

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Catholic Schools Convocation

The Martyrdom of St. John the Baptist

Opening Mass, Schools Convocation

Nativity Parish, Timonium

Aug. 29, 2019

You might not think that today's feast, the beheading of John the Baptist, is a propitious day on which to hold a Catholic schools convocation. Talk about getting the year off on a grim note!

But as we enter upon a year dedicated to the leadership, I hope you will join me in discovering lessons of leadership in the life of this courageous prophet and martyr, lessons in that leadership which you, our dedicated Catholic educators offer to our schools, our parents, our young people, and the wider community.

But first let me offer you a word of thanks.

I would be remiss if I failed to say how grateful I am to each of you for the work that you do day in and day out – as teachers and aides, as administrators and learning specialists, as coaches and librarians, and so much more.

Our schools could not hope to be successful without your leadership and service. I hope you know how much your daily work of heart and hand means to me, to the whole Catholic community, and to the community at large.

But back to John the Baptist, whose greatness the Lord himself extolled. What can this man teach us, a man whose life was so different from our own and whose death appears to be so grim and lonely? What can he tell us about the qualities of leadership you hope to exercise as Catholic educators in the academic year that lies before us?

Well, usually, at this point the homilist alerts his listeners to three points but if you don't mind I shall advance four brief points on leadership that arise from the life,

teaching, and example of St. John the Baptist – namely—

1) be a follower in order to be a leader; 2) embrace your vocation; 3) be clear and courageous; and, 4) give it all you got . . .

Four lessons from St. John the Baptist that apply to us. Let's get started.

To Be a Leader First Be a Follower

So, if you want to be a leader, St. John the Baptist teaches us, first be a follower. On the purely human plane, this seems self-evident. To excel in your profession, you must follow best practices and emulate those who are master-teachers.

To excel in your vocation as a Catholic educator, however, you must first follow the Master, the Lord Jesus Christ – he who is our Lord, our Savior, our Teacher, our Redeemer.

John made it clear to one and all that he was not the Messiah. He was not the sun but rather the lamp, not the Word but rather the voice, yes, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, “make straight the paths of the Lord.”

When he spotted Jesus he pointed him out: “Behold the Lamb of God.” And when asked about his relationship to the Christ, John said of Jesus: “He must increase, I must decrease.”

If we would be leaders in our Catholic schools, we, like John, must cede first place in our minds, our hearts, and our decision making to Christ our Teacher.

We must be pupils, disciples of this Master-Teacher beyond compare if we would be teachers worthy of the name and worthy of our great mission.

Embrace Your Vocation

Second, St. John the Baptist teaches us to embrace our vocation.

When Mary, carrying Jesus in her heart, approached the doorstep of Elizabeth, John the Baptist, who leapt for joy in his mother's womb.

As a young man, he went into the desert to prepare himself for his vocation to be the

forerunner, as it were, the advance man, for the Messiah.

There, in the desert, he embraced his vocation and never looked back, even though there must have been times when he experienced doubt or confusion. And for the rest of his life, he boldly fulfilled his God-given vocation, to the very end.

Often, the word “vocation” is applied to some state in life in the Church, such as the consecrated life, marriage and family, or the priesthood. But the word vocation is also legitimately applied to any form of service that takes up the better part of one’s waking hours.

Teaching is a vocation.

We say of some people that they are “born teachers” and many people discover at a very young age that they’d like to be teachers, inspired no doubt by the wonderful women and men who taught them.

I think Catholic teachers have a special mission, a special calling to open young minds and hearts to the presence of the Lord and his love, to communicate the truth of the faith in its fullness, and to help young people find their rightful place in the life of the Church, while at the same time helping the whole child to grow and develop

according to God’s good pleasure and measure – and if that’s not a vocation, I don’t know what is!

I would suggest that the beginning of a new academic year is just the right time to embrace anew the vocation to which you have been called as Catholic educators, women and men who are forerunners for our students, who walk with them, but who also go ahead of them, pointing out to them not only worlds of knowledge and discovery but also the presence of the Lord Jesus, our Savior and the lover of our souls.

To be a leader, you must embrace your vocation, thus saith John the Baptist!

Be Clear and Courageous

A third lesson St. John the Baptist teaches us on this day of his martyrdom is that we

must be clear and courageous in our teaching.

As we survey John the Baptist's life we see how he took to heart Jeremiah's words proclaimed today as our first reading - "Gird your loins; stand up and tell them all that I command you!"

St. John the Baptist heard the voice of God as he prayed and fasted in the desert and went forth with courage to proclaim a message that was clear and concise: "Repent and believe" - a message that untold people heard and heeded.

John's clear messaging did not remain a glittering generality, however, but rather was applied to very particular situations in need of reform and repentance, as for example, his boldness in speaking up to Herod about Herodias, his wife. That did not sit well with Herodias who took her revenge when she got the chance.

As educational and spiritual leaders you are expected to make complicated lessons clear and spiritual truths evident. And sometimes you will find yourselves having to communicate hard truths, hard truths that are part of our faith, hard truths about the young people we serve, truth that is to be communicated, not with malice or vengeance, but with love.

But as you know so well, for your trouble you sometimes reap the whirlwind! Yet, isn't it the case, almost an immutable rule, that the teachers we remember and cherish were not masters of ambiguity, but rather those who loved us enough to tell us the truth and to tell it to us lovingly.

So let us be clear, courageous, and loving.

Give It All You Got!

A final lesson from St. John the Baptist on this day of his martyrdom is this - if you'd aspire to be a leader in Catholic education, give it all you got.

I really don't think I need to say that to you because, as our award ceremony will amply demonstrate, this is what you do, day in and day out.

Yet, there is something about John the Baptist that spurs us on to greater heights -

he gave not only his time, talent, energy and treasure – but indeed his very life for the Lord Jesus Christ, his last and greatest witness.

While I suspect you are all planning to keep your heads during the year ahead, time and time again you will give away your hearts to your students, going the extra mile, above and beyond what is strictly required of you, and sometimes experiencing a kind of slow martyrdom when one of your charges gets into trouble, is seriously ill, or is found to be neglected by his or her parents and/or guardians. In such moments, turn to St. John the Baptist and ask him for his prayers.

Conclusion

For embracing your vocation, for your clarity and courage, for your discipleship, and for your readiness to give this vocation all you got – I say thank you.

When I offer up the host and the wine to be consecrated, transformed into the Lord's Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, I shall in a sense place your work of heart and hand on that paten and in that chalice, such that who you are and what you do will become a part and parcel of that living sacrifice of praise we offer to God through Christ in the Holy Spirit.

“Through him, in him, and with him,” may you be those leaders we need so much!

And may God bless you and keep you always in his love!