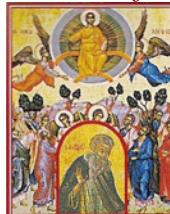


C. FROM THE LEAVETAKING OF PASCHA TO THE SUNDAY OF ALL SAINTS

The Ascension of the Lord



This Feast is celebrated on the 40th day after Pascha, which always comes on Thursday of the 6th week. It has received its name from the commemoration and event glorified on this day, the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ in the flesh to heaven (Mark. 16:16-20; Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:4-12). On the last day of His visible stay on earth the Lord Jesus Christ revealed Himself to all the apostles who have gathered together and commanded them not to leave Jerusalem, but to wait there for the coming of the Holy Spirit on them that was promised by Him. He "has led them from the city of Jerusalem to Bethany" on the Mount of Olives 1). While on the way He talked with them about the organization of His Church on earth. On the top of the Mount of Olives the Lord, explaining to the Holy Apostles what their purpose will be, said to them: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth". And when He had said this, the Savior lifted up His divine hands and blessed His disciples. "And when He blessed them 2), He receded from them, and went up again into heaven". The Apostles reverentially bowed to the Lord, Who blessed them, and with trembling and amazement watched Him ascend to heaven while, finally, a cloud took Him out of their sight. But the Lord was not slow to comfort His disciples with such an unexpected and regrettable separation. Behold two men in white clothes revealed themselves to the Apostles. They were Angels whom the ascended Savior as Lord and Master of the Angels sent to earth to the Apostles. The Angels said to them: "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who ascended from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven". Having heard from the angels such a comforting message, the apostles, filled with the deepest joy, left the Mount of Olives and returned to Jerusalem. So glorious was the visible ascension of Jesus Christ to heaven, which His Disciples told us. But His further invisible Ascension to an eternal divine kingdom to His Father was much more glorious, as this is described in the church hymns in the present day, in accordance with the prophecies of the Old Testament prophets.

The angels with the sound of the trumpet met the Lord who has gone up and accompanied Him (Ps. 46: 6). The Holy Spirit ordered the heavenly Powers to open the gates of the eternal kingdom of glory for the Redeemer: "Raise your

gates, you princes, and be lifted up, you everlasting gates: and the King of Glory shall come in" (Ps. 23:7). And our Savior, "went up to heaven, from where He also had come", as the Son of God, Only-begotten of God the Father, has received that divine glory which He had by the Father before the creation of the world; went up to heaven, as the Son of Man, having exalted mankind in His person "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion" (Ephesians 1:21). The very God the Father with love expected and received to Himself His beloved Son, the theandric Jesus Christ Who Himself sat on His right hand as it has still been described in the Old Testament by the Holy Psalmist: "The Lord said to my Lord: Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet" (Ps. 109:1; refer to Rom., 8:34; Heb. 8:1). Thus, our Savior not only has ascended to heaven, but also sits on the right hand of God the Father 3) i.e. as the God-man and Redeemer of the world, He has taken on all authority, greatness and glory even in His human nature, which belong to Him in His divine nature, as well as He, after His Resurrection, told the apostles: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me" (Mt. 28:18).

The Feast of the Ascension of the Lord is great in its own meaning, as it verifies the fulfilling of the divine plan in us about the salvation of man and all the world and about the highest glorification of the human nature, which in the person of Jesus Christ is raised higher than the light-bearing spirits and who is seated on the throne of divine glory. And this assures all of us that from now on the entrance into heaven opens for those born on earth, where Jesus has gone as a Forerunner on our behalf (Heb. 6:20) and where His journey to heaven becomes a path for all His true followers 4). Together with this "the present feast", the Blessed Augustine says, "reveals to us in Jesus Christ the mystery of man and God," witnessing to the undivided and unbroken union of the divinity and humanity in the person of Jesus Christ "Who ascended in both natures". In the Divine Services of this Feast, although they describe the sad thoughts that the Apostles originally had, being orphaned, they mainly changed them into a high feeling of joy 5). For, as St. John Chrysostom teaches: "Today people have become like angels, men have been united with the bodiless ones, and from this relationship came a great union. The Lord of all, having ascended to heaven, has reconciled the race of man with the Father. We, who were deemed unworthy on earth, today have ascended to heaven with our own essence. And the nature, from which the cherubim protected paradise, today itself sits upon the cherubim". That is why even the Holy Church in its hymns for this day, calling believers to sing the song of victory to the Lord, Who ascended and causing us to sit together with Him on the right hand of the Father, exclaims: "The earth exults, and heaven rejoices today at the Ascension of the Creator of creation"; "All the world, visible and invisible, celebrates. The angels exult, and men continually raise up doxologies". Calling her children to the

joy of the Ascension of the Lord, the Holy Church at the same time according to the words of the angels said to the Apostles after the Ascension of the Lord (Acts 1:11), in its hymns for this day reminds us also about the second coming, strengthening us by this victory to lift up "our eyes and thoughts to the heights", to focus our sights "together with our mortal feelings to the heavenly gates" and to beg the Lord that He "spare our souls, granting remission of our sins". In agreement with this even the Saint Gregory Diologos in his homily on the day of Ascension teaches: "Let us make haste, beloved ones, with all our heart to follow Him to where He has ascended. Let us reject any predilection for earthly objects 6). Having a part in the inheritance of heavenly abodes with Him, let us not search for blessedness on earth. We should take care and think about how He, though now ascended to heaven with meekness, will at one time be revealed with fear and with a terrible presence, and with severity will demand from us all that He now teaches with meekness. Let no one resent the time given for repentance. Let no one neglect himself while there is time. The Savior on the dread judgment seat will demand an account more strictly from us than He would have patience with us now. Brothers, never forget this. Let your spirit in the middle of the present sea of life be stirred up by the mighty storm; soon you will reach a quiet haven in the heavenly fatherland; soon you will be in the light of the unapproachable glory. Now the Lord ascends to heaven for you. Let us reflect more often and more attentively to what our faith teaches us. If we have not become stronger in the deeds of faith and piety, if our physical powers are still weak, then, at least, let us follow our Savior in our readiness and love for Him". "And if we live piously," as Saint John Chrysostom teaches, "and that we remain unshakably pious, always with diligence multiplying this good; and if we are deprived of all boldness and we recognize in ourselves alone only sins; then we would be corrected to get that same boldness, and there together also with one mind to meet with due glory the King of Angels and enjoy this blessed joy of our Lord Jesus Christ".

The establishment of the feast of the Ascension undoubtedly goes back to the earliest times. Besides the importance of the commemoration of this event on this holiday, that they speak of it from the earliest times positively witnesses to its antiquity. So, already the Apostolic Decisions prescribed it to be observed on the fortieth day after Pascha. St. John Chrysostom calls this feast a great and most important one and relates it to the category of feasts undoubtedly established by apostles, that is Pascha and Pentecost. The Blessed Augustine also calls it a most ancient and universal feast.

Troparion, tone 4

**Thou hast ascended in glory, O Christ our God,
Granting joy to Thy disciples by the promise of the Holy Spirit.**

**Through the blessing they were assured
That Thou art the Son of God,
The Redeemer of the world.**

(*Text tr. OCA 1967*)

Kontakion, tone 6

**When Thou didst fulfill the dispensation for our sake,
And unite earth to heaven:
Thou didst ascend in glory, O Christ our God,
Not being parted from those who love Thee,
But remaining with them and crying:
I am with you and no one will be against you.**

(*Text tr. OCA 1967*)

The Megalynarion

**We magnify Thee, O Life-giver Christ,
And we honor Thy divine Ascension
With Thy most pure flesh into heaven.**

Paramoeas: 1) Is. 2:1-3. 2) Is. 62:10-63:3,7-9. 3) Zech. 14:1, 4, 8-11.
Matins Gospel Mark 16:9-20; sel. 71. **Epistle** Acts 1:1-12; sel. 1. **Gospel** Luke 24:36-53, sel. 114.

On the feast of Ascension at **Matins** after the Gospel we sing: "Having beheld the Resurrection of Christ"; at the **Liturgy** we sing the festal antiphons which describe the prophecies of the Divine glory of the Savior, who ascended into the heavens with exclamations and the sound of a trumpet. Instead of "It is truly meet" we sing the 9th Ode Irmos of the canon: "We magnify you, the Mother of God". Besides this, at the beginning of the church services on this day and following until Pentecost we do not read the prayer: "**O heavenly King**" because it is the prayer to the Holy Spirit, whose coming the Church is still waiting for during these days, and after the blessing of the priest the reader directly reads "Holy God". Just as on the day of Ascension, and the following days up to the Leavetaking of the feast at the liturgy instead of "**We have seen the true light**" we sing the Troparion "Thou hast ascended in glory". The feast of Ascension is one of the **Twelve Major Feasts**. The **Leavetaking** of the feast falls on the Thursday of the 7th Week after Pascha.

Notes:

1) According to the explanation of the Right Reverend Philaret, Metropolitan of Moscow, the Lord selected the Mount of Olives for His Ascension, as one may consider, that it was His favorite place before which He

blessed with His repeated visits and prayer, and is where He began His special saving Passion for us, even unto death with spiritual grief, and His very difficult prayer, resulting in the outpouring of bloody sweat. Having returned to the place of the beginning of His sufferings to the place where He completed His glorification, He through this has signaled that His suffering and glorification compose one harmonious structure of the salvation for us the plan of God, one golden chain produced in the hearth of the wisdom of God, for the raising up again to heaven man who fell from paradise.

2) The evangelist did not say: "when you bless" but "when you have blessed", i.e. God blesses, and yet does not end His blessing, but continues to bless, and meanwhile ascends to heaven. According to the explanation of the Right Reverend Philaret, Metropolitan of Moscow, he specifically says that God does not want to end the blessing, but continues to endlessly bless the Church and all those believing in Him. Having received the blessing of Christ through the Apostles they distribute it to others, and thus, all those belonging to the Holy, Catholic (Sobornaia), Apostolic Church are made participants of the one blessing of Jesus Christ and His Father, "blessing us all in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavens (Ephesians 1:3). As the dew "of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion" (Psalm 132:3) this blessing descending on any soul rising above the passions and carnal desires is higher than the vanities and cares of the world. As the indelible seal, it marks those who are in Christ, so that at the end of the ages according to this sign He will pronounce to them from the midst of all the human race: "Come, receive the blessing"!

3) The Right Reverend Philaret, Metropolitan of Moscow, teaches: "Having heard that the ascended Lord "sits at the right hand of God" should not present to the mind anything corporal and sensual, but should think only that Christ has the same authority with the Father Almighty, is one in glory with him, one in the ruling consideration for all the world, and especially for the Church that is saved. In general, do not boldly turn the tested ideas at this immense height to flight: there is "unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16). If before the created light of the visible sun you have blinded your eyes, how is the uncleanness from the mud in the eyes of your mind not removed before the eternal light of the Sun of the spirits, before Which even the highest of the Angels close before the person? And the Apostolic eyes from nearby could follow the Lord Who is ascending; the cloud took Him and hid Him from them. And as they during this time "worshipped Him": so even you, after a modest look to heaven in faith, fall down, son of ashes, humbly into the ashes, even before the inscrutable greatness in almost silent awe."

4) The Ascension of the Lord, similar to His death and resurrection, includes the most precise paradigm in the plan of our salvation, and therefore was predicted and celebrated, in all its greatness even by the Prophets. And the Holy Apostle Peter, after the Descent of the Holy Spirit, in the hearing of all the Judeans asserted that "Heaven must receive Christ Jesus until the time for establishing all" (Acts 3:21), i.e. up to the end of the world. The time for the humiliation of the Lord has forever ended in His cross and tomb. After the resurrection the acceptance of all Authority by Him on earth and in heaven (Matthew 28:18), the time of glorification has essentially come to Him. But rough, corrupted by the sins, gravitating under the curse, our earth, obviously, is not a place of rest and glorification, but of temptation and wandering. The earth serves as a dwelling place only for those who are from the earth. But the Son of Man, "Who descended from Heaven" (John 3:13), did not belong to the earth. To tell the truth, "having shared in our flesh and blood" (Heb. 2:14), He had a body from the earth. But how long this body was similar to ours was as long as He lived on earth similar to us. In the resurrection His body changed and has accepted such properties that was visible, and at the same time became invisible, was tangible, yet passed through closed doors, accepted food, and was not subject to change. The resurrected Savior was on earth for forty days; but during this time He has been seen only when He revealed Himself to the Holy Apostles. Where and how He spent His other time is not known. But, obviously, the earth could not be still His dwelling place. For a body immortal, glorified and deified, it is much more natural to dwell in heaven than on earth. Already immediately after the resurrection from the dead the Savior tried to ascend to the most heavenly world, to the Father (John 20:17). And if He still remained on earth, then it is because of special love for the disciples and for the need to continue His conversations with them, "speaking of the Kingdom of God" (Acts 1:3). And when also this need has been satisfied, and when these holy chains begin to have power, then the Savior was glorified for His extreme effort on the cross for humanity. Similarly the fragrant incense is directed from the Mount of Olives to the eternal Sun. There, where all is in compliance with His purity and glory, and where He should be until that time, so that by His action and by His power all will be cleansed and enlightened and filled, and the very earth will be divested of its roughness and curses. Then the earth will be able to become the place of the visible eternal dwelling of God with men (Rev. 21:3). This was demanded also with new, great applicability of the Son of Man after His resurrection. As in the situation of humiliation He was forced to be an offering for all, so that in the situation of His glorification it fell to Him to become the manager and the head of all. But where ordinarily is the place for the head? Is it above the whole body? According to the same law (if the law is also necessary for the Law-giver) returned and now: as the Head and the Ruler of the whole world, the God-

man is seated "on the right hand" of God the Father, "in the heavens far above all rule and authority and power and dominion" (Eph. 1:20-21), that, in the expression of the Holy Apostle Paul "to unite all things" in Him "things in the heavens and things on earth" (Eph. 1:10), to accept divine "worship from all knees" not only "on earth and beneath the earth", but also "in heaven" (Philip. 2:10), "to reign" over all in heaven and on earth, and over all worlds, "until He has put all his enemies under His feet" (1 Cor. 15:25, Heb. 1:13), that all visible and invisible, all tribes and tongues confess, "that Jesus Christ" is truly "Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Philip. 2:11), "King of kings and Lord of lords" (Rev. 19:16). If there were no Ascension to heaven and glorification of the God-man, then the matter of our expiation would remain incomplete, unfinished and uncrowned. Being raised upon the cross, the Savior took all to Himself only up to the height of a cross; meanwhile He took all even up to the height of heaven, even up to the throne of glory (John 14:3). Therefore, "having accomplished" on earth "the work which Thou gavest Me to do" Father, "yes created" (John 17:4), He ascends to heaven to draw all men to Himself (John 12:32), prepared a place for us in the mansions of the Heavenly Father (John 14:2). But the mansions of the Heavenly Father, which the blessed one prepared for us, is open for all, but is not accessible to all. For the entrance into them it is required that we here on earth be clothed in appropriate dress, worthy of heaven. These clothes are prepared for us by the suffering of the God-man, adorned and sealed by His priceless blood; but under the divine plan of the management of our salvation, it belonged to the Most Holy Spirit to create our vestments in the "light and pure fine linen of righteousness" (Rev. 19:8). And the Son of God, after the end of His great work upon earth, i.e. after the forgiveness of people by His death, after His descent into Hades and after His resurrection, after His visible and solemn departure to heaven, so that His ascension opens the way to the invisible benefaction of the activity of the Comforter Spirit, only through whose assistance we can "put off the old man with its practices", and "to put on the new", with the primordial "righteousness and holiness" (Eph. 4:24, Col. 3:9-10). "It is to your advantage that I go away", the Savior told His Apostles, "for if I do not go away, the Comforter will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you" (John 16:7). And before the Descent of the Holy Spirit to earth "it was necessary for Christ to enter into His glory" (Luke 24:26) to receive "all authority in heaven and on earth" (Mt. 28:18) to ascend to heaven and "to sit on the right hand of the Father, (Mk. 16:19). For "the Holy Spirit was not yet" on earth while "Jesus was not yet glorified (John 7:39). Thus, in the trihypostatic council of God it follows that the fulfillment of the work of reconciliation, which remains with us on earth, is already not of the Redeemer Son of God, but of the Holy Spirit, Who, abiding in us, would regenerate in us a strengthened, consoled, spiritual life, and "helps us in our weakness (Rom. 8:26), also "intercedes for us with sighs too deep

for words (Rom. 8:26). But under the same plan of the management of our salvation it follows that also the Son of God "through the cross destroyed the enmity (Eph. 3:16 sic) between heaven and earth, went up to the heavenly saints who stand with Him before God the Father ever to decree peace to the world and to save those of the sinners, who, repenting their sins, even up to seventy times seven (Mt. 18:22), again will come through Him to God with faith and a broken spirit. And our Lord Jesus Christ as the eternal High Priest, passed into heaven "now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" (Heb. 9:24), "to make intercession for them" (Heb. 7:25), for us guilty before the righteous judgment of God, so that, "if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John. 2, 1). (See details in the Collected Works of Innocent, Archbishop of Chersonese, vol. 1, pp 353-359; Words and speeches of Sophonius, Bishop of Turkestan, vol. 1, pp. 15-23).

5) After the cloud hid the ascending Lord from the visible sight of the Holy Apostles, their hearts were filled with sadness, as before, when the Lord only told them before about His going to the Father (John 16:6). The faith of the Holy Apostles still could not reach the end of the Ascension of the Lord (John 14:25, 16:7); they now only saw that the Lord will no longer live on earth and they will no more see His corporal eyes. But their reception, then, of the message being revealed to them by the Holy Angels was for their faith to the end of what they could not reach, or, at least, to what their intellectual insight was not now directed. This message distracted them from their sad thoughts that the Lord will probably not be present any more among them, to talk with them, but has poured into their hearts faith and hope that the Lord who disappeared from their visible sight has ascended in divine glory, as well as He Himself told them before, that He will come again in the glorious image in the opening of the eternal kingdom of glory. And the Holy Apostles "returned to Jerusalem with great joy". Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow said, "They rejoice now because their faith opened their mind to the perfect understanding of the mystery of Christ: they believe and know that as Christ through His resurrection shattered the gates of Hades and opened the exit from it for the believer, so through His ascension opened the gates of heaven and the entrance into it for the believer. They rejoice because their love is perfect. It is delightful for them that their beloved Savior ascended to heaven in blessedness and glory, though they remained on earth for ascetical feats and suffering. They rejoice because their hope is perfect. They wait for and feel that the ascended Lord, according to His promise, will soon send them another Comforter, the Holy Spirit. And that, finally, according to the angelic announcement, "This same Jesus, who ascended into heaven, will so come" (Acts 1:11). And that He may come to keep His other promise: "I will come again and receive you to Myself" (John 14:3). And

this holy joy as the Right Reverend Demetrius, Archbishop of Chersonese teaches, remained forever the inalienable property of the souls of the Holy Apostles, the inexhaustible treasure of their heart, the plentiful source of comfort for all their subsequent life. Nothing in the world could take away from them this holy and life-creating joy of the Lord. As they seem lonely and helpless in the world, "like lambs among the wolves", how many are surrounded by their enemies and persecutors, how they met their "trouble in the cities, trouble in the deserts, trouble from the pagans, trouble from relatives, trouble from malevolent brothers". They always and incessantly rejoiced in the Lord, rejoiced in the work and ascetical feats of the annunciation of the Gospel of Christ, rejoiced in temptations, troubles and misfortunes, rejoiced amidst slander and intrigues, prosecutions and persecutions from the Jews and the pagans, rejoiced even in the very suffering for the name of Christ.

6) If we do not vainly carry on ourselves the all holy name of Christ, if for this we were buried with Him through baptism into death (Rom. 6:4), in order to live with Him for ever and ever; then it is already impossible for our souls to be attached to anything terrestrial and temporal, it is impossible for our hearts to be intimidated by this temporal dwelling. It would mean to renounce everything that is made for us by the incarnation, death and resurrection of the Son of God. It would mean to act contrary to the all-good counsel of God for us, contrary to our own faith and belief. We believe that for this the Son of God came down to earth, "that for us He will ascend to heaven"; for this also He arose and again ascended to heaven in order to open the way even for us to ascend there, "where the forerunner Christ went for us". Also what could attach our heart to the earth? Doesn't the earth even when we water it return thorns and thistles to us? On earth aren't there passion and vice, evil and untruth, poverty and sorrow, illness and suffering, crying and tears? Aren't our ancestors and parents, relatives and acquaintances, in the earth, and doesn't it also swallow up our body and transform it into corruption and ashes? Sooner or later we should leave it necessarily. Death will overcome and place us before God in heaven. But what then will happen to us if we are infatuated with the earth but be foreign to heaven? Can we live, so to say, in the heavenly abodes if we do not now get used to ascend there in our mind and our heart, to live there in our spirit, to breathe and feed on the heavenly air? Can we be installed in the community of Holy Angels and the chosen of God if we are not one with them in spirit and our heart? Can we not be pulled together with them in our thoughts and feelings, in our character and deeds? So, we need to draw near with the inhabitants of heaven before hand, to now get comfortably used to the paradigm of heavenly life, to before hand get accustomed to live with our spirit in heaven in order that upon death we do not leave for the abyss of Hades. How will we achieve it?

Certainly, we will not by own power and not by earthly means. "No one will enter heaven, except those who go to heaven with the Son of Man, who exists in heaven". No one can even raise us to heaven, except Him. Only He has the strength to lift up with Himself all who are attached to Him in faith, who love Him with all their heart, with all their soul and all their mind, who turn themselves to Him entirely and undividedly, with all their soul and heart, who with their whole part and destiny will love eternal life in Him, who will make the first and main purpose of all their activity the center of all their hope and desire, all intentions and aspirations. Such He will attach to Himself by the power of His grace. He will lead all the minds and hearts of those who, living in the flesh on earth, live in the spirit in heaven higher to heaven: "for where your treasure is, there also will be your heart", and where the heart is, there is the whole person, there is all his life and activity. For the true Christian all treasure is hidden in Jesus Christ, who ascended to heaven, and that is where his heart is, and where his life is (Philip. 3:20). If we shall only think of heaven, to wish and search only for the heavenly, neglecting all the terrestrial, the fears for our earthly affairs, for our fleshly necessities and needs, for our family and citizen duties are in vain! It is vain to think that all our affairs will then come to extreme frustration! On the contrary, then all our earthly affairs will accept a correct and successful course. All our work will be accompanied by blessed success. All our pleasant occupations, which they neither were nor of what they consisted, will be spiritualized and will be consecrated with the blessings of God and will receive the God-pleasing vision of the God-fearing services to the Lord, fulfilling His most holy will. If all the people with their mind and heart would strive for God their Father, wishing to please Him, as His good and obedient children, keeping His holy commandments, searching for heavenly blessings and the high place of the fatherland with all their desire and would do everything for the glory of God and for the salvation of their souls; if they would have expelled all evil passions, which make people both malicious and unhappy, from human societies, then would not human societies be truly blessed and happy? Would not our earth also become a most abundant paradise blessed by the Lord? At least, there would not be so much untruth and evil in it, tears would not pour so much, and cries and groans would not be heard so much, there would not be so much trouble and sorrow, which people create for themselves with vices and depravity, with their evil and untruths, with their unquenchable thirst for carnal pleasures, earthly treasures and contemporary honors. (See details in the Complete Collection of Sermons of the Right Reverend Demetrios, Archbishop of Chersonese. vol. 1, pp. 199-207).