

mouse rose to his feet, cleared this throat, and began his sermon.

"Thank you for inviting me to come to your church. I must admit, at first I was surprised that a church would ask me to give a sermon. Oh, I've been invited to Sunday school contests where they give each new person a Mickey Mouse hat and expect me to shake hands with everyone and act funny. But a sermon is something new.

"But after I thought about it, I realized that maybe Disneyland and the Church do have a lot in common. And as I began to organize my thoughts, I saw how ingenious it was to invite me to share. I really believe that if your church were to apply our principles, you could become as successful as Disneyland.

"First, make sure your enterprise seems exciting, even dangerous—but be quick to let your people know that there really is no danger involved. Give the illusion of great risk, but make sure everything is perfectly safe.

"Second, admit that you are in the entertainment business. People won't care what you say as long as they're entertained. Keep your people happy. Don't tell them anything negative. And don't make demands on them. Just keep them diverted from the ugly reality of today's world, and they will keep coming back for more.

"Third, make everything look religious. Make the religious experience so intricate, so complex that only the professionals can pull it off while all the laymen stand around watching with their mouths open. Just as people would rather pay to watch a mechanical bird sing on cue, so they would rather watch an elaborate worship than participate in worshipping.

"Fourth and finally, pretend that there are no problems. At Disneyland we dress our security guards up as smiling rabbits or friendly bears because we don't want anyone's experience at Disneyland to be ruined by the sight of law enforcement personnel. Disguise your problems behind a warm smile and a firm handshake. Leave troubles at home, and let the church be a happy place of friendly pastors and smiling deacons.

"People today want good clean entertainment and they want an environment that is safe for children, family and friends. I am so glad to see that the church is moving in this direction. Thank you, and God bless you."

Questions For Discussion:

1. What parallels, if any, do you see between Disneyland and the organized church?
2. Analyze each of the mouse's points. Below are some questions that may help:
 - "Give the illusion of great risk, but make everything safe."
 - a. Are there any risks involved in being a Christian today?
 - b. Does modern Christianity really cost the Christian anything?
 - c. Can you think of any examples of the church creating an illusion of risk?
 - d. How, if at all, does a church give people safety?
 - "Entertain the people."
 - a. How do churches entertain their people?
 - b. Should Christianity and the church be entertaining?
 - c. React to this statement: "People today must be

entertained. After watching sophisticated, professional entertainment on television and at the movies, people need to feel it's worth their time and attention to come. Of course, the content will be spiritual."

- "Make everything look religious."
 - a. Define religious.
 - b. What do you think Mickey Mouse meant by religious?
- "Pretend there are no problems."
 - a. Do you think the church should admit to having problems? The pastor? The people?
 - b. How can a church pretend it doesn't have any problems?
 - c. If Christianity is true, then don't problems raise doubts in the minds of searching unbelievers?



ASCENSION

The Feast of the Ascension, or *Hampartzoom*, falls on the 40th day of Eastertide, which always falls on a Thursday. The Ascension is a major event in the life of Christ. It is a sign of God's love for His Son. Through His death, resurrection and ascension, Jesus made it possible for us all to be reconciled with God. The people of the world are saved from sin and the gates to the heavenly kingdom are opened to the righteous.

Through Jesus' death and resurrection, we have received new life, a life filled with the grace and love of God. Through His death, Jesus rose to a new life. He ascended into heaven after His death. He returned to His Father in His risen body and He returns to us in His risen Spirit.

The word "ascension" means "rising to a higher place." The Feast of the Ascension commemorates our Lord's glorious rising into heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father and be honored by His Father for being a loving, obedient Son.

After His resurrection from the dead, Jesus appeared to men for a period of forty days, after which He "was taken up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God." (Mark 16:19; see also Luke 24:50 and Acts 1:9-11).

The ascension of Jesus Christ is the final act of His earthly mission of salvation. The Son of God comes "down from heaven" to do the work which the Father gives Him to do; and having accomplished all things, He returns to the Father bearing for all eternity the wounded and glorified humanity which he has assumed. (See e.g. John 17).

The doctrinal meaning of the ascension is the glorification of human nature, the reunion of man with God. It is

indeed the very penetration of man into the inexhaustible depths of divinity.

"The heavens" is the symbolic expression in the Bible for the uncreated, immaterial, divine "realm of God," as one saint of the Church has called it. To say that Jesus is "exalted at the right hand of God," as St. Peter preached in the first Christian sermon (Acts 2:33) means exactly this; that man has been restored to communion with God, to a union which is, according to Orthodox doctrine, far greater and more perfect than that given to man in his original creation (See Ephesians 1-2).

Man was created with the potential to be a "partaker of the divine nature," to refer to the Apostle Peter (II Peter 1:4). It is this participation in divinity, called *theosis* (which literally means deification or divinization) in Orthodox theology, that the ascension of Christ has fulfilled for humanity. The symbolical expression of the "sitting at the right hand" of God means nothing other than this. It does not mean that somewhere in the created universe the physical Jesus is sitting in a material throne.

The Letter to the Hebrews speaks of Christ's ascension in terms of the Jerusalem Temple. Just as the high priests of Israel entered the "holy of holies" to offer sacrifice to God on behalf of themselves and the people, so Christ, the one, eternal and perfect High Priest, offers Himself on the cross to God as the one eternal and perfect Sacrifice, not for Himself, but for all sinful men. As a man, Christ enters (once and for all) into the one eternal and perfect Holy of Holies: the very "presence of God in the heavens."

...We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God... (Hebrews 4:14)

For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens...He has no need, unlike those high priests to offer sacrifice daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once and for all when he offered up himself.

Now, the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tabernacle which is set up, not by man, but by the Lord. (Hebrews 7:26, 8:2)

For Christ has entered, not into a sanctuary made with hands, a copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf (Hebrews 9:24).

"...when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, He sat down at the right hand of God, then to wait until His enemies should be made a stool for his feet" (Hebrews 10:12-13; Psalm 110:1).

Thus, the ascension of Christ is seen as man's first entry into that divine glorification for which He was originally created. The entry is made possible by the exaltation of the divine Son who emptied Himself in human flesh in perfect self-offering to God.

In the Divine Liturgy, there are two distinct references to the Feast of Ascension:

1. The Sacrifice of the Eucharist
2. The Creed

During the "Elevation" in the Sacrifice of the Eucharist,

the priest raises the chalice in front of the congregation and brings to mind the ascension of Christ into heaven to "sit at the right hand of the Father," as the prayer of the elevation indicates. It shows the highest point of the upward procession of life of the soul.

In the Creed, we are told that Christ ascended into heaven in a glorified body, and will come again in the same body. This coming again refers to the Second Coming. The next time Christ comes, He will be recognizable, in the same body, but He will come as a judge of the whole world, with the glory of the Father. All will know who He is, all will be judged by Him.

ASCENSION PRAYER

"Grant, we beseech Thee, Almighty God, that as we do believe Thy Only-Begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into the heavens, so may we also in heart and mind ascend, and with Him continually dwell. Amen."



PENTECOST

Some authorities consider Pentecost to have been the development of an ancient Canaanite agricultural festival, naturalized and interpreted by the Hebrews in line with their Yahwistic beliefs. Details of its celebration vary and progress in the various stages of written Law. Specific offerings were not required, but each man brought voluntarily what his harvest justified (Deut. 16:10).

Later Judaism added to the meaning of Pentecost by making it commemorative of the anniversary of the giving of the Law at Sinai, thus transforming it into a joint harvest and historical celebration.

In the New Testament, the first Christian Pentecost fell on the same day as the old Hebrew festival. The events narrated in Acts 2 mark the beginning of the Christian Church. Multitudes of devout Jews from what seemed "every nation under heaven" (v. 5) had been attracted to Jerusalem. About nine in the morning (cf. v. 15), the Holy Spirit came upon the Apostles and some 120 disciples gathered together. The cloven "tongues of fire" (Acts 2:3) were analogous to "the burning bush" at Sinai (Ex. 3:2). Not only the disciples, but the throng gathered to celebrate the old Pentecost were included in the marvelous happenings (Acts 2:6). As the old Pentecost was a harvest feast, it was appropriate that the new Pentecost brought a harvest of "about three thousand souls" (v. 41) Many Christians saw in the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, 50 days