

**Homily for the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord
May 12, 2013**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The photo in the sports section of the newspaper shows a baseball player pointing to the sky. The headline over the picture says, "Pointing up." The caption under the photo says, "The Cleveland Indians' Carlos Santana points skyward after a solo home run in the sixth inning Wednesday in Cleveland."¹ Well, yeah! That's pretty obvious! What the sports writers and editors won't even speculate to say is *WHY* the baseball player is pointing to the sky. He has hit a home run, so he's not looking for the baseball, since it would not have gone straight up. It's not likely he would be checking the wind direction *AFTER* hitting his home run. So just why is he looking and point up to the sky?

Each of us has likely looked up at the sky from time to time these past few weeks. Perhaps we looked upward, thinking, "More rain?" At other times we might have looked up to admire a patch of blue sky or to

ponder the beauty of the golden orb of the sun. Today we find the Apostles standing and “looking intently as [Jesus] was going” to the Father in a cloud (Acts 1:10); their eyes, too, were fixed upward, but for different reasons than ours.

The question asked of them by the angel - “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky” (Acts 1:11)? - seems to us a rhetorical question; what else could they possibly do at the moment? Whereas we looked up recently in either exasperation or enthusiasm, they looked up in wonderment. Like the baseball player pointing to the sky to give glory and praise to God, the reason is obvious and so perhaps needs no explanation, but sometimes it doesn’t hurt to state the obvious as the angel did about Jesus ascending to heaven and promising that he would return someday just as they saw him go up into the heavens.

As they watched their Lord and Master being lifted up to be enthroned amid angelic shouts of joy, they must have remembered Jesus’ comforting promise: “In my Father’s house there are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may also be” (John 14:2-3). How long

would he be gone? I wonder if they didn't long to cry out, "Take us with you! Take us to your Father's house!"

Saint Augustine reminds us that "our realm is the earth; the angels' realm is heaven. So our Lord came from another realm into our own, out of the land of the living into the land of the dead, from the heights of bliss into the vale of sorrow. He came to us laden with His blessings, yet patiently bore our infirmities."² He suffered our death and rose triumphant from the grave. Now he returns to his realm, but not as he first came to us; he has taken his flesh, our flesh, with him into the Father's house, into the heavenly realm. By his glorious ascension he shows us what we know in our hearts, in the longing of our souls, that there is a place for us in heaven, that he has indeed prepared a place for us in his Father's house.

We, too, sometimes find ourselves looking intently, as it were, at the sky, not to look at rain, clouds, or sunshine, but wondering how we find our way to the Father's house, how we can "follow where [Jesus], our Head and Founder, has gone before" (*Preface I of the Ascension of the Lord*). This is well and good because in these times we keep our thoughts fixed on the things that last and seek after holiness. When we keep our eyes fixed on

the heavenly realm, we remember that, by virtue of our baptism, “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come” (Hebrews 13:14).

Other times, though, we find ourselves looking intently at something other than the path Jesus has walked before us, at something other than what will lead us to our true home as the sons and daughters of God. We sometimes become absorbed in our work, in our pleasure, in our athletics, in our relationships, and even in ourselves; whenever this happens we are not looking intently at what matters most and we will not find the way to the Father’s house. This is why we ask the Lord today that we “may in spirit dwell already in the heavenly realms” (*Collect at the Mass During the Day*). In these moments we would do well to listen to the angelic question, “Why are you standing there looking into the sky?” The question is a subtle attempt to redirect the attention of the Apostles to the mission entrusted to them by Jesus, to “go and teach all nations” (Matthew 28:19); the question can also shake us out of our stupor to refocus us on faithful and intentional discipleship and to reawaken in us a longing for heaven, to be in the presence of God who is our supreme and lasting happiness. If we remember the angel’s question we can take up the challenge given to us by

Pope Francis: "Do not be content to live a mediocre Christian life: Walk with determination along the path of holiness."

The way to follow after the Lord into the glory of the Father's house is simple; it is to keep the great double commandment to love God and to love our neighbor, and then to seek his forgiveness when we fail to do so. To love God is to live in such a way that we might be worthy of heaven; to love our neighbor is to live in such a way that we help them on the way to heaven. If we seek to keep our eyes fixed on him who keeps his eyes fixed on us, we will live lives of love and so follow after the Lord, not only in his death and resurrection, but also in his ascension.

Saint Luke includes for us two details of the Lord's ascension not related to us in the *Acts of the Apostles*: he tells us that the disciples "did him homage" and "returned to Jerusalem with great joy" (Luke 24:53). Why would they be filled with joy even as the Lord left their sight?

Their joy is found first in the word of the angel that echoes like a blare of trumpets: "This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven" (Acts 1:11). Their joy had its foundation in their confidence that Jesus will come to take them to himself.

But their joy is also found in their act of worship, which precedes their return to Jerusalem. Their joy is sustained in their worship of God, which explains why “they were continually in the temple praising God” (Luke 24:53).

As we celebrate the Lord’s ascension into his glory, we come to church to worship and praise God here in this Eucharist and then we are sent forth to keep our eyes fixed intently on Him so that we may grow in the joy of His holiness and bear witness to His love in the world.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ *The State Journal-Register*, May 10, 2013, p. P42.

² Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon* 18.1.