

The existence of God, the meaning of life, and whatever follows death - these are great mysteries. But none of them perplexes Catholics as much as this question: Do we celebrate Ascension on a Thursday or a Sunday? The calendar we give you at Advent each year puts it on a Thursday with big letters and a small asterisk. The Ascension of the Lord is one of 10 possible holydays of obligation in the Catholic Church; the Vatican lets conferences of bishops around the world decide which ones they want. Any conference that does not keep Ascension as a holyday has to move it to the following Sunday so that everyone is called to participate at mass on this important day. However, in the United States, our conference had trouble deciding what to do. Bishops on the East coast said their people loved Ascension Thursday masses, but elsewhere bishops reported that the faithful were not at the holyday mass, which posed its own problems because a day of obligation carries penalties for those who miss mass. So about 15 years ago our bishops asked Rome for a split decision, and Rome agreed. In the United States, most dioceses celebrate Ascension on a Sunday, but some observe it on a Thursday, and all Catholic calendars have asterisks. It's frustrating because Catholics like unity between the local and the universal church; however, sometimes our unity exists in our flexibility.

Unity is the theme of the second reading for Ascension this year, and it's hard to tell if the Letter to the Ephesians is praising a unity that does exist or hoping for one that does not. People had different responsibilities in that church: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, and all these should be working together, Saint Paul writes, for building up the body of Christ. After all, there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." This play between one and all affirms that we really do have unity where it matters most, in God, who took on flesh, died and rose, and then ascended into the heavens.

This seems to be what the Letter to the Ephesians means when it examines the words from the Book of Psalms, "He ascended on high." Paul writes, "What does 'he ascended' mean except that [Christ] also descended into the lower regions of the earth?" This may refer to what we say in the creed every week, "he descended into hell," meaning the place where those who died before the time of Christ awaited their redemption; not "hell-the-place-of-the-damned" but "hell-the-waiting-room" - and we've all had a vivid experience of that at some time in our lives. However, more likely the word "descended" here is referring to the Incarnation - that the Second Person of the Trinity entered the womb of Mary and took on flesh. He "descended" to earth, becoming like us, so that he could "ascend" to heaven, to make us like him. Christ thus showed he was Lord of everything on earth and in the heavens. He is the focus of our unity.

We sometimes have disputes within the Church - who should lead us, which words help us pray, who may get married, who may come to communion, or when we celebrate Ascension. Such disagreements can be healthy because they refine our understanding of what God is calling us to do. They shouldn't distract us from the good news that there is one Lord, one faith and one baptism, and that Christ is Lord of all, holding us all together even when we disagree.