



FACT OF FAITH

The Ascension

By Fr. Larry Rice

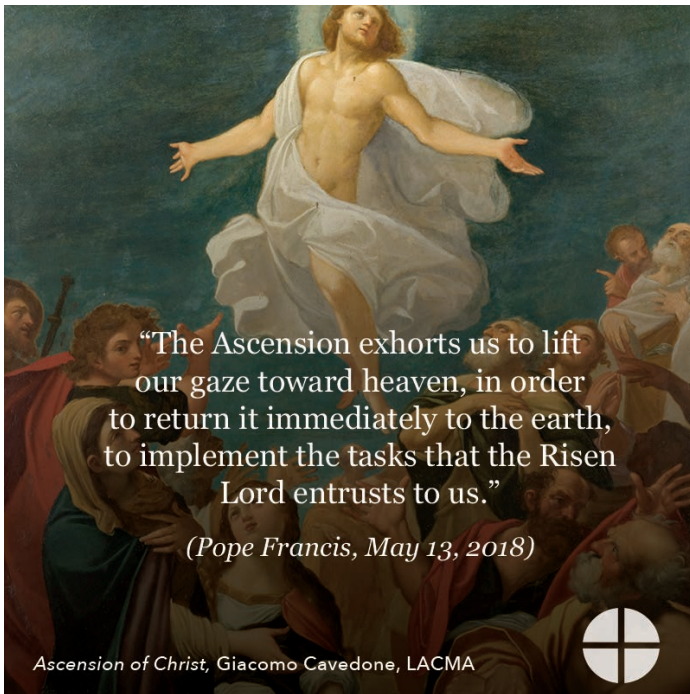
On the Feast of the Ascension, the church celebrates the return of Christ to the Father, his physical body leaving the earth behind. In John’s Gospel, Jesus makes it clear that his return to the Father is necessary so that the Holy Spirit can be given to his disciples.

For many years, this feast was celebrated as a Holy Day of Obligation on the Thursday after the Sixth Sunday of Easter. The precise date moved from year to year, as the date of Easter moved based on the lunar calendar. Not long ago, most of the diocese in the United States moved the celebration of the Ascension to the Seventh Sunday of Easter. The

ecclesiastical provinces of Boston, Hartford, New York, Newark, Philadelphia, and the State of Nebraska have maintained the celebration on the Thursday after the sixth Sunday of Easter.

So, why couldn’t the risen Christ have simply stayed with us, guiding the Church on Earth for all time? Imagine what the world would look like today if Christ has not ascended. If Christ were still walking the earth, what would faith be? Where would our free will be? My own opinion is that it was necessary for Christ to ascend and send the Holy spirit so that our faith would matter, and our free will remain intact. God is still with us, and present to us, but in ways that allow us to freely choose to accept or reject his grace. Christ is present in the Eucharist, in the Word of God proclaimed, and in his Body the Church. The Holy Spirit is present to us, dwelling within us, received at our Baptism and sealed at our Confirmation. But these ways of remaining with us are not so concrete that our free will is collapsed. He has the ability to choose the Good, and to choose to accept God’s grace, and he’s never going to do anything that makes that choice less meaningful.

So, the feast of the Ascension is important to us, not because it’s a big “good-bye” to Jesus, but because it ushers in a new era in which Christ continues to be present to us, and in which the Holy Spirit dwells in the hearts of all believers.



“The Ascension exhorts us to lift our gaze toward heaven, in order to return it immediately to the earth, to implement the tasks that the Risen Lord entrusts to us.”

(Pope Francis, May 13, 2018)

Ascension of Christ, Giacomo Cavedone, LACMA



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