

## The Christ in His Ascension

by Metropolitan George (Khodr) of Mount Lebanon

What does the Book [Holy Bible] really mean when talking about the Ascension of Christ to Heaven, which we celebrated in my church [the Orthodox Church] two days ago? This occasion or this 'mystery', is the fulfillment of the discourse concerning the incarnation of the Word. This is the last chapter that talks about both the divinity and humanity of Christ.

The story develops, according to Mark, after that Jesus appeared to His disciples and after He commanded the Gospel to them, "*He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God.*" [Mark 16:19]. The resurrected Savior is, in His luminous and glorious body, co-sitting with the Father in a way that He — not only through His divine nature — but also through his victorious and deified human nature, is co-equal to the Father. In the same way where you would co-equate another human being to yourself by offering him a seat on your right-hand side, God the Father also equated His resurrected Christ with Himself.

In Luke's gospel after He appeared to them for the last time, He was assumed to heaven in such a way it appears that the ascension and the resurrection were not separated by a time interval. In the beginnings of the Acts of the Apostles (which was written by St Luke) He was appearing for them for forty days then "*He was parted from them and carried up into heaven.*" [Luke 24:51] — and all this having happened after He promised them the Holy Spirit. For me, the forty days, are a symbolic number. Numbers were mainly used in a theological symbolism: This was the amount of time that the people of Israel spent in the desert of Sinai before they reached the Promised Land. Consequently, we can parallel this to Heaven — that Christ attained in His Ascension — which is in fact our Promised Land; or in other words, that the first one was a picture of this latter one. Similarly Moses "*was there with the Lord forty days and forty nights.*" (Exodus 34:28) Also the prophet Elias spent this amount of time in his way to Sinai. It seems that a symbolic number always precedes the transfigurations [revelations]; particularly in the ascension, the human nature of Christ is transfiguring for the last time and becomes able to co-sit with God. In the same way as God walked in the human nature through the incarnation of His Son, humanity walks in God through the Ascension of Christ.

The action did not take place within dimensions. It is the participation of the human nature, which was purified in Christ, in the heart of God [the divine nature] — These two natures function without confusion, are not divided nor separate, and at no time did they undergo any change — as determined by the 4th Ecumenical Council (451 A.D.) That, which had already taken place in the incarnation, similarly takes place in the Ascension according to the same way. The human nature in Christ does not disappear or dissolve but its honor is transfigured [revealed] during His Ascension.

By saying: "*No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven*" (John 3:13), It is not the movement in space, in both situations, that John is referring to but rather he meant that a junction between the two natures had come to happen. The eternal Son becomes incarnate from the moment after Gabriel' annunciation to the virgin, and the Divinity assumes the humanity of Christ — since the moment of its creation until fulfillment — in death and resurrection and its revelation in the ascension. The Ascension is the appearance or revelation of what had come to happen, since the moment the Word was incarnate in the womb of Mary. The Son adopted the time and space and voluntarily

submitted himself to it, but He again freed himself through His death and resurrection without abandoning His human nature, which was elevated [the human nature] beyond the bondage of time and space. It is merely for the common expression's sake that it was said "He descended" or "He ascended". Christ was here because He wanted to heal and free us. After doing such, He "ascended" to heaven. Heaven is the place where man is attracted to, but heaven is not a location. Heaven is not above and neither is the man below it. Him who attained the divine state is in heaven. The human body, in the General Resurrection, will enter the divine state, which would be expressed as "being in heaven." When the Book wanted to express the fulfillment of Christ in the human nature, it said, "He ascended." In reality, Christ — in His Glory — entered to the Divine expanse or He assumed his humanity to this expanse. Christ is not in a locale; neither do we go to a certain location in order to meet with Him. He comes to us in the Holy Spirit, imprints Himself in us, and assumes us a habitat for Himself. His heaven is within us.

Christ, sitting up on high is glowing with the Holy Spirit. *"If I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you ... However, when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth ... but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice."* (The sermon of farewell, according to St John). Christ is hidden physically [in the body], but active through the Divine Spirit. This Spirit depicts Christ in the human soul. Jesus is not absent, but the intimacy of the relationship between Him and us is stronger than the relation that existed between Him and His disciples. We are always in a state of waiting for Him. His face is turned towards us and ours towards Him.

The humans await the return of God to abide in them, and God awaits the return of humans to Him through repentance, longing and hope. The ascension is the judge in both the two situations; it is the revelation — not only of the transfiguration of God — but also to the transfigurations of men if they walked in God.

And God comes back to you in order that you may remain a complete human, not that you should demolish your human nature, but rather that you reestablish it upon purity. Your God will not annul you, but He will "employ" himself within you; He will not melt you within Himself in the Last Day because you will be resurrected and you will hold your entire self in front of His eyes after that the Holy Spirit has brought your bones back to life. This "move" towards God, in this world and in the world to come, through holiness and righteousness is not a transformation in your human nature in itself, because originally, your nature only exists only if it sprung from the divinity of God.

And if He waited for you, He is waiting with you that you shall elevate [offer] unto him all the works of history as an offering. You only are able to utter creativity through His inspirations. He motivates in you the beauty of your human nature. You are beautified if He found His habitation within you and if you ascended, you will be ascending unto Him and you will not lose anything from all what you originally had of purity, glory and righteousness.

The words that you utter are not truly magnificent, if they are not coming from the light that God pitched into your heart; all the more these words remain human ones. Every great word that was uttered in the times of humanity is a human word; even so if it was descended unto them from the heart of God. The divine "breeze" that descends upon you does not impede you on a creative level; it becomes within you a golden speech. You are not a mere cassette-player replaying God's words, but you are a

creator of beauty springing from within yourself — from your inner soul, which was touched by God — but not abolished and replaced by Him.

If He was the beauty that is within you, then He must have passed by your world. He set it alive within you and through you. The world has no existence without you, it does not exist apart from you. The world is your quadrant and you are its playground. Your world is printed, in its magnitude, on the face of God. Since this world is His creation, it will remain forever after having baptized it, in the Last Day, in His global and eternal Light. It shall remain united in its matter, mind and light all together. The world will become your Lord's vestment upon the Second Coming of Christ.

Starting from this vision, Christianity is then knit to the history and routed in the eternity at the same time, global and covering the universe with light; Christianity is responsible in time but free from its bondage. It [Christianity] is present in the matter and motivating this matter with the motion of the spirit. That is why Christianity has nothing far apart from the time just for the sake of a "romantic" eternity, nor does it passively stand in the viewer's stand watching the course of events as they were independent from the human being.

The believer doesn't escape to a desert — not even if it became his hermitage — for he will have the whole world in his heart and prayers. Some of us may seek solitude for peace and tranquility's sake, but he is never deserted. His profoundness will become deeper as he stands in the divine presence.

The world is entirely included in Christ's salvation plan. Everything in the world is His dearly beloved for the exception of sin. Everything in it is attracted to heaven. Our mind is attracted towards heaven as far as this mind is awaking, loving and hugging for the existence. But never in the way, that we shall detest all the good in our world, not in the way that we should become indifferent to the construction, improvement and organizing of the world.

We can never say that this world ascends through its own powers, nor does this world progress automatically towards the better. But we do preach that God elevates the humans and their surrounding in His loving care. The world is elevated and does not ascend by itself. It struggles and God accepts it and pulls it up to Himself. He, who is sitting up on high in His Bright Body, opens up and embraces him who is longing for Him. After the Ascension of Christ, tomorrow the universe, in its turn, will be received up. These are the ways of the affectionate.

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