

HOMILY OF HIS EXCELLENCY ARCHBISHOP CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES
EASTER VIGIL
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
WASHINGTON, DC, APRIL 3, 2021

My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the representative of the Holy Father, I greet you in the name of Pope Francis and express his spiritual closeness, assuring you of his prayers, as we celebrate this most solemn Vigil of the Lord's Resurrection, the pinnacle of the Church's liturgical year. In a special way, I want to express the Holy Father's closeness to the sick and suffering and to those who have been caring for them throughout this time of pandemic. I greet all those joining this liturgy by television and the internet, with special gratitude toward the Eternal Word Television Network, and invite you to enter, with me, into the Paschal Victory of Christ.

Vatican diplomats are trained in Rome at the Pontifical Ecclesiastical Academy, located near the Pantheon. Directly across from the academy is another church called Santa Maria Sopra Minerva, built over a pagan temple of Minerva. In this church is kept the body of St. Catherine of Siena. Also, in this church is the cell that Catherine used when she lived in Rome. Looking around this church, one notices that some Dominican friars were laid to rest in the floor of the church. One notable friar buried there is Blessed Fra Angelico, who was a renowned artist.

Fra Angelico lived in Florence for some time and painted a variety of religious scenes, often imitating the work of Giotto, but Fra Angelico would always add something to his paintings — something that added to the theological content of the painting. If one compares the two artists' depiction of the Risen Christ's Appearance to Mary Magdalene on Easter morning, one notices a small but significant difference. In Fra Angelico's painting, the Risen Lord is carrying a gardener's hoe. He does not carry a grave digger's shovel, as if he works among the dead; rather he carries a gardener's hoe, as one who tends to the growth and care of the living.

Why a gardener's hoe? The story of humanity began in the Garden which God had fashioned when he said, "Let us make man in our own image", which we heard in the First Reading from Genesis. Of course, in the second story of the creation of man and woman, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and sinned. The *Exsultet* refers to the "Happy Fault", which merited our Redeemer, yet not all of the consequences of that sin were happy. Adam and Eve hid themselves in shame from the Divine Gardener, and suffering and death entered our world. Immediately, God began devising a plan to save us from our sins, and through the readings this evening, we heard how God entered history to save His people, finally sending us His own Son.

Through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, the Garden and humanity that lived in the Garden were again re-fashioned in God's image. Now, as on that first Easter morning, Jesus, the Divine Gardener, walks through His Garden, just as God had done in Genesis. He does not find us hiding in shame; rather, He discovers that we, like Mary Magdalene, are rushing out to greet him in this glow of Easter joy.

We go to meet the Heavenly Gardener, as He comes to tend to the Garden of His Church and world in which He has created each of us to live. He uses His Gardener's supplies – the sacraments – to make things beautiful for His Father. At baptism and confirmation, He planted the seeds of new life in us and strengthened us with the grace of the Holy Spirit. He gave us in baptism the water we need to live and grow.

In the sacrament of reconciliation, the Sacrament of Divine Mercy, the Gardener oxygenates the soil of His Garden. In Holy Communion, the Gardener nourishes us with His Flesh and Blood so that we might have life in this world and the next. In holy matrimony, husband and wife enter a covenant with the Divine Gardener and the fruit of their love blossoms in children. At ordination, a priest is given a special power to till the soil of other gardens, which we call parishes.

On this Easter night, the Heavenly Gardener desires to walk through the garden of our souls and to till its soil, no matter how hardened that soil might have become. The grace of the Resurrection, which we celebrate tonight, can transform a world, scarred by suffering and death. Where once there was death, with God there is the hope for life in abundance here and in eternity, for He is Risen!

The Risen Lord has the power to revive the most withered and desolate gardens, changing them into a lush, flourishing paradise. Isaiah tells us: *He will renew your strength, and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring whose water never fails.* This Easter we cannot give into despair. We do not hide in shame. We rejoice for the One who carries the Gardener's hoe has risen from the dead! Behold! He comes to till His garden – here in Washington and around the world! May we, through the graces of Easter, blossom like the lily and proclaim to the whole world: *He is Risen!*