

**HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HOLY MASS FOR THE SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD
MOUNT ANGEL ABBEY – SAINT BENEDICT, OREGON
MAY 12, 2024**

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Greetings and blessings to all of you! Once again, I am pleased to convey to everyone the spiritual closeness and affection of the Holy Father. It has been a grace to spend these days with the Mount Angel community, and with the Church in the Archdiocese of Portland. In a special way, I would like to recognize the mothers who are here today: Happy Mother’s Day! Thank you for the gift that is your motherhood.

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After gathering the Apostles and promising to them the Gift of the Holy Spirit, who would empower them to be his witnesses to the world, the Lord Jesus was lifted up out of their sight; and the Apostles were left “looking intently at the sky as he was going”. Two men dressed in white garments said to them: “Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky?” While it was understandable that the Apostles would be transfixed at an event that exceeded their comprehension, they needed someone to “bring them back down to earth”. The two men continued: “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.”

In reflecting on the mystery of the Ascension, Pope Benedict wrote:

“The departing Jesus does not make his way to some distant star. He enters into communion of power and life with the living God, into God’s dominion over space. Hence, he has not ‘gone away’, but now and forever, by God’s own power he is present with us and for us.”¹

Reflecting on the same mystery, Pope Francis said:

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two*, p. 283.

“The Ascension does not point to Jesus’ absence, but tells us that he is alive in our midst in a new way. He is no longer in a specific place in the world as he was before the Ascension. He is now in the lordship of God, present in every space and time, close to each one of us.”²

My brothers and sisters, the closeness of Jesus to us, even after his Ascension to heaven, is such an important reality. And it has everything to do with our gathering for this Eucharist. The Eucharistic celebration is the sacramental experience in which, together, we encounter the One who has ascended into heaven, but who is close to us now through the action of the Holy Spirit. Far from having “our heads in the clouds”, or “looking up into the sky” as the mystified disciples did, we are to “take and eat” the very flesh and blood of the Lord, and to do so in the company of our fellow believers. In this Eucharist, we believe that Christ is here among us, continuing to nourish his Church. He is present in his Word, present in the sacred elements, and present in one another. Christ continues to walk with us, and through this Eucharist, shows us the pathways where he wants us to carry out the mission that began with his Incarnation. He is still very much alive!

The Eucharist, then, is the consummate meeting place for the Lord and his disciples. In the Eucharist we are one with the whole communion of saints, across both time and geography. For us, gathered here on this commencement weekend, this is a great grace and source of consolation. For many of you, today and the coming days are a time when you will be saying “goodbye”. Family members and loved ones have come for this weekend’s celebrations and will soon return home. Students will part ways, and some will leave this institution to pursue the service for which they came here to be formed. There are departures and separations. At times like this – and whenever there are “departures” in this life, we might remain “looking into the sky”, as it were: fixed on the mystery of separation, and perhaps even “frozen” in sadness. To be sure, the experience of sadness at such separations is very human. Such sadness even helps reveal the love that binds us to one another and speaks of a longing for the eternal communion that we will find in heaven. Yet the word of the Lord reminds us that, although we must endure separations on earth,

² Pope Francis, General Audience, 17 April 2013.

we remain united with him, and he with us, in a way that our vision doesn't fully capture. And if we are united with him through the Spirit, then we are also united with our brothers and sisters, our family members and friends, and all who are companions of Jesus.

We are united, above all, through the Bread we break and the Cup that we share in our daily, or weekly, Eucharistic communion. For that reason, no matter how much distance separates us on earth, or how much time has passed since the faithful ones before us have gone to their reward, when we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we are one with them in Christ.

As Pope Benedict went on to say in that reflection on the Ascension:

“Because Jesus is with the Father, he has not gone away but remains close to us. Now he is no longer in one particular place in the world as he had been before the ‘Ascension’: now, through his power over space, he is present and accessible to all – throughout history and in every place.”³

The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews states:

“For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the one that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.”⁴

Indeed, let us offer him this sacrifice of praise, the Eucharist. In this offering, let us experience communion with one another and with the faithful of every time and place, as we journey toward the everlasting communion in that heaven to which Christ has ascended.

³ *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two*, p. 284.

⁴ *Hebrews* 13:14-15.