

ASCENSION – A (June 5, 2011)
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We celebrate today the feast of our Lord's Ascension into heaven. Many of you will remember when this feast was always observed on the Thursday that came forty days after Easter Sunday—related to the forty days after his resurrection that Jesus had appeared to his disciples as St. Luke recounted in our first reading. Back in the 1990's, however, the bishops of Iowa decided to use their authority they had to shift the celebration of Jesus' Ascension to the following Sunday—and we have been doing so ever since. So in case you are worried about missing the Ascension holy day this past Thursday, don't worry: you didn't!

We indeed recognize the Ascension as a triumphant moment for the risen Christ who returns, body and soul, to his Father's heavenly kingdom. But we might also wonder what importance or relevance it has for us. After all, Jesus is the eternal Son of the Father who came down from heaven when conceived in Mary's womb—it seems only fitting that he should return to the glory of his Father. We, on the other hand, do not share Jesus' divine nature—so what does his Ascension mean for us?

In fact, Jesus' Ascension is supremely relevant and important for each one of us and for every person who ever lived or will live. For one thing, it affirms the reality and actual existence of this place we call 'heaven'. Of course, we should probably put quotation marks around the word 'place' since heaven is not confined to or exist in a specific physical or geographical location as does this church building or this city. That, in turn, is one argument often used by atheists and other who reject the very concept of heaven. "We can't see it," they say, "and so it must not exist." I remember reading about one of the early cosmonauts from the Soviet Union who shared in that regime's rejection of God; as he orbited the earth, he mockingly remarked that he found no evidence of heaven up there with the sun, moon and stars.

To think of heaven in such a limited, materialistic way—as if the only things that are real are things that can be analyzed or measured in a laboratory—is to miss the point completely. No one is his right mind would deny the reality or existence of things like love or peace or joy or beauty or thought or wonder...even though they cannot be measured by a ruler or weighed on a scale. God, of course, is the supreme and foundational reality, the ultimate truth. And heaven is the eternal presence and infinite, merciful love of this amazing God. As such, God and heaven are beyond our human power to describe or measure—our poor, limited human words and senses are hopelessly inadequate to capture completely this divine reality. St. Paul captured this inadequacy so powerfully in his first letter to the Corinthians in words we have heard many times: "Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it entered the heart of man what God has prepared for those who love him."

So indeed: 'Heaven is for Real'—just like the title of that book I mentioned to you earlier this year. It is real, even if we cannot yet see it, because God has revealed its existence to us...and God does not lie. Not only has God revealed to us the reality of heaven—we also yearn for heaven. We long for ultimate and lasting joy and peace. That longing is real, we all feel and experience it, sometimes more intensely than others. And we also know that none of the things of this earthly life can satisfy that longing in any lasting way. We may well experience a momentary satisfaction after a delicious meal or from other delights of the senses, but they do not last nor can they last.

Only God can possibly satisfy that longing within us—a longing that God himself created within us. Psalm 42 expresses it so well: "Like the deer that yearns from running streams, so my soul is yearning for you, my God. My soul is thirsting for God, the God of my life. When can I enter and see the face of God?" St. Augustine, one of the greatest saints of the Church and one of the greatest minds in human history, echoed that thought in his Confessions (his spiritual autobiography) when he wrote: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you."

God made us with the cooperation of our human parents; and in creating our souls, he also instilled in us that longing, that desire for perfect and eternal union with him. And that is not just some pipe-dream, no mere make-believe wish-fulfillment as claimed by our atheist friends. Heaven is indeed for real, and the Ascension of Jesus not only affirms that reality—it makes it available for us as well. Remember: Jesus is the incarnate word of God. His divine nature took on our flesh-and-blood human, bodily nature when he was conceived in Mary's womb. After the separation of his soul and body at his death on the Cross, his body and soul were reunited forever when he rose from the dead. And he ascended—body and soul together—to his Father's heavenly glory. This is mystery, to be sure, and we cannot claim to comprehend it fully...but that makes it no less real.

That also means that heaven is now possible for us as well when our bodies and souls are reunited at the end of time and the final judgment. Pope Benedict XVI has well described the meaning of Jesus' Ascension as our 'belief that in Christ the humanity that we all share has entered into the inner life of God in a new and...unheard of way' and that we have found 'an everlasting place in God.' Since that is what we are made for and what we long for in the depths of our being (even if not always fully aware of that longing), the Ascension of Jesus is good news, indeed it is tremendous news for us. Heaven is truly for real, and the risen and ascended Jesus is the one way by which we can attain that goal for which we are made by God to long for and strive for above all others. May God's grace and Spirit lead us all to a deeper desire for that heavenly goal and a stronger resolve to strive for that goal by living the call to holiness for the love of God.