

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD
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WESTIN CONVENTION CENTER, PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

Good morning! As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father to the United States, once more I want to greet you in the name of the Holy Father and to assure you of his prayers and gratitude for your efforts directed toward the care of migrants. I want to thank Anna Marie Gallagher, the Executive Director of CLINIC, as well as Bishop Vann, the Chairman of the Board, and Bishop Zubik for their kind invitation to be with you. Additionally, I greet my brother bishops – Bishop Soto and Bishop DiMarzio. We pray in a special way for Bishop DiMarzio who is today celebrating the 49th anniversary of his priestly ordination.

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, raised his hands and blessed them. As he blessed them, he parted from them and was taken up to heaven. And they did Him homage and then returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and they were continually in the temple blessing God. (Luke 24:52-53)

From Luke’s description, the Ascension is the definitive farewell and blessing of Jesus to the disciples, literally, his adieu. This farewell is described twice: In the Gospel, Jesus ascends, and the Apostles return to Jerusalem with great joy. In Acts, Luke writes: *“He was lifted up and a cloud took him from their sight.”* (Acts1:9)

There is also another account of a farewell in Acts - the departure of Paul from the elders of Ephesus: *“And now behold I know that all you among whom I have preached the kingdom of God will see my face no more...I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come among you, not sparing the flock. ...After he had said this, he knelt down and prayed with them all. They all wept and embraced Paul and kissed him, sorrowing most of all because of the word he had spoken, that they should see his face no more.”* (Acts 20:36-38)

Comparing Paul’s departure with the Ascension, we note that while the friends of Paul return home in tears, the disciples of Jesus re-enter Jerusalem *with great joy*, like the night of the Resurrection when Jesus appeared to them, even though the doors were locked. We know that just three days earlier, Jesus had promised: *“Now you are in sorrow, but I will see you again and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will be able to take away your joy.”* While the Lord was referring to Easter, his words can be applied to his Ascension.

At Bethany, with the Lord’s Ascension, the disciples’ heart is not afflicted. The Resurrection has changed their suffering and sorrow into joy. Although Jesus physically left them, they now experience His Presence in a new, intense and intimate way. The disciples returned to Jerusalem with joy, stemming from the fact that the Ascension was not really a separation, the Lord's permanent absence. On the contrary, they were certain that the Risen One was alive and that in him the gates of eternal life had been opened to humanity forever. The Ascension did not imply Jesus’ absence from the world but began the new form of his presence through His sharing in the God’s royal power.

Even though He has ascended, the Lord is never far from his people. He will always walk with every pilgrim, like he did with those on the road to Emmaus. His presence will not be a physical presence, limited in space and time. In reality, His absolute distance is an absolute closeness, especially in the sacraments and in His Church. If first he was close to us physically,

now, as Temples of the Holy Spirit, which we became in Baptism, He is in us. First, he was visible with a human face; now he is invisible, but we see His transfigured face when we receive Him in the Eucharist, and we encounter Him in His Church – in its members, drawn from every people and nation.

He is Risen! He has gone to His Father's House, but He is alive! Some years after the Ascension, Saint Paul would write: *"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me."* Now we can better understand Jesus' words: *"I came that you may have life and have it abundantly."* In reality, the Ascension is the equivalent to saying: "I am going away so that you may always know the joy of living – of living with intensity."

In the Ascension we discover the secret to the joy of living. What does the Ascension of the Lord mean today? The Ascension has two aspects. The first is the sorrowful human separation – the farewell that leaves a void and emptiness in the heart. The second is the gift of the Divine Presence that fills our hearts in a way that far exceeds the pain of emptiness. Inasmuch as it is a separation, the Ascension speaks of an end to a specific way that Jesus relates to His disciples; inasmuch as it is an elevation into Heaven, the Ascension is a symbol of the glorification of the Lord.

Practically-speaking, the movement of the Lord in the Ascension is this: From Jerusalem, Jesus rises toward the heavens, re-entering the *"heavenly sanctuary"* (Heb 9:24) so that He can descend with the Father and the Holy Spirit into the soul of the baptized person. St. Alphonsus Liguori writes: "Paradise for God is the human heart." On the one hand, Jesus has taken his place in heaven and He reigns in glory, receiving with the Father and Holy Spirit, adoration and glory. On the other, God wants to descend and dwell in our hearts. That is where we encounter the Risen Lord of Life. To ascend into heaven, we must descend into the depths of our hearts to encounter the Lord by means of recollection and prayer.

What is the key to happiness? The Carmelite, Elizabeth of the Trinity, wrote:

"I wish I could teach you the secret of happiness the way God has taught me! You say that I don't have any worries or sufferings. It is true, but if you know how to be happy, then you can be happy in the exact opposite situation. You need to construct a "cell" within your soul. You will know that the good God is there, and you will enter this cell time and time again. When you feel nervous or assailed by melancholy, run immediately into your refuge and entrust everything to the Master. If you know Him in prayer, nothing will irritate you. In reality, there you find rest. To pray is to go with all simplicity to the one who is Love and to remain there with Him like a child in his mother's arms – to abandon one's heart to Him. That is happiness."

While we have gathered during these days to reflect on how we can welcome, protect, promote and integrate migrants so that they can feel "at home", we must not lose sight of our mission of directing them toward their heavenly home with Christ in Heaven. In the meantime, we share the journey with them, recognizing that wherever we go, He is with us – even to the end of time!