

Sunday, June 5, 2011

The Path to Ascension

Last Thursday, we celebrated the feast of Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ to the heavens. It is one of the major feasts of the Lord according to the rite of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

There are two important points we need to keep in mind while we live in the atmosphere of the Ascension of our Lord Jesus:

The first point: the Ascension of the Lord Jesus only pertains to His Humanity not His divinity, meaning that the act of ascension was only related to the human nature of Christ, while the Divine nature does not move from one place to another. Of course we know that the Lord Jesus is ubiquitous by His divinity, on earth and in heaven, as He also confirmed this fact in His conversation with Nicodemus: *“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven”* (John 3:13). That is to say, Ascension was an act to glorify and elevate the human nature, but the Divine nature does not need to be lift up or to move from one place to another. We should also bear in mind that the Lord Jesus Christ is one person; where His Divinity is united with His humanity, and that His divinity has never parted from His humanity for a moment or a twinkling of an eye, neither before His Ascension nor after and forever.

The second point, which is based on the first, is that when we recognize that the human nature of Christ is the one that ascended and was elevated to be at the right hand of the Father, it means that when we unite with Him we can ascend with Him to be at the right hand of the Father as well. Here, we need to understand the meaning of the right hand of the Father. We know that God is a boundless spirit, He has no left or right, top or bottom, nor does he have front or back, but the **“right hand”** in the Biblical language always indicate power, righteousness and glory. The Ascension of the Lord Jesus and His sitting at the right hand of the Father indicates that He has rested, while carrying the human nature in the Glory and power of God. This means that by abiding in Christ, we become qualified to rest at the right hand of the Father as well, meaning that we live in the power and glory of the children of God.

Therefore, we should never think of the Ascension of the Lord Jesus in a physical sense, meaning that He moved and we moved with him from one place to another, neither should we think that being at the right hand of the Father means that we are now above the people and look at them in a condescending manner. This notion of material and physical location is entirely erroneous. In fact, the Lord Jesus has elevated our status not our physical position, and our ascension with him means that we live in the power, glory, and honor of the children of God.

In every feast of the Lord, the church always emphasize on this beautiful notion, that it is not enough to celebrate these feasts as outward events that are separate from us, nor that we just see them from afar and be happy to commemorate them. Rather, by celebrating the Nativity of Christ, for instance, we ought to be born with Him... In His Resurrection, we rise with Him... In his Ascension, we ascend with Him, and so on... The church doesn't stop there, but she also explains to us how to be born, how to rise, and how to ascend! All through carefully selected readings of the treasures of the Divine word of God.

On this basis, the following important question poses itself: How do we ascend with Christ?

In the epistle to the Hebrews, our teacher St Paul the Apostle says: *“where the forerunner has entered for us, even Jesus...”* (Hebrews 6:20), and by entering into the Holy place, he means Ascension. That is to say our Lord Jesus as the head of the church, has preceded us to the heavens, and in doing so He opened the door for us, the members of His body, to ascend and follow Him to His glory. How do we find the ascending road that leads us to this heavenly glory?

The first reading that the church offers us immediately after the feast of Ascension, on the Thursday evening (the Gospel of the eve of Friday), shows us, through the words of Christ Himself, how to follow Him in ascension? And what are the characteristics of the Ascending road? The Lord says: *“Whoever desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me. For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake and the gospel's will save it”* (Mark 8: 34-35). Here, the Church clarifies the following to us:

- 1 - The natural path to our salvation is to follow the Lord Jesus Christ, or in other words, to ascend following Him.
- 2 - God does not force anyone to follow Him, but rather He offers an invaluable invitation. It is up to the freedom of man and willingness to sacrifice.
- 3 - Self-denial is essential before Ascension, meaning that the road to Ascension starts with humility and humbling one's self, and bowing down at the feet of others.
- 4 - Self-denial and humility of the heart qualifies man to be filled with the Grace of God. Through the power and support of Grace, man is able to carry the cross and follow Christ, regardless of the obstacles and difficulties.
- 5 - Carrying the Cross takes man to Ascension following the Lord Jesus on the path of salvation. But he who avoids the Cross is lost and went astray from the path to Ascension.
- 6 - He who doesn't want to deny himself but rather has pity and cherishes himself, and seeks comfort and honor for himself, wouldn't be able to carry the cross, and therefore wouldn't be able to follow Christ on the path of Ascension.

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