

It's a Mystery, not just a History: The Ascension of the Lord

Last week our consideration was the Liturgy of the Word, which I will return to in the weeks to come. But as we celebrate the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord today, in the Diocese of Des Moines, I think it opportune to consider both the solemnity itself, and our celebration of it today, rather than last Thursday, where it falls in the calendar of the universal Church and is celebrated in a few dioceses of the United States.

The first thing to recognize about Ascension Day is that it should not be thought of as an historical commemoration. The New Testament treats the Ascension as an integral part of the one, singular Easter mystery. In the gospels, the earliest resurrection stories {e.g. in Mark's gospel} depict the appearances of Jesus on Easter day as manifestations of the *already* risen and ascended Christ. The later appearance narratives (e.g. in Luke and John) tend to separate the Resurrection and the Ascension, but they are still not regarded as two successive or separate events. They are separated in order to better contemplate the meaning of two aspects of a single mystery. For several centuries the Church did not, either in its writings or in its liturgy, treat the Ascension as though it actually "occurred" on the fortieth day after the Resurrection. Rather, this is another example of how the number "forty" is used to symbolize the time needed to prepare for a new life, a new experience of God. In this case, the new life and experience of God comes with Jesus' physical absence, but enduring presence through the gift the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. It is because of this symbolic significance of the Ascension, signifying the eternal mystery of universal and abiding presence of Christ in the world, indeed in *all* of creation, that the exact timing of its "history" is not the most important thing about the feast. What is most important is expressed in these prayers of the day: *May we follow Christ into the new creation, for his ascension is our glory and our hope. Christ is the beginning, the head of the Church; where he has gone, we hope to follow.*