This is a continuation in the series exploring in detail each line of the Apostles’ Creed, which we are reciting in Mass each week, in lieu of the traditional Nicene Creed, during the Year of Faith, 2013.

**He Ascended into Heaven and is Seated at the Right Hand of God the Father Almighty**

The Ascension of the Lord marks the completion of the earthly life and ministry of Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles describes this event as the moment of Jesus’ definitive departure. He leaves his disciples with the exhortation not to leave Jerusalem but to wait there until they are baptized with the Holy Spirit. Jesus will no longer be present in the world in the way they have seen and heard him, but will now make his presence known in a new way: in the Eucharist and in the Church.

Was this a time to be happy or sad? One would think that this final farewell would bring tears to the eyes of the disciples. Who would not be sad realizing that they would never see him again? In fact the disciples had already experienced his first departure in a most traumatic way when he died on the cross. One can only imagine their grief then. His appearances after he rose brought unexpected joy to them, as Luke describes their feeling. Yet at the same time his presence among them was going to be different. They would enjoy his company, but only momentarily. He would show himself on various occasions, somewhat unexpectedly, but then vanish from their sight.

From what he said and what they experienced, it seems that Jesus had prepared them for the day when he would no longer be visible to them. Clearly he explained to them that he was in fact going to return to his Father in heaven. This should give them cause for rejoicing. Why? Because now his risen humanity was taken up into a more complete and perfect union with the Father. So when he ascended, the disciples did not appear sad but rather dumb-founded. They knew this would happen ... but now what? What’s next? The words of the angel were a wake up call to stir them from their stupor: “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking up into the heavens?

Jesus’ last conversation with his followers finds him trying to focus them on their mission. “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” They had envisioned Jesus coming with great power and might to restore Israel’s kingdom. Rather, Jesus left them with a mystery about his final return: “you will not know the day or the hour.” So the Ascension forces the disciples to let go of the dreams they had of a world suddenly and totally transformed in an earthly way. “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you. “

The Pentecost event, which follows ten days later, brings about this radical change of fearful followers into courageous missionaries. Notice that our creed combines the ascension with the assertion that Jesus was seated – enthroned – at the right hand of the Father Almighty. The point of Jesus going to the Father doesn’t mean that he is abandoning us. To the contrary he is positioning himself in heaven as the one who will forever plead our cause and who, with the Father, bestows on the world the Holy Spirit to carry on his work. We will learn more about this in a reflection on Pentecost. For now, what we need to grasp is how in his risen state, close to the Father, Jesus can do more for the world then he could when he was in the flesh. While on earth, even in his risen state, he could only be in one place at one time. Now he can be everywhere.

What is the meaning of the phrase “at the right hand of the Father?” The Catechism of the Catholic Church (663-664) explains: "By 'the Father's right hand' we understand the glory and honor of divinity, where he who exists as Son of God before all ages, indeed as God, of one being with the Father, is seated bodily after he became incarnate and his flesh was glorified." Being seated at the Father's right hand signifies the inauguration of the Messiah's kingdom, the fulfillment of the prophet Daniel's vision concerning the Son of man: "To him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him."

The ascension deepens our confidence that, as Jesus said, “The Father and I are one.” We can ask for anything in the name of Jesus and know that the Father listens, even we in our weakness and when have given up on him. Humanly speaking, don’t we always want to have a close friend in high places, someone to take our cause with the highest authority? Whenever we turn to Jesus, pray to him, and seek a closer relationship with him, we can be sure that he will
intercede for us. In him we dare to call on God as our Father, trusting in what Jesus told us: “Whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you (John 15:16, 16:23)” Fr. John