

Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord B2024

Today we celebrate the feast of the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ in heaven. On this day, the resurrected body of our Lord has entered the eternal glory of the Father. This day inaugurates a new era for the Church and the disciples, where we are all called to mission and to give witness about the Risen Lord to the whole world.

The solemnity of the Ascension of Jesus "to heaven" gives us an opportunity to clarify once and for all our ideas on what we understand by "heaven." The majority of people identify heaven as the dwelling place of God. The Scriptures use the same spatial language when it says, "Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to people of good will."

However, with the rise of modern sciences, this religious meaning of the word "heaven" has been put into question. For modern man, heaven is the space in which our planet moves and the whole solar system is situated. We all remember the polemic sparked by a Soviet astronaut, on his return from his trip through the cosmos: "I have traveled much through space and I haven't found God anywhere!" Fortunately someone answered him quickly: "If you would have gone further, you would have found him".

It is important that we clarify what we, Christians, mean when we say "Our Father, who art in heaven," or when we say that someone has "gone to heaven." When I was young, there was a question in our Catechism that said: "Where is God"? The answer was: "God is in heaven, on earth and everywhere". In other words, it is God who has created the heavens, the earth and everything else that exists.

If so, God cannot be "closed" in things he has created; he is beyond them; he is above heaven and earth as we know them. Therefore, when we say that God is heaven we are describing with human words the realities that are beyond our human perception. That God is "in the heavens" means that he "dwells in inaccessible light"; he is as far from us "as heaven rises over earth"; he is infinitely different from us.

Heaven, in the religious sense, is more a state than a place. God is outside of space and time and so is his paradise. In the light of all that, what does it mean to proclaim that our Lord "went up to heaven"? We find the answer in the Creed. "He went up to heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father." That Christ went up to heaven means that "he is seated at the right hand of the Father", that he has entered God's World and has been constituted, as St. Paul says in the second reading, Lord and head of everything.

Though Our Lord went up to heaven, he did not, however, leave completely the earth. He has only gone out of our visual world. As he assures us: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:16-20).

The words of the angel, "Galileans, why are you looking up to heaven?", therefore contain a warning, if not a veiled reproach. We must not stay looking up to heaven to discover where our Lord is, but rather live in the awaiting of his return, continuing his mission, taking his Gospel to the ends of the earth and improving the quality of life on earth.

As for us, "to go to heaven" or "to paradise" means to be "with Christ" (Philippians 1:20). As our Lord says, "I am going to prepare a place for you ... so that where I am you may be also" (John 14:2-3). Understood in these terms, "Heaven," is as a place of rest and eternal recompense of the good. Our true heaven is the Risen Christ, whom we will go to meet and with whom we will be one "body" after our resurrection.

There are those who ask: But what will we do "in heaven" with Christ for all eternity? Won't we be bored? Let me answer with another question: Is it boring to be well and with excellent health? Ask those who are in love if they are bored being together. When one experiences a moment of very intense and pure joy, does not the desire arise that it last forever, that it never end?

Here on earth, the states of things do not last forever, because there is no object that can satisfy us indefinitely. It is different with God. Our minds will find the **Truth** in him and the **Beauty** that we will never cease to contemplate; and our hearts will find the **Good** that we will never tire to enjoy.

Our duty in the present state of the world is to fulfill the mission our Lord has left us. The core of that mission is the proclamation of the Gospel so that people may come to faith and be saved. That mission is the main reason of the existence of the Church. It is given to the apostles and after them to us. A big part of that mission is also, while we bring the good news to people, to transform the conditions of the present world with the message of Jesus. I believe that is the reason why the Angels were reproaching the men of Galilee for standing passively looking at the sky instead of being active.

In that perspective, it is absolutely clear that our commitments in the world and on a daily basis are really important. Of course, Jesus is in heaven where we will find him one day, but Jesus has to be found also here in the world through people as they are inspired by his Gospel.

Let me wrap up things: The Ascension of our Lord Jesus is a mystery of faith and hope in eternal life. Our Lord precedes us to prepare a place for us so that where he is now we too might be. The Ascension of our Lord reminds us that, though we are on earth to fulfill the mission left us, we should not live in it by losing sight of heaven, our eternal home land.

The feast of the Ascension of our Lord awakens in us the longing for heaven, the hope for immortality and the expectation of glorious body, like that of our Lord Jesus. Let us fight a good fight while still on earth so that one day we may enjoy with him and in him a complete, perfect and eternal happiness.

Acts 1: 1-11; Ephesians 4: 1-13; Mark 16: 15-20



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(Reworked from a Homily of Fr Cantalamesa on the Ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ).