

**ADDRESS BY HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES FOR MOUNT ANGEL SEMINARY
SAINT BENEDICT, OREGON
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Dear Friends in Christ,

What a joyful day! Thank you, Abbott Jeremy, for your gracious invitation to be here. Monsignor Betschart, thank you for your ministry as President-Rector of Mount Angel Seminary for the past 12 years, and may God bless you in many ways as you conclude your service this summer. I thank both of you for your leadership in this community, especially for helping the Seminary to embrace a vision of communion and to welcome the pastoral conversion which Pope Francis has been calling us to. To Fr. Jeff Ervin, who will begin as the new President-Rector in July: congratulations and best wishes! Congratulations to the Seminary community as you celebrate 135 years of forming servants of the Lord for this part of the country and beyond. In a special way, congratulations to the more than two dozen graduates whom we recognize today, as well as to their families and loved ones. You will forgive me if I single out one of the graduates in particular – the only one of them who is a brother bishop: Bishop Kevin Vann of the Diocese of Orange. I will be getting a full report from the administrators on what kind of a student the Bishop has been!

As the Holy Father's personal representative to the United States, I want to convey to everyone who is here the spiritual closeness of the Holy Father, and to assure all of you graduates and seminary students of his care and affection.

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Dear Graduates, I want to reflect with you on the way in which we are being called to be the pastors and missionaries of today. And I will follow a three-fold structure in this reflection. To bring the Gospel of Jesus to the world, it is a matter of beginning from that personal encounter with Christ Jesus which gave us the experience of his love. Secondly, of allowing that personal experience of Christ to

inform our pastoral mission to others. And finally, of being daily renewed by the risen presence of Jesus in our Eucharistic celebration.

Personal Encounter as Source of Mission

If we are to ask: What kind of missionary disciples, and what kind of priests, are needed in today's Church? The first answer is: *joyful* ones! You and I know, brothers and sisters, that this can't be a "fake" joy. So then: Where does the real joy – the joy that endures – come from? It comes from the Lord himself! The joy that makes you a disciple is born from that *personal encounter* by which Christ Jesus first met you when he called you to follow him. For this reason, it is important for us to return to the grace of that encounter – what the Holy Father calls "our own Galilee".¹ As he said during last year's Easter Vigil:

"The Pasch of the Lord takes us back to the grace of our own past; it brings us back to Galilee, where our love story with Jesus began, where the first call took place. In other words, it asks us to relive that moment, that situation, that experience in which we met the Lord, experienced his love and received a radiantly new way of seeing ourselves, the world around us and the mystery of life itself."²

Jesus has approached each of you in a particular way. He has met your weakness with his mercy, and communicated his love to you. It is an *experience* of the incarnate love of the risen Christ. As Pope Francis said in *Evangelii Gaudium*:

"Thanks solely to this encounter—or renewed encounter—with God's love, which blossoms into an enriching friendship, we are liberated from our narrowness and self-absorption. [...] Here we found the source and inspiration of all our efforts at evangelization. For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?"³

¹ Pope Francis, Homily at Mass for Monday of the Third Week of Easter, 27 April 2020.

² Pope Francis, Homily at Mass for the Easter Vigil, 8 April 2023.

³ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, 7.

Mission in the Manner of Christ

This brings us to the next step. Beginning from that place of our own personal encounter with Christ, which has filled us with joy, we are then called to be *missionaries* of that joyful encounter. Our energy for evangelization comes from the freedom we have gained from being met with God's unconditional love.

Not only does our encounter with God's love give us the energy for mission – the desire to evangelize others – but it also shows us *how* we are to evangelize. We are to propose God's love to other people in the same manner in which God first proposed his love to us. When God came to you and to me, he did not find a person who was “ready-made”: someone who had all the capacities, all the required knowledge, all the virtues and perfections to make us “fit” for him. No. What God found when he approached us was a person with weaknesses and imperfections, but also someone who, in the depth of his heart, hungered and thirsted to know that he was good and that his life had a particular meaning. And God came precisely to feed that hunger and satisfy that thirst. He came not to affirm *our* righteousness, but to give us the gift of *his own righteousness*. This loving gift, from the beginning, came to us as *mercy* – as it always does. This is the “good news” with which God met each of us. It was a mercy – filled with tenderness and compassion – that met us in our *reality*, and which made us realize that no matter how weak and frail we are, we are loved by God and invited into his friendship.

Because this is the way God encountered us, it has to be the manner by which we encounter others in the name of God. Practically, this means that as God's pastors and missionaries, you have to be willing at all times to encounter people and to encounter people's *reality*. As the Pope has taught us, “Realities are greater than ideas.”⁴ Ideas are good. The degrees which you are being awarded today are the testimony that you have achieved a certain mastery of ideas, whether on the philosophical or theological plane. Congratulations to you! The Church needs good thinkers! But we must remember that, as Francis puts it: “Ideas – conceptual elaborations – are at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis.”⁵ If

⁴ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 231, 233.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 232.

we forget to place our ideas – even the most theologically astute and doctrinally sound ideas – *at the service* of our pastoral mission, then we risk, he says, “masking reality” with “angelic forms of purity, dictatorships of relativism, empty rhetoric, objectives more ideal than real, brands of ahistorical fundamentalism, ethical systems bereft of kindness, intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom.”⁶ This will not help people to receive a saving encounter with Christ.

What *will* help them, on the other hand, is a smile of recognition and a listening ear. When we see the person’s real situation, and listen to their honest questions, we will recognize that our answers to them must be as much from the heart as from the “head”. We might think that we need to explain the Church’s philosophy, or give someone a logical explanation of a Church teaching. But many of the people we encounter, even if they ask those questions, are actually needing an answer to a deeper question that they might not articulate in words. A question like: *Why do I feel like an outcast? Is there anyone who will listen to my story without judgment? Is there hope for me if I know the commandments but have difficulty conforming my life to them?* The most powerful pages of the Gospel are those that tell the stories of hurting people whose hearts are broken with questions like these. The Samaritan woman at the well. The man with leprosy. The woman caught in adultery. When we read these stories, we see in Jesus the pastoral program that we are called to follow. Remain with the person in their situation. Address the need that they bring. Offer them compassion and mercy.

Eucharist as School of Mission

I have spoken of the need to return to the source of our own encounter with Jesus. Secondly, of letting that encounter be both the energy and the model for our mission to others. Third and finally, I encourage you with what your own hearts desire so much already: to find the “source and summit” of grace in the celebration of the Eucharist.

I feel it is so important for us, in the Church of today, in the *world* of today, to have a renewed and “eye-opening” experience of the Eucharist. To discover in

⁶ *Ibid.*, 231.

our celebration of the Eucharist a key to the pastoral conversion that is needed. Each day we approach the Eucharist with our brothers and sisters in Christ. It is the daily ritual of our communities which is the central and formative encounter with Christ and with one another. It is a comfort to us, a source of nourishment and encouragement. It is also a daily challenge, a renewal of the call to be true missionaries of the One whom we meet in that saving, nourishing, sacrificial meal.

I am convinced that if we are to have real Eucharistic revival, we must wake up again to the *incarnational dimension* of the Eucharist. To the fact that here is Jesus, present both in his divinity and humanity, present to us as resurrected and alive, and by his presence giving us the *discernment* we need, not only as isolated individuals, but as a community and as Church, to walk the path of mission *today*. I am saying nothing new. In one sense it is a simple and obvious idea. It is clearly the reality that is expressed by the Emmaus encounter in Luke's Gospel.⁷ And yet at times, we don't seem to capture this incarnational dimension of the Eucharist fully. The Mass can be celebrated with the highest aesthetic expressions in the most splendid cathedrals, or it can be offered in the most basic manner in a simple chapel – and yet no matter what the externals are, it is meant *always* to be the community's encounter with the living and risen Lord, who not only comes to us in bread and wine but who enters our journey and shows us the way to walk. He also opens our eyes, as he did with the Emmaus disciples, to a realization of his presence that we had not anticipated or pre-conceived.

This is why the Pope wants us to re-discover Eucharistic “amazement” as we renew the practice of adoration.⁸ Not to increase the distance between Christ's sacredness and our human poverty. But rather, to let him *touch* our poverty and enrich us by his free gift. The Eucharist, as the Holy Father says, “is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.”⁹ Even though we surround the Blessed Sacrament with the greatest adornment and situate the Sacrament with a prominence that calls for reverence, this should not make us forget that the Lord comes to our actual bodies to be our food, and he lives among us in

⁷ Cf. *Luke* 24: 13-35.

⁸ Cf. Pope Francis, *Angelus* Address, 8 August 2021.

⁹ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 47.

order to be our companion. This is the amazement that we are called to: a recognition of the fact that Christ comes to us in such an intimate and enfleshed way. This, too, should inspire our missionary work. We need to approach others as Jesus approaches us: entering their lived reality as it is, touching them where they are, and causing them to be “amazed” that they are being invited into the company of the Lord and his Church.

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Dear Graduates, dear friends in Christ, our Lord calls us to a beautiful vocation: to be his missionaries in the world. Today is a day of joy. A chance to remember the love by which Christ first encountered us. To draw strength and energy from that encounter. And to keep approaching the Eucharistic celebration as a renewal of our friendship with Jesus and with one another, as well as a sign of the way forward. May the Lord continue to lead us in our journey together.