

the CATHOLIC NAVIGATOR

Aboard St. Peter's Barque with the Catechism Charting Our Course

1 June 2014; Cycle A, 7th Sunday of Easter/ Solemnity of the Ascension

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Tradition...Tradition!

St. Augustine writes that celebrating Ascension Thursday was an apostolic tradition first implemented in 68 AD. While no written evidence of this can be found, there is evidence that celebrations of this event occurred as early as 385 AD.

At times there were processions with torches and banners. More often there were fruits (grapes) and vegetables brought in for blessing.

More interesting though, was that a common practice on Ascension Thursday was to extinguish the Paschal candle that was lit at the Easter Vigil Mass. This signaled the passing of Jesus from this world and the beginning of our vigil until he returned. This second coming is known as *the Parousia*.

Parousia, from the Greek, means 'the presence' of 'the essence' and has long been used to refer to Jesus Christ's return.



SCRIPTURAL SECRETS...

The Resurrection and Ascension are intimately connected events: the first, an ascent from the grave; the second, an ascent from the created world. Both events are recorded with different timing and locations by gospel writers whose accounts were composed from different perspectives and for different audiences.

Matthew says nothing about the Ascension. His gospel ends with the apostles gathering on the mountain in Galilee and Jesus' commissioning them to "Go forth and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them ..." (28:19) One can assume that Matthew understands Jesus' final leaving from the mountain to be as mysterious as his appearance there.

Mark's Gospel ends with Jesus being "taken up into heaven" (16:19) in Judea, apparently on the same day of his Resurrection after scolding his disciples for hardness of heart and unbelief. Some scholars suggest that Mark's account of the post-Resurrection events (Mk 16:9-20) is more of an overview of all that occurred between the Resurrection and Ascension rather than a time and place accounting.

Luke's Gospel also places the Ascension on the same day as the Resurrection. Here Jesus, after appearing to them behind locked doors, makes sure they know he's not a spirit by eating fish and having them touch his wounds. This occurs after two disciples 'recognized' him in the breaking of the bread at Emmaus. He tells those gathered that they are witnesses to all that had happened, but cautions them to await the "power from on high" before going out to spread the Good News.

In John, there is no direct mention of the Ascension event. Instead, a very human scene ends the story on the shore of the Sea of Tiberius: even after Jesus told him three times to "feed my sheep", Peter is apparently jealous of John's presence. However, this gospel has scattered allusions to the Ascension throughout. (Jn. 6:62; 20:17)

Only in Luke's Acts of the Apostles does it directly state that Jesus made appearances for forty days before he was "lifted up" from the Mount of Olives. This account is the one that the Church references to indicate that the Ascension occurred just a few days (ten) before the foretold descent of the Holy Spirit.

Different timing, different locations, different emphases—so what can we take from all these elements? We know that what occurred involved a bodily resurrection, not just a spiritual one. We know that Jesus is with the Father. We know that this Resurrection-Ascension comes with the demand to go out and evangelize, bringing the Word of God to all. We know that we are a part of this body that is being resurrected and brought back to God. We know that this is the reason for our hope and the basis of our looking forward. We know that we can find Jesus in the breaking of the bread. We know that there are good shepherds here to help us find our way to The Good Shepherd. We know that we can no more understand the Resurrection and Ascension events than did his disciples. And, lastly we know that all we can do is accept the accounts of eyewitnesses and the integrity of Scripture given to us by the Holy Spirit.

New Testament Times

The first reading for the Solemnity of the Ascension begins with this sentence: "After Jesus had been taken up to heaven the apostles returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, *a sabbath day's journey away.*" (Acts 1:12, emphasis added) So, what is "a sabbath's day journey"? The answer recalls the Israelites' exodus from Egypt. In Ex 16:25-30 the Lord prohibits them from leaving camp to gather manna on the Sabbath, the day of rest. Then, when Joshua led the Israelites across the River Jordan into the Promised Land, he commanded that the Ark of the Covenant carried by Levites precede the gathered tribes by a distance of

2000 cubits (Josh 3:4).

Based on these scriptures, rabbis ruled that no one could travel more than 2000 cubits (about 1000 yards) from home on the Sabbath, presumably that being the distance maintained in camp between the Israelites' tents and the Ark. Some letter-of-the-law types came up with a clever refinement: on the day before Sabbath set a lunch on a rock 2000 cubits away from home. With this now a 'temporary home,' one could go there for lunch and then undertake an additional 'Sabbath's day's journey,' to extend the overall distance traveled! Wonder how God views this type of legalism!



CATECHETICAL CORNER

Ascension Thursday, forty days after Easter, occurred this past Thursday, but is attached to the nearest Sunday in most dioceses for pastoral reasons. One of the Holy Days of Obligation here in the U.S., the Ascension brings to mind a line in two different prayers: the Nicene Creed ("He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.") and the Our Father ("...who art in heaven.").

In the creedal profession, the ascent (Ascension) to the Father is the sixth article of this faith prayer. This ascent completes the journey from the Father that began with his descent from heaven (the Incarnation). (CCC 661) The phrase, 'to come full circle' has never had more meaning. Not only did the Son of God (the Word) return to his rightful place, but because of this journey he "is seated *bodily* after he became incarnate and this flesh was glorified." (CCC 663, italics added) WOW! Ever since this ascent, humanity, through the bridge of Jesus, has been living in God! This is huge: "Christ's Ascension into heaven signifies his participation, in his humanity, in God's power and authority." (CCC 668) This marks the beginning of a new age in which "the the renewal of the world is irrevocably under way..." (CCC 669)

In the Our Father, 'who art in heaven' is "rightly understood to mean that God is in the hearts of the just..." (CCC 2794) Yet, even though he resides in the hearts of the just, he is veiled and lives in 'heaven,' "his dwelling place... (and) the Father's house is our homeland" for which we long.

When this reunion will occur, individually or for all humanity, we do not know. Like Jesus told the apostles, "it is not for you to know the times or the seasons..." However, we don't need to know this: when we receive the Holy Spirit, we are empowered to fully submit our will to the Father's and answer his call to give witness. At the right time then, we will make our ascent.

SAINTS PRESERVE US!

St. Boniface (born Winfred) was born around 675 A.D. and martyred in 754. He was a native of England but no one is quite sure where he was born. He joined the Benedictine order and was ordained at 30. Giving up the chance to be Abbot of his order, he instead dedicated himself to the organization and reform of what had become of the Church in Germany.

At the time, Germany was filled with tribal peoples and ruled by chieftains and lords. This was near the dawn of feudal society. The state was wildly intertwined with the Church, and often it was the rulers who would appoint their own bishops! Even Boniface said, "Without the patronage of the Frankish chiefs I cannot govern the people or exercise discipline over the clergy and monks, or check the practice of paganism." One such chief was Charles "the Hammer" Martel (known for stopping the push of Islam into Western Europe)!

With 'the Hammer's' backing, Boniface was able to accomplish much in his quest to organize and reform the Church in Germany, while also dealing death blows in large areas to pagan superstitions. Unable to stop local powers from seizing Church lands, he did manage to get the bishops and clergy to better obey the Pope (rather than local patrons), by getting stricter guidelines for the clergy approved. He also established many places of prayer, notably in the form of Benedictine monasteries.

In 754 A.D., Boniface set out for Frisia (northern parts of Germany) to evangelize and convert the Frisians (a German ethnic group living in northern coastal areas). He had always felt called here. Many were baptized and converted. But, on the way to the area where these neophytes would be confirmed, Boniface and fifty-two others were attacked and slaughtered by armed marauders. Instead of the gold and silver the brigands sought, only books and Sacred Texts were found.

Considered by Catholics to be the "Apostle of Germany," his feast day is June 5th.

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