

Reflection on the Feast of the Ascension

This Sunday we as a people celebrate the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord. This Feast marks the fortieth day after Jesus rose from the dead and brought the hope of eternal salvation to all humanity. Recently in the last twenty or so years many Dioceses in the United States and elsewhere with approval from Rome have moved the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord to the Sunday following the fortieth day. This has been done with the intention to enable the faithful to be more able to celebrate this important Feast by attending the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

After Jesus rose from the dead, He led His disciples out to the mountain, He informs them that they are to go into the world and proclaim the “*Good News*” beginning in Jerusalem. Then He departed from them and ascended to Heaven, to His Father and our Father. Ten days after the traditional feast day is the Feast of Pentecost, the celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit the birth of the Church. The Feast of the Ascension of the Lord is a bridge from the Resurrection of the Lord to the Birth of the Church.

The Ascension of the Lord provides a transition point that has been a part of the Church since antiquity. There is no documented evidence of the existence of this Feast before the beginning of the fifth century. St. Augustine of Hippo (354 to 430), stated that the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord is of Apostolic origin. St. Augustine also spoke of the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord in terms that it was already universally observed in the Catholic Church.

As we celebrate the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord, many of us might still have vivid memories of this Feast being called Ascension Thursday and being celebrated on a Thursday as a Holy Day of Obligation. In fact, there are still at least 7 Dioceses in the United States that celebrate the Feast of Ascension on Thursday. These Dioceses are Boston, Hartford, New York, Newark, Philadelphia, Omaha, and Lincoln. I remember back in the 1990’s when our Archdiocese under the leadership of Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan, moved the celebration of the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord from Thursday to Sunday. My father was not too happy with this change for his whole life he had celebrated the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord on Thursday and now in the Archdiocese of Santa Fe it had been moved to a Sunday. My suggestion was that if he wished he could travel to Amarillo, Texas. At that time Amarillo was still celebrating the Feast of the Ascension on Thursday and not Sunday. So, for the next few years my Father and Mother for the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord would travel to Amarillo, Texas and celebrate the Feast on a Thursday. In time my parents embraced the celebration of the Feast on Sunday and stopped traveling to Amarillo, for the Feast.

Change in life can be difficult, be it for my Father, the moving of the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord from Thursday to Sunday or for the Apostles, Jesus ascending to His Father and our Father. This Feast marks a change in the life of the early Church. In our Gospel reading this Sunday taken from the Gospel of Matthew we hear not only of Jesus ascending to His Father and ours, but also of the Apostles being informed by Christ that they are called to go into the world and make disciples of all the nations. This directive from Jesus to His disciples is often referred to as the “*Great Commission*”, Jesus sending his disciples into the world. This “*Great Commission*” is not just for the Apostles of the New Testament, it is a commissioning for all believers of Christ. Each one of us due to our baptisms are called and commissioned to proclaim the good news to all the Nations.