is the gift of Christ's victory to those who believe. Though we do not deserve this, in the condescension of his mercy, Jesus, who is the Lord of our life, captures our hearts and leads us to heaven.

Today our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven; let our hearts ascend with him. Listen to the words of the Apostle:

If you have risen with Christ, set your hearts on the things that are above where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God; seek the things that are above, not the things that are on earth. For just as he remained with us even after his ascension, so we too are already in heaven with him, even though what is promised us has not yet been fulfilled in our bodies.

(St. Augustine, Sermon on the Ascension)