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Sending Forth

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In his homily at UD's baccalaureate Mass on May 3, Father Chris Wittmann, S.M., director of campus ministry, had a message of hope and challenge for graduates on the Solemnity of the Ascension:

My guess is that there are probably a number of students here who are more than ready to graduate. As much as you may have loved UD, perhaps you can't wait to get out of here. This is a healthy and normal reaction because, let's face it, as good as it is, the life of a college student or a graduate student is not very “sustainable” over the long haul. Consider, for example, the hours kept by most college students: the average human being cannot sustain them for more than a few years. The diet, both solid and liquid, is not exactly well-balanced, on the average. The life of a college student does not occur spontaneously in nature. So even if these have been the best years of your life so far, you probably need to move on, to continue becoming who you are called to be by God's love.

All the same, if you are like me, you have spent some time this past couple of weeks trying to brace yourself for the goodbyes that are inevitable this weekend. If you are like me, you have attempted to begin saying those goodbyes, aware that it will be impossible today and tomorrow to see everyone and to say everything that you will wish you would have said if you had only had the chance. And, if you are like me, you will have botched the job a little here and there; started to get choked up with tears, perhaps, before you got to say what you really wanted to, and backed away, chickened out, said something less than what you had hoped to say, for fear of the tears, for fear of facing the reality of the grief of farewell. You may, like me, be asking yourself: "How can I say goodbye to this person whom I have come to love, but whom I have never quite told that I love them?" And further still, you may also be asking yourself: what does my departure from UD mean for me? Will these people I am saying goodbye to somehow still be part of my life? How? And who will I be, apart from UD and apart from these people?

This must have been something of what the disciples of Jesus were going through on the day that Jesus ascended into heaven. This was their final goodbye to the one whom they had come to believe was the savior of the world. How were they supposed to carry on without him? They had left everything to follow him, and now he was leaving them! Before he died, there had been long goodbyes and explanations from Jesus of how they were to carry on, but this was too much to absorb in their grief. Then, after only three days, he came back, risen from the dead, and everything was new again. But now he was leaving again, for good, and his goodbyes were short this time. The disciples were stunned and uncertain what to do. As he was ascending, they must have been wondering, despite Jesus’ promises: will he somehow still be a part of our lives? How? And who will we be — who will I be — without Jesus close at hand? Maybe this was part of the reason that the gospel says that when they saw him on the mountain that day, "They worshiped, but they doubted." And now as he ascends to heaven and leaves them again, can we blame them for standing there, full of doubt, staring into the sky?

The Ascension is a necessary step in the resurrection event that flows from Resurrection through Ascension to Pentecost - the sending of the Holy Spirit. Jesus must leave us in order to send the Holy Spirit to be with us. Jesus must return to the Father, to his rightful place. The Holy Spirit, who is present to us at all times in a way that Jesus in the flesh could not be, can only come if Jesus leaves. The Holy Spirit, who sustains the life of the church, the body of Christ on earth, the life of the individual Christian, must come down.

Here is the sobering good news: Even after the resurrection, there is more "letting go" to do. There is dying to self even in and after the rising. There is letting go required so that we can receive with open hands and open hearts the gifts the Spirit of God has in store for us. Jesus says to Mary Magdalene on the morning of the resurrection: "Do not cling to me; Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father."

Why? Because in the letting go, in the surrender of our tight grasp on control in life, necessary even after the resurrection, we receive from God that which we could never have received before; that which we could never gain by grasping. We are given gifts and power beyond our wildest dreams. The disciples pestered Jesus, risen from the dead, with questions about the future, and he said, "It is not for you to know the times or seasons that the Father has established by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."
Christ's witnesses ... to the ends of the earth. Those scared, doubting disciples, worried about all sorts of things. Us, worried about life beyond graduation, worried about our beautiful, glorious, tragically flawed world. We tearful and timid doubters, who have been baptized in Christ, are called to be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth. It is more than we could have ever gained or grasped or imagined.

When Jesus appears on the mountain just before he leaves them, Jesus says to the disciples and to us: "All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I command you." These are profound marching orders for doubting disciples who are coming down the mountain or departing from UD. How can we accept this great commission? What fears do I need to let go of to count myself among those who are so entrusted by Jesus? Jesus says simply, "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age."

And sure enough, after Jesus left, the Holy Spirit came to the disciples, and they were transformed into courageous witnesses, preachers and healers. They did the same powerful works that Jesus had done. The preached the truth regardless of the cost, and thousands were converted. But it never would have happened if Jesus hadn't left them. Nor would the following words ever have been written:

"May the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, give you a Spirit of wisdom and knowledge of him. May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call, what are the riches of glory in his inheritance among the holy ones and what is the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe." Jesus says that all power in heaven and on earth has been given to him, and he shares it with us; with those who are willing to worship in the midst of our doubt; to let go of our tight grasp, to keep surrendering, to say our tearful farewells, even while we are being raised to new life.

Let us say our goodbyes with hearts that are free from fear and full of faith. Graduates, may you not doubt the surpassing greatness of his power for us who believe. Accept, with open, grateful hands and hearts, the commission we share to be Christ's witnesses to the ends of the earth. And living in the power of the Holy Spirit, let us all give praise to our God through Christ, who promises to be with us always, until the end of the age.