

Ascension Thursday

No feast day confuses Catholics more than the Ascension. When I was growing up, we always called it Ascension Thursday; the two words were inseparable. Several decades ago the Vatican reissued directives about holydays. Each conference of bishops may choose from a list of ten. The holydays therefore differ from country to country. A few of these are so important that if the conference does not choose them, they must move to a Sunday. This applies not only to Ascension, but to Epiphany and Corpus Christi; it does not affect a day like Saints Peter and Paul on June 29. The Mexican bishops have added Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12, even though that is not on the list of ten, and many people will tell you that Ash Wednesday is a holyday, even though it is not.

In the United States our bishops' conference did something regarding the Ascension that they'd never done before; they let certain regions of the country keep it on a Thursday, while others moved it to Sunday. Many of the wall calendars in Catholic homes come from regions that still observe Ascension on a Thursday, so they put "Ascension" in bold print today, with an asterisk detailing what most of us observe, that the solemnity may transfer to this coming Sunday.

Then along comes the Ordinariate, which overrides the geographical distinctions made by the US bishops, and keeps Ascension on Thursday. Here in Kansas City, today is a holyday of obligation for some Catholics, but not for all.

The disciples stood looking up at the sky as Jesus ascended into heaven, wondering where he was going, when he would come back, and what they were supposed to do in the meantime. They probably had no idea that the confusion they were feeling would extend all the way into the Catholic calendar.

You may be thinking, "but today's first reading clearly says that Jesus ascended forty days after the resurrection. Shouldn't we all keep Ascension on a Thursday, forty days after Easter?" But the gospels do not agree with the dates in Acts of the Apostles. Even the gospel written by Luke, who also wrote Acts, suggests that the ascension took place on the same day as the resurrection. Understandably, there is much confusion about today. Jesus anticipated this when he told the disciples, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The confusion they experienced lasted nine days. It came to an end on Pentecost, when the gift of the Holy Spirit brought clarity, direction and confidence to a group of followers newly determined to tell the world that Jesus is the Son of God.

Confusion is not limited to Ascension. Many of us are confused about passages of the bible, feasts on the calendar, the laws governing the sacraments, and the various forms of liturgy that the Catholic Church embraces. We may also be confused about more personal matters: which decision to make about the people we love, the work we do, and the temptations we face. Confusion is part of being human. If you feel confused about your life, then Ascension is your feast day. We celebrate it not in wonderment or despair, but with full hope that for those who believe, because of the promise of the Holy Spirit, one day we will see.

THURSDAY, MAY 25, 2017