

## ASCENSION, 2026

You heard in Acts 1:3 the statement that the Lord Jesus ascended into Heaven 40 days after Easter. This is why the Catholic Church traditionally celebrated the Feast of Ascension on the 40th day from Easter, Ascension Thursday. In more recent years, in many regions of the Roman Catholic Church, including this one, the feast of the Ascension has been moved to the following Sunday. Evaluating that move is above my pay grade. What is not above my pay grade is giving a homily that shows why celebrating the feast of the Lord's Ascension is important.

My starting point is from the account of the Lord's Ascension in St. Luke's Gospel, which is not the account we read this year, but which has a detail that I think is essential to celebrating this feast well. The final verses of St. Luke's Gospel say, "they worshipped Him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God." (Luke 24:50-51) After the Lord departed from them in visible form, the Eleven and those who were with them (probably including Mary, since we know from Acts 1:14 that she was with the group in the Upper Room in the days of prayer between Ascension and Pentecost) were not sad, they were joyful. Why were they joyful?

During 40 days of intensive spiritual training bathed in all the power and wonder of His glorious Resurrection, the Lord Jesus Christ taught His disciples how to live each day on earth with their hearts in Heaven, and enabled them to do so. He was not present on earth in His true physical form, but He was present in Word and Sacrament, and through Word and Sacrament their hearts were in Heaven with Him. When He ascended into Heaven, their hearts ascended with Him. Their response to the Cross 43 days earlier could only have been horror and anguish. He seemed really to be gone from them. Now, after 40 days with the Resurrected Lord, they knew better. He was with them on earth in Word and Sacrament, and they were with Him in Heaven in spirit. "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Matthew 6:21). After 40 days with the risen Lord, He was truly their treasure; so, when He ascended into Heaven, their hearts went with Him. In their hearts, they were already in Heaven.

During those 40 days of intensive spiritual training with the Resurrected Lord in the Flesh, they came to understand the great truth that He had to struggle first, and then enter into joy. With that, they also came to understand the truth that they, too, would have to suffer first, and then enter into joy. As we celebrate the Feast of the Lord's Ascension, we must apply that lesson to ourselves. We also must struggle first, and then enter into joy.

Whatever struggles we are called to face come to us under God's providence. He permits them, and He will never permit a struggle to come to us without also providing the wisdom and strength to win the struggle. I certainly don't mean that we need to go out hunting for dragons to fight. The dragons will come to us, sure enough. Into every life there will come some kind of pain, difficulty, or sadness. The sooner we can accept this, the better off we will be. One generation of Christians lives, rejoices, and struggles in this world. Then it goes to the next world, and another generation follows it. Those who have gone before us in Faith struggled and, with God's help, won their fights. At times they were taken down or knocked down, but they did not stay down. With God's help, they defeated the world, the flesh, and the devil. Now they share a throne with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Everyone called by God's Grace to the life of Heaven has to fight. Accept this fact. Others fought before us. Now it is time for us to step into the ring. St. Paul did it before us. Sometimes he got beat up physically, and sometimes he got beat up spiritually, but he kept fighting. At the end of his life he could write to his disciple St Timothy, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the Faith." (2 Timothy 4:7)

A former altar boy of mine sent me a video of part of his kickboxing workout in preparation for a fight. It certainly looked scary to me. He admitted that his grappling, while "very much alive," could use some more work, but he's pretty confident about his boxing and kicking. Now, I have no idea who he's going to fight, but I can guess that he has a serious challenge on his hands; but he's not scared. The fight is coming.

That is true spiritually for each one of us. We have good spiritual nutrition, if we've partaken of what the Lord provides for us in Word and Sacrament. We have good spiritual training, in the sacred Scriptures and the traditions of the Church, if we have paid attention. We can be confident, but not overconfident, since the world, the flesh, and the devil are strong and cunning. Still, properly nourished and trained, we need not be scared. The fight is coming.

Our Lord fought His match before us, and won. A whole succession of saints, some known to the world and others known only to their family and friends, have fought their matches before us, and won. That should encourage us.

Now we step into the ring. All of those saints are cheering for us.

We have to pay attention to what we are doing. Pay attention to your footwork! Keep an eye on that right hand! Whatever happens, don't be discouraged. As a friend of mine says, whenever asked for advice about a fight, "attack early, attack often." Don't just play defense, but take active measures against occasions of sin and incitements to unbelief. Above all, don't give up. Keep up your courage, and never stop fighting. As long as you keep fighting, the Lord Jesus guarantees to keep you in the fight with new strength and new wisdom. Attacks might come from your mind, or your body, or your bank account. Some attacks will feel like accidents, while some are obviously premeditated. Some attacks will come from enemies - you're ready for that. Some spiritual attacks will come from friends, however. Be alert for that surprise attack. You will feel lonely in that ring, but you aren't really alone. Be brave and fight, and keep on fighting. Whatever happens, keep on fighting until you win. Then Jesus Christ Himself will hug you, and give you a joy which nothing in all the universe will be able to take from you.

After the fight, we enter into that perfect rest into which the Lord Jesus has ascended. In that perfect rest, "there is no more death, neither sorrow nor tears, nor any more pain, for the former things have passed away." (Revelation 21:4) Think about that. Nor more sin, guilt, remorse, punishment, penance, defeat, or sickness, to weigh us down. No more passion, prejudice, arrogance, envy, or wrath, to lead us astray. We will see God as He truly is. We will drink from the Living Water flowing from the throne. We will be HOME.

HOME! What a beautiful word. Jesus Christ has already returned home, and He is getting home ready for us. All that stands before us and HOME is one fight, albeit a long one. Let's fight and win. With "a great cloud of witnesses" (Hebrews 12:1) cheering for us, and Jesus both waiting for us and actively assisting us, let's fight and win, and then come out of the great tribulation, having washed our robes, "and made them white in the Blood of the Lamb." (Revelation 7:14)