

Going with Christ to God

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Go to Google Images and look at some depictions of the ascension. This makes clear how difficult a festival this is for contemporary believers to celebrate.

Following a traditional pattern, nearly all the dozens of entries are literalized illustrations of Luke's Acts account. In some, Christ is dressed in resurrection whites, with or without his upper body clothed; in others, he is adorned in the red of royalty. In most artistic depictions Christ is in *orans* position, perhaps to suggest flight, but I hope rather to record how Jesus himself prayed: not kneeling with head down, eyes closed, curling up into oneself, but standing with head held high, eyes alert, and arms reaching out to embrace the community and render praise to God.

I am hoping that in the 21st century we can encourage all Christians to adopt the *orans* as the usual posture of prayer and praise. Although it will take some years to effect, we could begin this paradigm shift on Ascension Day. For one thing, it would inhibit the recent practice of everyone perpetually holding a printed program, as if worship is a reading exercise--rather than our communal liturgy being the ascension of all the baptized into the presence of the resurrected Lord.

I remain fascinated by the 14th-century biblical exercise that came to be titled *Biblia Pauperum*. In this remarkable text--much copied, first by manuscript and later printed in blockbooks, translated into several languages, and even painted on the walls of some churches--40 pages of catechetical illustrations tell the biblical meaning of Jesus.

On the page dedicated to the ascension, the central picture is of the disciples gathered on the mountain as rays descend from heaven. Jesus' footprints are there, to recall the reality of his earthly presence. To the left of this picture is Enoch being received into heaven. To the right is Elijah, ascending to God. The imagery suggests that all the righteous rise at their end to be with God. Deuteronomy 32:11 is cited: Christ, Enoch, Elijah, and all the faithful will like an eagle fly to God, who guides them. Another text cited is Micah 2:13: one will go up to prepare the way for others.

I do not subscribe to all the sometimes bizarre hermeneutical permutations of the medieval *Biblia Pauperum*. By no means. But I am heartened by its suggestion that like Jesus, we as the faithful of God's people will at our end go with Christ to God. This is how I taught death to my daughters: when we die, we go to God.

And where is God? Well, besides *everywhere*, in the assembly at the eucharist each week.