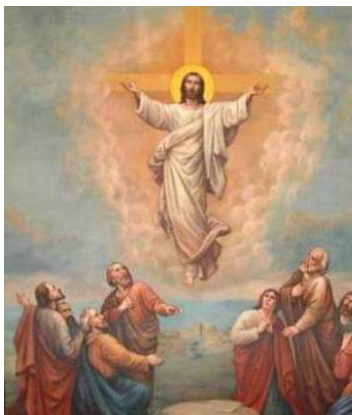




According to ancient tradition, it is noon when Christ prepares to ascend into Heaven. He is surrounded by His Mother, His apostles, and about a hundred disciples. All know that the Master is about to depart and ascend in glory to rejoin the Father. The Blessed Virgin looks at her Son just as she looked at Him in the manger, during His life in Nazareth, on the Cross, and at the Resurrection. She recalls all these events that lead up to this final moment: Jesus’ ascension into glory. What feelings might have stirred within her? Sadness at having to leave Jesus once again? Such a human feeling would have been natural. But that was not the case. Let us listen to the great Benedictine preacher Dom Guéranger:



“One wondered which feeling must have prevailed in that maternal heart: the sadness of no longer seeing Jesus, or the joy of knowing that He was finally about to enter into the glory due to Him. The answer came readily to the minds of those true Christians, and we, too, will arrive at it for ourselves. Had not Jesus said to His disciples, ‘If you loved Me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father’ (Jn 14:28)? Now, who loved Jesus more than Mary did? The mother’s heart was therefore filled with joy at the moment of that ineffable farewell. Mary could not think of herself when it came to the triumph due to her Son and her God. After the events on Calvary, could she have desired anything other than to see, at last, the One she knew to be the sovereign Lord of all things glorified?”

We can observe that in each set of mysteries, a separation between the Blessed Virgin and Jesus is meditated upon. In the Joyful Mysteries, it is the loss of Jesus in Jerusalem. In the Sorrowful Mysteries, it is the death of Christ on the Cross. Finally, in the Glorious Mysteries, Our Lord leaves the earth, where she is called to remain for a little while longer. But just as sorrow predominated in the first two separations, so this time it is immense joy that fills the Heart of the Blessed Virgin. A joy at seeing Him enter into glory. Just as on the Cross, where she was united to His suffering, so at the Ascension Mary is united to the glory of her Son.

And what of the apostles? They, too, are filled with joy, the Gospel tells us. But the Ascension also marks the beginning of a new life for them. Before departing, Christ addressed them one last time, entrusting them with the greatest mission ever entrusted to humankind: *“Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved; but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”* (Mk 16:15–16) Saint Matthew completes Saint Mark’s statement: *“Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”* (Mt 28:19–20) The Ascension marks the sending of the apostles into the world to proclaim the Gospel everywhere. Here we see the three elements of this mission entrusted by Our Lord to His Church: to baptize, to teach the faith, and to ensure observance of the divine laws.

To baptize—that is, to transform each person into a child of God and administer the sacraments to them. To teach the faith—that is, to teach all people the truth of Revelation: the Holy Trinity, Christ who is true God and true man, eternal life... It means teaching the Creed. Finally, it means ensuring observance of the divine laws—whose observance is necessary to enter Heaven—and helping the faithful to keep them through the sacraments and prayer.

This Church, entrusted to the apostles at the Ascension, is **One**, for it is the mystical Body of Christ, who is “one”; **Holy**, for it is the Church of Christ, who is holiness itself, and because it is governed by the Holy Spirit; **Catholic**—from the Greek *Katholicós*, meaning universal—for it concerns all people without exception; **Apostolic** because the apostles were entrusted with this mission and because it must proclaim the Gospel to the whole earth through a universal apostolate. Yes, what an immense mission—impossible from a human perspective—was entrusted to the Apostles by Our Lord on this day of the Ascension.

Let us now contemplate Our Lord. After disappearing from the apostles’ sight as He ascended to the Father, Jesus is acclaimed by the countless souls to whom He has opened Heaven. Among them are

Saint Joseph, Saint John the Baptist, His grandparents, Saint Anne and Saint Joachim, as well as , the good thief. He is also acclaimed by the multitude of angels and is reunited with those who assisted Him on earth: the Angel Gabriel, messenger of the Annunciation; the angels who sang at His Nativity; those who served Him after the temptation in the desert; and the angel who sustained Him in His agony. Passing through this immense crowd in glory, He stands before the Father and presents to Him the fulfillment of His mission. He was obedient even unto death on the Cross. He opened Heaven to humanity by redeeming their sins and reconciled them with God. He founded His Church to lead future generations to their eternal salvation. Then, in glory, Christ the King takes His seat at the right hand of the Father.

Heaven! The goal of our brief earthly life, which we must ardently desire, as indicated by the fruit of this mystery. But to desire it, we must first try to understand what it is. In his book, **Reflections on Eternal Truths**, St. Alphonsus Liguori highlights the difficulty of imagining the reality of Heaven, so great is the gulf between our world here below and the indescribable bliss of being with God, the Blessed Virgin, the angels, and all the saints for all eternity:

"It is impossible for us to understand in this life what a joy it is to see and love God face to face. However, we can form some idea of it from what we know of divine love. (...) What sweetness does a soul not experience when, enlightened by a ray of divine light, it discovers in prayer the goodness of God, His mercies toward it, and the love that Jesus Christ has shown it and continues to show it! The soul then feels utterly consumed and overwhelmed by love. And yet, in this life, we do not see God clearly or as He truly is. For now, we have a blindfold over our eyes; and God, for His part, hiding behind the veil of faith, does not reveal Himself to our gaze. But what will it be like when the blindfold falls from our eyes and, as the veil disappears, we see God face to face?"

Heaven, then, is first and foremost being with God Himself, our Creator. It is being immersed in His majesty, His power, and His Love. It is dwelling in the fire of the Father's Heart, being radiant with the Love of the Holy Spirit, and living with Christ in His glory. But there is also our Heavenly Mother and the entire people of God with whom we will live: the angels—especially our guardian angel—the saints, and some of the people we will have known on earth—family, friends, and even those enemies converted by grace and divine mercy. This Heaven is not a static state, a sort of mystical weightlessness that might almost be frightening. In "eternal life," there is the word "life": a true social life, as on earth, but where God will be at the center and where everything will be beautiful, just, and charitable in our relationships with one another. A life of glory, received from Christ, beyond comparison with the pale and vain glory of this earth. St. Teresa of Avila was granted a vision of Heaven:

"The Lord wished to show me, in a vision, a part of the glory of heaven; and I understood how incomparable it is to all that one may suffer here on earth, and how the trials of this life are nothing in comparison to that glory; and a single one of these graces is enough to make one despise all earthly things and regard as nothing all that is transient in this life."

To desire Heaven, one can also look at its antithesis and want to avoid it at all costs: eternal hell. Hell is being cut off from God and His heavenly City forever. It is being plunged into a world of horror where everything is nothing but hatred toward one another, perpetual suffering, and excruciating regret at not being with God because of our own fault. St. John Chrysostom noted that Our Lord Jesus Christ Himself preached more often about Hell than about Heaven. At Fatima, Our Lady showed Hell to three little children. Here is the description of this vision from July 13, 1917:

"We saw what looked like an ocean of fire. Immersed in this fire, we saw demons and souls, as if they were transparent, black, or bronze-colored embers, in human form, floating in the inferno, carried away by the flames that burst forth from within them along with clouds of smoke, falling on all sides, like sparks in great fires, weightless and unbalanced, amid the cries and groans of pain and despair..."

Let us recall the attitude of the saints. The Holy Curé of Ars, Pope Saint Pius X, and many others had a great longing for Heaven while dreading the thought of going to hell! May this mystery of the Ascension instill in us this longing for Heaven, for ourselves and for others. And if we falter, the vision of hell must awaken us to desire it even more. That is why the Blessed Virgin taught us this prayer at Fatima, recited after each decade of the Rosary, which expresses this desire for Heaven for ourselves and for others:

"O my Jesus, forgive us our sins, save us from the fires of hell, and lead all souls to Heaven, especially those who are most in need of Your mercy."