

GOD'S ASCENSION MAN'S EXALTATION

Have you ever tried to look straight into the sun? The brightness of that created orb of light is so stunning that blindness results if we do not avert our gaze. What then can we say of the radiant splendor of the mystery of Christ's resurrection? Surely this uncreated brilliance lies beyond the reach of the eyes of our souls. Yet the Psalmist sings: *"In Your light shall we see the light."* (Psalm 35:9, LXX).

A prism! If you want to experience the luster of pure natural light without having to dim your eyes before its power, refract that light through a prism and behold the colors of the rainbow! In the same way the Church takes the radiance of the Risen Christ and refracts it through the prism of its liturgical life.

Behold the mystery of the Risen Christ rendered accessible to the soul of man: contemplate Him as the liberator of Adam and Eve from sheol, ascending to the Father, and sending the Holy Spirit.

In doing this the Church follows the example of the Gospels. Compare the four accounts of the end of the Master's sojourn among us in the flesh. Notice that in St. Luke's account in Chapter 24 the entire mystery is presented in one breathless exclamation: the empty tomb, the announcement of the angels, the evening meal with the pilgrims to Emmaus, the appearance to the Apostles, the promise of the Spirit, and the Ascension.

Read it once through and see if you don't have the impression that all these events were experienced as one – in rapid, dizzying succession. After all, it was Eternity breaking down the wall of separation from the world of time. But later St. Luke himself –

in the *Acts of the Apostles* – and the other evangelists came to contemplate the Mystery according to the prismatic pattern the Church would later adopt for its festal cycle: first Pascha (the Resurrection), then the Ascension, and finally Pentecost.

WE ARE RESTORED TO GOD

Concerning the Feast of the Ascension, St. John Chrysostom asks "What is it we commemorate this day?" The golden-mouthed Patriarch of Constantinople replies to his own question: "This day all mankind was restored to God."

In the beginning when God created mankind "after His own image and likeness," He planted a thirst in our heart that could be slaked only by God Himself. As St. Augustine said, "You have made our hearts for You, a Lord, and they shall not find their rest until they rest in You." Though the fall deadened this appetite for Divinity, it did not destroy it utterly.

The Son of God emptied Himself of the Godhead so that His poverty could enrich our humanity with Divinity. He took upon Himself a human nature and united it to His Divine Person. By the Resurrection He destroyed human mortality; by His Ascension He brings back to the Father in His own Person His human nature – and ours. Listen again to Chrysostom:

"We who were unworthy of earthly dignity now ascend to a heavenly kingdom, and enter into heaven, and take our place upon a royal throne. This nature of ours, because of which the Cherubim guarded the gates of Paradise, this day sits high above the Cherubim... This day they see our nature upon the royal throne, shining in immortal beauty and glory."

"From dust to dust" – this was to have been our fate. But if we accept to follow Christ, we find that our journey ends not as earth in earth, but Godlike in heaven.

FORTY DAYS OF PREPARATION

When the evangelists speak of the forty days that separate, or rather unite, Easter and the Ascension, we must reflect on the mystical character of the number forty. In the Scriptures, forty usually implies a period of transition: the forty years of wandering in the desert before the Israel of old could enter the Promised Land; the forty days' fast by which Our Lord prepared for His earthly ministry; the forty hours Our Lord spent while in the tomb destroying death by His own death.

Scholars tell us that the ancients revered this number because it was the product of the four points of the compass (or alternatively, the four elements or the four seasons) and the "perfect" number, 10 – the number which points to infinity.

The forty days of Christ's risen life are meant to stand as an invitation for us faithful who *"have been baptized into Christ"* at Pascha to *"put on Christ"* (Galatians 3:27). The Ascension reveals the destiny of humankind: to be united intimately with God. What the serpent had craftily suggested in Eden, "You shall be gods," now becomes reality. As St. Peter proclaims in his second epistle:

"He has granted to us His precious and exceedingly great promises; that through these you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world by lust."

(2 Peter 1:4)

During the forty days of Lent we tried to make good that escape through repentance. During the forty days of Pascha we glory in our newness of life, realizing that this life is His. *"I now live – not I, but Christ lives in me!"* (Galatians 2:20). This is the joy of the Ascension feast. It is the feast of humanity's own destiny achieved by Christ's compassionate love for mankind.

Listen to the Mystery glorified in this festal sticheron from Vespers:

In Adam human nature fell to the depths of the earth, O Lord.
In Yourself have You restored it.
Today You have lifted it above the powers and principalities of heaven.
You loved it and granted it a throne with You.
You had compassion on it and granted it a share in Your own destiny.

REVEALED BY THE CLOUD

The feast of the Ascension, then, is not the feast of the Lord's farewell. How can we rejoice if we are left orphans, bereft of the fellowship of Christ? It is the feast of the Lord's presence! Though He is taken up in His body, His presence is revealed, not hidden, by the cloud.

In Exodus the Holy Spirit led the first Chosen People on their pilgrimage by His presence in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. The cloud of the Ascension prefigures the fiery tongues of Pentecost; both cloud and fire, as in Exodus, are signs of the presence of Christ's Holy Spirit.

Before He ascended to the Father, Jesus could be here or there, then or later; but once ascended, He is present everywhere and always – by His Spirit, through His Church, in you and in me. Truly, in this light do we see the Light.

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