

## Ascension

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manity into God's heavenly domain." (665)

In ascending, Jesus "precedes us into the Father's glorious kingdom so that we, the members of his Body, may live in the hope of one day being with him for ever." (666)

"In some way, Jesus becomes our pioneer or trailblazer," explained Father Sebastian Falcone, professor of theology at St. Bernard's Institute. "He charts the road. He's the one who first traces that pathway."

Thus these events are relevant to Christians as a whole, Father Falcone emphasized, because we too will be resurrected and join God in heaven.

"What we need to see is that Resurrection, Ascension, exaltation, are also very real moments to which we ourselves are being called," he said.

But while the theological significance of these events is clear in Catholic teachings, a number of the details surrounding the Resurrection and the Ascension — even the length of the period between these events — are not.

Indeed, the Scripture accounts vary widely on how long Jesus remained on earth after his death on the cross, who he saw and what he did.

### Evolving beliefs

According to Father Falcone, the earliest mention in the New Testament — in terms of when scholars believe the books were written — of the Resurrection is 1 Corinthians 15:3-7.

In that section of the letter — written approximately in the year 55 — St. Paul summed up the events surrounding Jesus' death and resurrection, and his appearances after his death, declaring that these teachings are the ones that he was taught.

But, Father Falcone noted, there is no mention in the letter of the Ascension.

Because St. Paul points out that these are the lessons that he had received, the priest observed, the passage suggests that the Ascension as we understand it is not a major part of the Christian beliefs at that time.

The first mention of the Ascension in Scriptures comes in Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles, which were writ-

ten around 75-80. Father Falcone continued. At the beginning of the Gospel, the priest noted, Luke declares that he has done research before beginning to write, and thus is recording what others are then teaching.

"Somewhere between 55 and 80 the Ascension has slipped in," Father Falcone remarked.

But Luke then offers two different times for when the Ascension took place. In the Gospel, the Ascension occurs Easter Sunday. In Acts, however, Luke sets the interval between the Resurrection and Ascension at 40 days — the only mention of that span in the Scriptures.

In looking at the other Gospels, John — written around 95 — "has the Ascension taking place on the very day of the Resurrection," Father Falcone observed.

Matthew's Gospel, on the other hand, makes no mention of the Ascension. Mark mentions it only in an ending added later, but does not give a time for it, Father Falcone noted.

In setting the time between the Resurrection and the Ascension at 40 days in Acts, Luke is making use of the classical biblical number to denote a period of formation, according to Father Edward Schillebeeckx, OP, in "Ascension and Pentecost," published in the May 1961 *Worship* magazine.

Father Schillebeeckx observed that the flood lasted 40 days and 40 nights; Moses spent 40 days on Mt. Sinai; Israel spent 40 years in the desert; Elias walked 40 days and 40 nights to Mt. Horeb; and Jesus spent 40 days in the desert before beginning his own ministry.

Likewise, Father Raymond E. Brown, SS, in his 1973 book, *The Virginal Conception and Bodily Resurrection of Jesus*, argued that the 40-day span between the Resurrection and the Ascension is intended to prepare for the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, "which marks the beginning of the missionary thrust of Christianity."

"We can interpret the first chapter of Acts as a Lucan attempt to fill in the time between two datable events; approximately 50 days apart: Jesus' death at Passover time and the charismatic manifestation at Pentecost. By allotting definite spans of time to the events surrounding the resurrection ... Luke is able to provide a bridge between the earthly ministry of Jesus and the history of the Christian community."

The church decided to use this Lucan time frame of 40 days for its own commemorations of the events after Easter — to give enough time for us to reflect on the suffering and resurrection of Jesus, Father Falcone noted. He acknowledged, however that the specific literal interval is still left open to interpretation.

### Appearances

In addition to differences concerning the time span between the Resurrection and the Ascension, the different texts also contain different accounts of appearances of Jesus during that period.

Mark and John have him appearing to Mary Magdalene alone, while Matthew has him appearing to her and another Mary at the same time. Luke and Mark alone record appearances to two disciples on the road. Luke and Mark also alone record an appearance to the Eleven on Easter night. John, on the other hand, has him appear to the disciples, minus Thomas, Easter night, then to the disciples with Thomas a week later. John mentions appearances to seven disciples at the sea of Tiberias, while none of the other Gospels do. Meanwhile, only Matthew mentions an appearance to the Eleven on a mountain in Galilee.

Further, some of the appearances seem to have taken place after Jesus ascended. For example, in John 20, Jesus tells Mary not to cling to him because he has not yet ascended to the Father — the implication is that he is about to do so immediately — then he appears to the disciples later that night, apparently after ascending. And in Matthew 28:18, Jesus tells the disciples that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to him, suggesting that he has already returned to the Father.

Father Brown addressed some of this juggling around of the timing of the appearances in terms of the Ascension.

"It seem that in primitive Christian theology Jesus' ascension into heaven (his glorification) and his communication of the Spirit were understood as aspects of the resurrection of Jesus, constituting one eschatological act of God.

"The union of these ideas may have been suggested by the fact that the Lord who appeared to the disciples was Jesus exalted in glory; and from this appearance the disciples came to understand that Jesus had been raised from the dead, as they felt the presence of his Spirit in

their lives."

Meanwhile, he speculated that the variations in the accounts in general "arose in part because there never was one unanimously accepted tradition with a complete geographical or chronological sequence of appearances."

Further, he goes on to suggest that "individual Christian communities had independent reminiscences of the risen Jesus."

### Faith and salvation

Father Falcone pointed out that while Scripture scholars and theologians can debate the specific details of the Resurrection, the appearances and the Ascension, these events remain mysteries, and belief in their reality is ultimately a matter of faith.

"Up until the time of the Crucifixion, the death and burial, anybody could envision what was happening," he said. "You didn't have to believe."

"Once you cross that, you get to the Resurrection," he continued. "You can only see that enlightened by the power of faith."

But, he added, "If I could prove the Resurrection by any explicit historical proofs, it would no longer be the object of faith."

Moreover, these events have a broader spiritual implication for believers.

"Jesus, several times, especially in John's Gospel, says he will send the Spirit when he has returned to the Father," Father Falcone said. "He says he can't send that Spirit until he reaches that full glory. At that point, he can begin to empower all of humanity with the gifts of the Holy Spirit."

In Christian beliefs, the Resurrection and the Ascension are inextricably tied to the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, Father Schillebeeckx noted.

"The resurrection, the ascension and pentecost are three distinguishable moments of one progressive saving action: the death, the rising from the dead, the establishing of Christ as Kyrios or Lord (the essence of 'ascension') and ultimately the actual effusion of the Holy Spirit," he wrote.

As Father Schillebeeckx wrote, "Ascension and Pentecost are the foundation of our hope."

"Everything of humanity that we possess, Christ took with Him to the Father: through Christ's glorification humanity is taken up for good into the life of God."

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