



THEOLOGY CORNER

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“What is the Significance of the Ascension?”

As Catholics, we speak often of the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus. Yet, for some reason, we tend to neglect talking about Christ’s Ascension into heaven. There is so much significance to our celebration of the Ascension of Christ, so much that in some dioceses in the United States and many around the world, the Ascension remains a Holy Day of Obligation on its own. In most dioceses in the U.S., however, this celebration has been moved to the nearest Sunday, which happens to be the Seventh Sunday of Easter. It is traditionally celebrated on Thursday since it marks forty days from the Resurrection to the Ascension as we see was the case in Acts 1:3. As usual, these “forty days” that Luke describes are not arbitrary. It is always a time of transition, preparation, and purification. Just as Jesus used this time to prepare the disciples for his departure and clarifying against misunderstandings of the kingdom, so too should we consider this time that we have spent together since Easter Sunday to prepare our hearts for the Kingdom and to prepare our hearts and transition into a time when we reflect deeper on the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost! In this time, we transition from a consideration of the resurrected Jesus to a consideration of what we can do to continue what Christ has accomplished in his glorious Ascension. This gets to the heart of the matter: what precisely did Christ accomplish by ascending into heaven?

Not long ago, we read in the Gospel of John that Jesus tells his disciples, “I am going to the Father.” (Jn 14:28). We know that Jesus in his divinity never left the Father, for wherever the Son is there is the Father. Thus, we know that when Jesus speaks of going to the Father, he is referencing the joining of his humanity together with the Father. This joining of Jesus’ humanity with the Father in heaven is the climax of the Paschal Mystery. In other words, everything that Jesus accomplished is brought to its completion in the heavenly sanctuary. Think about it this way: before his Ascension into heaven, his sacrifice satisfied the feast of Passover as the ultimately Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. After his Ascension, he fulfills the day of the Atonement when the high priest would enter the Holy of Holies. In effect, Jesus brings the paschal mystery into eternity! He quite literally unites heaven and earth together — bringing up our humanity into communion with the Holy Trinity so that the Holy Trinity can come down and dwell in us. It doesn’t get more beautiful than that!

Jesus is no longer limited in his humanity, and can thereby make his sacrifice present for all time and in all places. This is why we can have the sacrifice of the Mass as we all gather for an earthly participation of his one sacrifice! Christ ascended has returned to his rightful place, seated at the right hand of the Father, enthroned as King of the Universe. By returning to his rightful dwelling place, he acquired for us, as the body of Christ, the worthiness to be united with Christ the Head for eternity. In doing so, it also awakens us in the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Charity. It awakens us in faith because Christ ascended is no longer seen bodily, and thus begs for an increase in faith so as to believe in whom we can no longer see. It awakens us in hope in that we can look forward to the place that he prepares for us by means of his Ascension. Lastly, it awakens us in charity insofar as Christ’s departure from earth into heaven made it possible to receive the Holy Spirit who is the very Love of God: “But I tell you the truth, it is better for you that I go. For if I do not go, the Advocate will not come to you.” (John 16:7).

Taking these things into proper consideration will make clear what our response should be to the question posed by the angels after the Ascension: “Why do you stand looking into heaven?” Let us not stand and merely look in awe as Christ is not seated at the right hand of the Father; rather, let us do all that we can to participate in the work of Christ. As he brought heaven and earth together by his Ascension, let us also bring heaven and earth together by serving as instruments of God in bringing Christ to the world.