

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Opening Mass of the Holy Spirit; 21st Week in Ordinary Time

Opening Mass of the Holy Spirit

Mt. St. Mary's Seminary

August 30, 2017

Well, here we are at the beginning of a new year of formation. For those of you – faculty, staff, and students – who are returning this is my first opportunity to offer a warm word of greeting. To those of you who are newly arrived, this is my first opportunity to welcome you to the Archdiocese of Baltimore – the oldest diocese in the United States where, naturally enough, this the nation's oldest seminary is happily to be found.

We've gathered for a Mass of the Holy Spirit – and for what shall we pray? If you're a seminarian, you might pray that the year will go well, that the rector and faculty will be nice, and that, at year's end, you'll be that much closer to the priesthood. Fair enough, I'd say, but that's not really putting one's best foot forward. The Holy Spirit wants you to ask for something more significant than that. If you are in the administration or a faculty member, you might ask the Holy Spirit that your students be bright and responsive, that they be easily formed, that the year will go off without a hitch, and at the end of it, you may be that much closer to a sabbatical. Fair enough, I'd say, but here again, the Holy Spirit is inviting us to ask for more.

Let me suggest that we should forsake the task of trying to conjure up that for which we might beseech the Holy Spirit this afternoon and instead do what disciples *ought* to do, viz., to rely on the Word of God to inform the prayer that rises from our lips and from our hearts. Let, then, our readings guide our prayer as seek the overshadowing power of the Spirit at the beginning of this new endeavor.

Yet, if we turn to the Gospel reading from St. Matthew, our prospects are not very promising. For, in that passage, we find Jesus railing against the scribes and

Pharisees. Indeed, for the past few days (interrupted only by the Beheading of St. John the Baptist) – every sentence the Lord uttered begins with the word, “Woe!” “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites....” “Woe to you, blind guides....” “Woe to you scribes and Pharisees...you are like whitewashed tombs...” One Scripture scholar dubbed this section of Matthew’s Gospel, “Showdown in the Temple” and these particular verses as “The Seven Woes”. So one thing we can hope for is not to have a showdown in the chapel nor to have anyone say anything to us in the course of the next nine months that sounds even remotely like the seven woes Jesus flung at the leaders of his day!

But let’s stop and take a look inside these seven woes. At heart, Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees of insincerity and hypocrisy. They are using religion as a means of puffing themselves up, as a means of attaining authority, respect, and prosperity. In the process, they are perverting the understanding of the law – the Torah – which is not merely an interminable list of rules but rather, the true and living Word of God, almost the Lord’s personal intervention by which he sought to shape the lives of the people he had chosen to be his own. The scribes and Pharisees, on the other hand, tried to shape the Torah, to subvert it for their own purposes, thus to aggrandize their own private world.

This sounds a great deal like what Pope Francis terms “spiritual worldliness.” Spiritual worldliness hides behind a façade of piety and consists of seeking not the Lord’s glory but one’s own well-being. Like whitened sepulchers, those who practice this form of piety look good on the outside but on the inside they are very far from that Gospel ideal of purity of heart – and it can happen to any of us, myself very much included. How easy to become the prisoners of our favorite ideas and opinions –thus trimming and shaping that part of the Word of God we find disconcerting. How easy it is to impose one’s opinions on others in an authoritarian sort of way.

What, then, is the greater good for which we beseech the Holy Spirit? Three things . . . and with your permission . . . I’ll add a fourth. First, let us pray that when we hear the Lord’s stern warnings, we don’t look the other way and imagine they are meant for someone other than us. The Lord is doing us a favor when, with his Almighty Word, he shatters our façades. Second, let us pray that in place of make-believe piety, we acquire more deeply day by day the heart of a disciple. Disciples are those

who listen to the voice of the Lord and follow the Shepherd wherever he leads them. Third, let us ask the Holy Spirit for the grace to dwell even now in heavenly realms. By that I do not mean that we should walk around with our heads up in the sky but rather that we associate ourselves with the self-giving love of heaven, “where Christ is seated at God’s right hand,” surrounded by the redeemed. The prayers and self-giving love of those “who have washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb” helps to free us from the prison of self-interest, from the narrowness that reduces the Gospel to one’s private preserve. Yes, dear friends, we are asking for a lot this afternoon! But what a beautiful prayer to rise from our lips and hearts as we call up the Holy Spirit at the beginning of this new year of formation. In a way, it sums up the work you will be doing in the months ahead as in God’s grace you experience all the dimensions of formation.

I mentioned a final petition we should address to the Holy Spirit and it comes from our reading from Paul’s 1st Letter to the Thessalonians. Here we find Paul writing to a local church that he founded. In one of the earliest books of the New Testament, St. Paul displays what he elsewhere terms “anxiety for the churches” – that is – an overflowing love and concern for the spiritual good of those who are members of those early Christian communities he helped to found. Paul is reminding them of his own example of self-less love and urging the Thessalonians not to fall prey to those peddling false teachings but rather to become themselves disciples who truly believe in God’s Word and allow it to shape every aspect of their lives.

We should ask the Holy Spirit, then, that as the year ahead unfolds, we will develop day by day the heart not only of a disciple but also the heart of a *missionary* disciple – a truly pastoral heart filled with love for the people we will serve, a heart that is ready, willing, and able to seek the spiritual welfare of others. This kind of a heart we cannot manufacture for ourselves but only when we allow the Spirit to insinuate himself in all facets of formation such that we live and love in a heavenly way amid the realities of life here and now.

Yes, it’s a lot to ask for but I am convinced that these are the things for which we should ask. For, as Father Olier insisted, the seminary is to be “an apostolic house,” a community of priest and future priests, sharing the same life, in preparation for receiving or renewing the apostolic Spirit in their hearts.[1]

Come Holy Spirit, fill our hearts and fill the hearts of the faithful! Amen.

[1] Raymond Deville, *The French School of Spirituality*, trans. by Agnes Cunningham (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press) 1994, p. 87.