



The Day of Faith and Hope for Christians

A pastoral statement from the bishops of the Province of Denver on the observance of the Solemnity of the Ascension.

February 9, 2000

Dear brothers and sisters in the Lord,

Last year the Holy Father, at the request of the bishops of the United States, granted permission for a change in the date of celebrating the Solemnity of the Ascension of Our Lord. Ecclesiastical Provinces in the United States now have the authority to maintain the solemnity on the traditional Thursday of the Sixth Week of Easter ("Ascension Thursday"), or transfer it to the Seventh and final Sunday of Easter, one week before Pentecost.

The bishops of the Denver Province, comprising the Dioceses of Cheyenne, Colorado Springs and Pueblo and the Archdiocese of Denver, voted in the fall of 1999 to move the celebration of the Ascension to the Seventh Sunday of Easter. The new date will apply beginning this year, in the Easter season of the Great Jubilee.

We believe this change will enable more of our people to deepen their participation in the meaning of the Ascension as an integral part of the Paschal Mystery, which begins on Good Friday and concludes with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In His ascension to the Father, Jesus is fully glorified. He does not "exit" the world; rather He becomes present to all of its peoples, in all of its ages. Nor does He exit time; rather, He becomes its center.

Through His ascension, Jesus "entered . . . into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb 9:24). The Ascension is therefore also a reminder of our own eternal destiny, for Jesus goes before us to prepare for us a place in His Father's house (Jn14:2-3). Finally, in returning to the Father, He enables us to take up the mandate He gave us to "go therefore, and make disciples of all nations . . ." (Mt 28:19), through the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Ascension, like all "holy days of obligation," has a powerful catechetical content. The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy reminds us that, "In the course of the year . . . [the Church] unfolds the whole mystery of Christ from the incarnation and nativity to the ascension, to Pentecost and to the expectation of the blessed hope of the coming of the Lord" (102). For the Christian, all time is sacred, from the Christmas and Easter seasons to the "ordinary time" in which we now find ourselves on the Church calendar. Time has meaning and direction beyond the annual cycle of the seasons. The liturgical year teaches the story of our salvation.

The Great Jubilee we now celebrate embodies this. As the Third Millennium Draws Near, the Holy Father's 1994 letter preparing the way for the Jubilee, recalled that for Christianity, "time has a fundamental importance;" that in Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, "time becomes a dimension of God"; and that "from this relationship of God with time, there arises the duty to sanctify time" (10). In fact, for all humanity, "time is indeed fulfilled by the very fact that God, in the Incarnation, came down into human history" (9).

Yet if this is so — if we have "the duty to sanctify time" — why change the traditional Thursday celebration of the Ascension?

We should remember that holy days of obligation have not remained static throughout Church history. Some have been moved, some have been added and others have been retired altogether. Therefore, this change is not unprecedented. All Saints Day was transferred from May to November in the Ninth Century, to cite only one example.

Nonetheless, we take this step reluctantly. Some will perceive it as a concession to convenience, or the product of a priest shortage, or another step toward secularizing the daily life of the wider community, which already too often lacks an awareness of the presence of God. Each of these concerns is worthy. The root of our decision, however, lies elsewhere.

Too many of our people — either through innocent misunderstanding, distraction or indifference — have already strayed from a full, conscious and active participation in the worship life of the Church. Mass attendance on holy days has declined significantly in the last two generations, even among families with children in Catholic schools. In moving the Solemnity of the Ascension from Thursday to Sunday, we act for a simple but urgent reason: to reach more of our people with the meaning of this feast. The 50 days of Easter which conclude on the great Solemnity of Pentecost are the pinnacle of the liturgical year. Our hearts should be filled to overflowing with the light, joy and peace of the Risen Lord during this time. That joy cannot be shared without a proper understanding of our Lord's ascension — which, in turn, can more fruitfully be achieved through celebrating the Ascension in our Sunday worship.

We conclude with a word of encouragement and a word of caution.

Since World Youth Day 1993, our region has been blessed with an enormous outpouring of energy and zeal in service to the Gospel. God is working here in a special way. We all feel it. And His work is made more effective by the many thousands of good people who seek to do His will.

The adversary of faith in our country in our day, however, is not persecution, but complacency. We are not immune to it here.

We live in a culture of comfort and distraction. As our Holy Father reminds us in his 1998 apostolic letter *Dies Domini* ("On Keeping the Lord's Day Holy"), "If believers are not to be overwhelmed, they must be able to count on the support of Christian community. This is why they must be convinced that it is crucially important for the life of faith that they should come together with others on Sunday to celebrate the Passover of the Lord in the sacrament of the New Covenant" (48). This is why he regards Sunday worship as an "obligation of conscience" (47), and why all faithful Christians "need to take part in the [Sunday] liturgical assembly" (46). This is why the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that "the Sunday celebration of the Lord's Day and His Eucharist is at the heart of the Church's life" (2177). And this is why the Code of Canon Law holds that "on Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are bound to attend Mass" under grave obligation (1247). Thus, whatever their motives, clergy, catechists and others who downplay the obligation of Sunday Mass or who mistakenly counsel believers that participation in the Sunday Liturgy is a matter of private conscience, very seriously mislead the faithful and cooperate in their loss of Christian identity.

Sunday worship — and by extension, worship on all days which the Church designates as "holy"— is never merely an optional matter. It is an act of praise and thanksgiving, community and solidarity, vital to the health of the whole Church. It is also, in John Paul II's words from *Dies Domini*, "a great school of charity, justice and peace" wherein believers "become, in their turn, builders of peace" (73).

In transferring the celebration of the Ascension to Sunday, we acknowledge that what is at stake here is not merely a deeper understanding of the Solemnity of the Ascension and its place in the Paschal Mystery -- but the nature of Sunday itself as the supreme day of faith and hope in every Christian's life.

As John Paul II concludes in *Dies Domini*, ". . . Sunday is the weekly Easter, recalling and making present the day upon which Christ rose from the dead . . . the day which reveals the meaning of time" (75). By our actions, we reveal our hearts. In that spirit, we invite our people to live each Sunday of this Jubilee Year as "the soul of [all] other days" (83). For worship is a form a witness . . . and by our witness, we "make disciples of all nations."

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