

## *The Ascension of the Lord* *June 2, 2019*

*“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.”* (Hebrews 4:14-15)

Human words are lacking when one has a mystical experience. I begin our reflection upon today’s Feast of the Ascension with this to remind us that even Saint Luke’s description of Christ’s Ascension (Acts 1:6-12) cannot fully explain what took place. Saint Luke describes Jesus as being “*lifted up and a cloud took him from their sight*” (Acts 1:9). We could, using modern science, question how far was Jesus lifted up. With the size and scope of the universe, could we suppose Jesus is still being lifted up to heaven? Although Saint Luke’s description only symbolizes what actually happened, the truth of this event is: Humanity, in the person of Jesus, has now broken through the barrier separating heaven and earth and sits enthroned in heaven. He is in us and we are in Him. We are able to rejoice, for His victory is our victory.

The passage from the book of Hebrews, quoted above, provides a foundation for our celebration of this fact. The Ascension of Jesus is the ascension of humanity into the inner life of the Trinity. It is an ascension which allows humanity, you and I, to experience heaven in a “new” way. Unlike the angels, themselves fully spirits, humanity is now present in heaven and able to experience heaven as Jesus is present and experiences heaven (in His glorified body). Allow me to quote directly from the highly esteemed Catholic convert, writer, and apologist, Ronald Knox, who explains this better than I:

*Under the old dispensation, one part of the tabernacle, and afterwards of the temple, was curtained off in darkness to serve as the innermost shrine, the holiest place of all. Only once in the year was the curtain drawn aside, only once in the year did any human foot tread there, and that was on the day of Atonement, when the high priest, after doing sacrifice, went in there and sprinkled the blood of the victim, to make amends for his own faults, and those of the people. Just so, our Lord offered the perfect sacrifice of his own death; and as he did so, the veil that was hung between the most holy place and the rest of the temple was torn, we read, from top to bottom. The fact was symbolic of the occasion. For our Lord, having offered the perfect sacrifice, ascended into heaven, tore aside the veil of mystery that hangs between earth and heaven, went, once for all, into his Father’s presence to make atonement for your sins and mine.*  
(Ronald Knox, Pastoral and Occasional Sermons, pp. 468-469)

Our Catholic liturgy “re-presents” the Ascension of Jesus each time you and I attend Mass. We are able to see our priest who, in the person of Jesus the High Priest, ascends to the altar to offer the one true sacrifice, offered once upon the cross, the Body and Blood of Jesus. We are able to glimpse Heaven. We see, through the words and actions of our own priest, the perfect sacrifice of the perfect victim continually offered by the perfect priest for our sins. Although many of us are too young to remember, unless we have experienced the pre-Vatican II liturgy as an adult, this action was beautifully captured at the very beginning of the Mass. The priest, arriving at the foot of the altar would pray before ascending into the sanctuary to offer the liturgy. As he ascended to venerate (kiss) the altar, he would offer this prayer in union with Jesus our High Priest for all God’s people: *Take away from us our iniquities, we beseech Thee, O Lord, that we may be worthy to enter with pure minds into the Holy of Holies: through Christ our Lord.* I cannot stress this enough - we witness the events of the life of Jesus (the Biblical account of His Ascension) each and every time we attend a Mass. The Bible, literally, becomes alive for us through the words, actions, and prayers we offer when we attend Mass. How blessed are we who are able to be here at this moment! Let us thank God for this moment when the life of Heaven is made present for us still on earth.