

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Memorial of the Beheading of John the Baptist

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St. Mary's Seminary

Aug. 29, 2018

A Word of Welcome

If memory serves, the opening Mass for St. Mary's Seminary often takes place on the feast of the beheading of St. John the Baptist. For those who of you who are new, I want to assure you that this is not a harbinger of things to come!

And let me welcome you, our new and returning seminarians, to St. Mary's Seminary, our nation's oldest, and to the Archdiocese of Baltimore, also our nation's oldest archdiocese. In a special way, I want to greet and thank Fr. Brown, your Rector, together with your dedicated faculty, with its newest members, Fr. Stevens, Fr. Millet, and Fr. Sean Gould – how welcome you are – as well as Fr. Terrien and Fr. Griswold who are returning from sabbatical. And we should never forget the staff who work so hard day in and day out to ensure that this seminary and university fulfills its mission. You have come to a wonderful and sound place to be formed for the priesthood, and I'm very glad that you are here!

The Beheading and the Crisis

There can be no doubt that you begin or resume your seminary studies at a difficult moment in the life of the Church. This summer the news has not been good and it will not be good for some time to come. The Grand Jury Report in Pennsylvania, the situation of Archbishop McCarrick, and the letter of the former Nuncio, Archbishop Viganò have plunged the Church in the United States into crisis, a crisis that has also erupted in Chile, Australia, and elsewhere.

This is not a mere public relations crisis. It represents a tsunami of moral failures –

grave acts of commission and omission – that have justifiably bewildered and angered God’s People, undercut the Church’s evangelizing mission, and caused doubts about the soundness of seminary formation, not only in the past but even in the present. You’ve no doubt heard this from your family and friends. You talk about it among yourselves. The social media and the blogosphere are filled with it and many irresponsible things are being said by extremists on the right and the left. Thankfully, over the past week, your faculty has dealt constructively with this crisis, and will continue to do so in the time ahead.

All this has created a dark and difficult environment in which to be formed as priests. You may well sympathize with John the Baptist who, after bearing witness to the light, was cast into darkness. Surely there were moments of solitude when John was tempted to wonder if he had done the right thing. Surely there were times when John the Baptist could have lost his focus. But it was there, from prison, in the dungeon of suffering and doubt, that John the Baptist bore his most magnificent witness to Christ. So too it is often in times of corruption and turmoil in the Church’s life that God raises up great leaders, such as St. Francis of Assisi or St. Catherine of Siena. Allow the Lord and his Spirit to make of you the leaders that the Church needs. Be among those who will help bring the Church to a new day!

Keeping One’s Focus

You didn’t ask for this but let me offer you a little advice as a new year of formation gets underway. Don’t get utterly swept up in the *sturm und drang* surrounding this crisis. Please don’t lose your focus. Talk it over with your spiritual director and your formation advisor. But mostly concentrate on formation. Concentrate on becoming in God’s grace the best priests you can be. Continue developing your life of prayer. Stay close to Jesus in the Eucharist. Rely on the Lord’s mercy in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Tend to your own evangelization so that one day you will evangelize others. Be first a disciple so that one day you will be a missionary.

Study hard, imbibe and ingest the truth, beauty, and goodness of the Church’s faith, learn to make it your own, form a coherent, integrated, picture of the faith, a coherent picture that will continue to develop and grow throughout your life. Relate

your studies to your life of prayer and your moral life, and practice what Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar called, 'theology on one's knees'.

Try to see the relationship of prayer and study to pastoral needs with which one day, God willing, you will grapple.

Let your friendship with the Lord – his love for you and your love for him – open your hearts to healthy relationships and life-long friendships, for nothing develops the personality quite like true friendship, especially a capacity to forgive and to be forgiven. Through friendship with the Lord and friendships in the seminary community your persona becomes not an obstacle but a bridge to Christ.

Let prayer, study, and human formation culminate in pastoral charity, that is to say, 'a charity that evangelizes.' Earlier in the summer I was in a room full of priests and one of them asked how to evangelize the millennials, as if there is a secret formula for reaching this elusive demographic. But there is nothing magic. Evangelizing isn't a matter of technique. It's all about being the sort of priest who is deeply authentic, and who knows and loves his people, listens to them, cares about them, teaches them, ministers to them, and walks with them along the way of salvation.

Conclusion

Finally, turn every day to Mary. As per Fr. Olier, Mary, the Seat of Wisdom, has a special love for this place and she has a special love for those who study here for the priesthood. Stay close to Mary, ask her to intercede for you and for your classmates and do count on my prayers even as I ask you to pray for me now and again. God bless you and keep you in his love!