

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
THE SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD
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As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to the United States, I wish to express the spiritual closeness and paternal affection of His Holiness Pope Francis as we celebrate today the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord into heaven. Today in the United States we also celebrate Mother's Day. I greet all mothers and am grateful for the many sacrifices you have made in guarding and nurturing the life and faith of your children.

The Gospels and Acts recount that the Lord spent forty days with His disciples before ascending into heaven. St. Leo the Great explains the solemnity this way:

"Throughout the whole period between the resurrection and ascension, God's providence was at work to instill one lesson into the hearts of the disciples - that our Lord Jesus Christ should be recognized as truly risen. The apostles had been intimidated by the catastrophe of the cross, and their faith in the resurrection had been uncertain; but now they were so strengthened by this truth that when their Lord ascended into heaven, far from feeling sadness, they were filled with great joy when they saw man's nature rising above the dignity of the whole heavenly creation, above the ranks of angels, above even the archangels. Nor would there be any limit to its upward course until humanity was admitted to a seat at the right hand of the eternal Father."

The Risen Lord spent forty days strengthening the faith of the disciples. Let us consider the first day. On that day, he appeared to Mary Magdalene who mistook him for the gardener. He called her by name, "Mary," and she knew that it was He. He had truly Risen! On that same day, after hearing from Mary that the Lord had conquered death, many were slow to believe and remain crushed and downtrodden. Jesus appeared to the disciples on the road to Emmaus and opened the Scriptures for them. Their hearts burned within them and they came to know Him in the breaking of the Bread! St. John's Gospel recounts that on the evening of the same day, the Risen Lord walked through the walls and offered the gift of peace to His disciples, showing them His wounds and giving them the power to forgive sins! And that was just the first of the forty days!

We could think of other days, such as when St. Thomas cried out, "My Lord and My God!", having touched the wounds of Jesus. The Acts of the Apostles tells us: *He presented himself alive to them by many proofs after he had suffered, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.* Yes, the experience of the days between the Resurrection and Ascension strengthened the faith of the Apostles: the death Jesus suffered on the cross truly had been conquered!

At the Ascension, one would have expected the disciples to be sad that Jesus was leaving them, but surprisingly the Apostles were filled with joy and *went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the word through accompanying signs.* Their faith in His promises was now so sure that seeing Him enter heaven triumphantly, victorious over

death, they experienced pure joy, because they saw their human nature ascend to the heights of heaven.

The Lord's Ascension is our own elevation. In Christ we have already penetrated the innermost sanctuary of heaven and have gained far more through the His ascension than we lost through the devil's attack on our first parents. In his malice, the devil robbed humanity of the happiness of its first home, but the Son of God has taken us into Himself, making us members of His own body through baptism. The whole reason Jesus came down from heaven and that He ascended to heaven was so that we, who had fallen from our lofty status through sin, might know the Father's love and rise to the glory of heaven by His grace.

This is the day when our poor, weak human nature is carried up in Christ above all created spirits; above all the angels; beyond the highest heavenly powers to the throne of God Himself. Today is a day for rejoicing. The King of Glory has entered heaven. As the Preface for the Ascension says: "He ascended, not to distance himself from our lowly state but that we, his members, might be confident of following where He, our Head and Founder, has gone before."

Yes, these forty days were days of joy, confirming his Resurrection, and of hope, filling his disciples with a longing for heaven. Confident in His promises, the Apostles awaited the sending of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate. They were filled with joy in expectation of this Spirit, who would fill them with his manifold gifts and power to preach the Gospel. This was their mission: to *go into the whole world and proclaim the Gospel to every creature*. They were to baptize those who believe, opening the path to salvation for them. The mission of the Apostles remains our mission – to bring joy and salvation to our world. As Pope Francis says:

"The Joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ, joy is constantly born anew." (Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 1)

As Pentecost approaches, let us ponder the great mission and responsibility given to us. Following the example of the Apostles, let pray in joyful hope for a new outpouring of the Spirit. Uniting ourselves in prayer with the Virgin Mother of God, who knew the joy of the Spirit at the Annunciation and waited eagerly to encounter him again with the Apostles, may we, with the whole Church, cry out, "Come, Holy Spirit!"