

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 24th Sunday in Ordinary Time; Mass of the Holy Spirit

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Mass of the Holy Spirit

Loyola University Maryland

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Introduction

As the current academic year gets underway and starts to accelerate, I'm glad to celebrate this Mass of the Holy Spirit with all of you who are part of this university community - thank you, Fr. Linnane, for inviting me! To the new students, I offer a warm welcome to the Archdiocese of Baltimore, the first Roman Catholic diocese in the United States, founded in 1789. Today the Archdiocese has over half a million members and is blessed with more than 140 parishes in Baltimore throughout nine counties of Maryland. Our Catholic schools educate nearly 25,000 young people and Catholic Charities is the largest provider of social services in the region, in urban neighborhoods, in rural areas, and among the immigrant community, while five Catholic hospitals provide generous charity care to those in need. The Archdiocese is also blessed by the presence of three Catholic universities. It partners with religious orders and with many faith-based organizations that are doing really good work, often heroic work, in our midst. All this we do because our faith impels us to do it. Whatever we do for those who are in need, we do for Christ.

So, if you are going to be here at Loyola for any length of time, I hope you'll make the Archdiocese of Baltimore your spiritual home and become involved in the ministries of the Church. Let me add that, for all of its challenges and needs, Baltimore is a wonderful city. It's a place with heart and soul, a place where good people are doing their best to make a better life for themselves and for their families. You will find here heroic goodness even in the most disadvantaged neighborhoods. You will discover here a wealth of history and culture and

neighborhoods that are flourishing with young people and new life. So you see, I'm neither Democrat nor Republican but I am strongly pro-Baltimore!

The Holy Spirit

So, we've gathered for a Mass of the Holy Spirit, a Mass in which we ask the Spirit to inspire and sustain this community of faith, learning, and service as it embarks on a new academic year. During this Mass we pray for the administration and for the faculty, for those who provide support services, and most of all, for you, the students. We ask the Spirit for guidance and help in all the challenges of the academic year.

But what does it mean to ask the Holy Spirit to assistance? Will the Spirit exonerate you from the hard work in which you're already engaged? Will the Spirit give the right answers on exams to those who do not study? Or to those who neglect to spend the time doing research the magic ability to write brilliant papers capable of amazing your professors? Of course not. God loves us too much to treat us so foolishly. What, then, can we expect the Holy Spirit – the Spirit whom we received at Baptism, whose fullness we received in Confirmation, and whose grace is renewed in us at every Eucharist? What will the Holy Spirit to do for in us and among us?

The answer is this: The role of the Spirit is to link us to Jesus and to his redeeming love. It's to open our hearts toward Jesus and to make Jesus come alive in us, so that we would think, speak, and act as Jesus would do. So too the Spirit opens our minds the panoramic beauty of the Catholic faith and its importance in our lives and in the life of the world today. The Spirit trains us to treat others as we would like to be treated, and to serve the poor and vulnerable in ways that affirm their dignity, and to love our neighbor, those around us who may need our care and attention. The Spirit also opens our hearts to the amazing truth of God's merciful love and to the reality that the Lord has in mind for us some specific work, some vocation; maybe you will discern that special work during your at Loyola. And finally, welcoming the Holy Spirit into our hearts makes a big difference in how we relate to other people, how we do our work, and what we give priority to. And when a critical mass of people in a community are open to the Spirit, the community itself is takes on a new spirit of joy and encouragement.

Mercy and Forgiveness

Today's Scripture readings, however, focus on another role of the Spirit in our lives: the Spirit forgives of our sins by uniting us to the redeeming work of Jesus, to Jesus who died to set us free from sin and death. So, let's briefly review today's readings, a CliffsNotes version, if you will, Scripture readings that are all about mercy and forgiveness. What is God saying to us?

In the reading Exodus, we find Moses on the mountain encountering God's glory. Meanwhile the people down below give up on Moses, thinking him to be dead, and so they revert to idolatry, the worship of a calf made of gold. In his mercy God had led his people away from worshipping lifeless objects, just as the Lord urges us, in our lives, not to substitute other things for his love. After the people of Israel fell back into idolatry, God does not abandon them. Filled with the Spirit, Moses pleads for the people and God forgives their sin.

In the reading from his first letter to Timothy, Paul makes it abundantly clear that he was rescued from his former way of life by the grace of the Risen Lord, that is to say, by the working of the Holy Spirit in the depths of his being. Paul had cursed and persecuted the Lord's disciples, only to be forgiven by God's mercy and called to be an apostle; as he proclaims: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners [&] of these I am the foremost!" Paul is telling us that if he can be forgiven, we can be forgiven!

And in the Gospel read of the lost sheep and the lost coin, powerful images of ourselves when we stray from friendship with God. How are we like lost sheep or like lost coins? It's like this: Once lost neither sheep nor coins can find themselves; someone has to find them. So too, when we stray, we cannot find our way back to God merely on our own. Instead, the Good Shepherd comes in search of us; each of us matters to him! So too the Church is like the woman searching for the lost coin. The Church must seek out members who no longer practice their faith, either because of scandals or unresolved questions, or simple apathy. And when these members are found, there's great rejoicing on earth and in heaven!

But the greatest story of God's mercy in all of Scripture is the prodigal son, the younger of two sons who decided to take his inheritance and leave home. Not long

after, he found himself far from home, underemployed, hungry, and alone, an apt description of ourselves when we decide to take our leave of God's household. But notice what happens: in his misery, the prodigal son comes to his senses. He experiences remorse for the mess that he made of his life and makes the decision to ask his father's forgiveness, to return home humbly. Genuine remorse for our sins is not mere a psychological guilt pang. Rather, genuine remorse for sin comes from the Holy Spirit who moves us not only to see the harm our sins have caused in our life and lives of others, but also prompts us to trust that God is kind, patient, and merciful, just like the father in the parable who waited every day for his son to come home. And in the power of the Spirit, our sins are not merely covered over or forgotten. They are instead annihilated by the Holy Spirit, who, in the Sacrament of Mercy, applies Jesus redeeming love to the specific wounds of our existence. What a powerful impetus for you and me to frequent the Sacrament of Reconciliation!

Joy in the Holy Spirit

Recently, a priest who was my good friend went home to God. He was a man of joy and peace even on the worst days. Nothing got him down. As a young priest I asked him why he was always peaceful, joyful, and upbeat. He answered, "I guess it's because I go to confession so often. If God can forgive my sins, [he said] what's there to unhappy about?" I can attest in my own life to the truth and wisdom of that good priest's words. One of the great outcomes of opening our hearts to the Holy Spirit is joy – the joy of forgiveness, the joy of God's friendship, the joy of one another's friendship. As this new academic year unfolds, my fondest prayer for you is that you will experience, every day, true joy in the Holy Spirit and may God bless you and keep you always in his love!