

Father-Son Communion Breakfast

I. Introduction

A. Thanks very much for inviting me to take part in this long tradition of a father-son communion breakfast. More than a few alumni of Loyola Blakefield have told me that this is one of the traditions they remember and value most of all - They were influenced the example of their fathers' strong faith and they remember how receiving Holy Communion together strengthened their relationship, their friendship with their fathers.

B. Studies show that when the father of a family practices the faith it has a great deal to do with whether or not the sons and daughters will grow up to be practicing Catholics. It's not that the example and teaching of mothers doesn't count - but there is just something important about example of faith the father gives to his whole family, especially his sons.

C. Just yesterday the AOB annual Men's Fellowship Conference of the AOB took place at St. Philip Neri Parish in Linthicum. It was headlined by such notables as Coach Harbaugh who has also spoken at this communion breakfast. About 1,200 were in attendance - it continues to grow every year - and many fathers brought their sons to this day of prayer and fellowship. Many of the speakers told about their relationship with the own fathers and made it very clear that when the father-son relationship is healthy, the future of the son is also likely to be a lot healthier. So thank you for this long tradition and thank you for including me in it.

II. Pilgrimage to Rome

A. As some of you may have seen, I went on a pilgrimage to Rome last week. It was an unusual pilgrimage because the participants were interfaith leaders. A few months ago, when the trip was being planned, I thought I should tell my 96 year old mother what was up. So I called her and told her that a priest, a rabbi, and imam and three protestant ministers were planning to see the Pope. "Are you getting ready to tell me a joke?" she asked. "No, ma," I said, "this is for real." "Well, does

the Pope know what you're up to?" she wanted to know.

B. Let me tell you why this pilgrimage was organized, who the participants were, what we hoped to gain from it, and also what you might gain from this action-packed two-day pilgrimage to Rome.

C. Well, as you know, it's been almost a year since the death of Freddie Gray and the disturbances that broke out in Baltimore in the aftermath of his death. Many of my friends who live elsewhere in the country asked me about Baltimore and I'm going to guess many of you get similar inquiries. Whenever they see pictures of Baltimore on television, it is burning. They want to know, "Are you safe?" "What's it like to live there?" - as if I should get a purple heart for living across the street from Sotto Sopra!

D. The news about Baltimore, I like to say, is both better and worse than it seems. It's better than the images we currently see in much of the national media. For now at least, the unrest is in abeyance and while the rate of violence and death by gunfire is unacceptably high, there are many people dedicated to improving Baltimore's future. But the news is also worse than many people tend to think. The angry protests may have subsided but the problems remain. They are deep and systemic, and they admit of no easy answers. The breakdown of the family, the absence of male role models, gangs, drugs, gun violence, lack of employment, underperforming schools, and, of course, devastated neighborhoods with many abandoned row houses. These problems have been going on for years and they are deeply rooted.

E. Many good people have tried very hard to address these problems over time. The Catholic Church has been addressing these problems through its parishes, hospitals, schools, St. Vincent de Paul, and, of course, Catholic Charities, led by a proud L-B alumnus, Bill McCarthy. Shortly after the riots someone prepared a "heat map" showing the Catholic presence in West Baltimore - and it is massive - and we are working hard to network and streamline our own services to make it easier for those in need to make use of them. But for a long time it has been clear that even these massive efforts aren't enough. So over time we've developed relationships with other faith-communities such as the Jewish, Muslim, AME, Baptist, Lutheran and

Episcopal communities. After the unrest of last spring, however, we knew we had to deep those relationships and to redouble our efforts to bring healing and hope to some of the most impoverished neighborhoods in all of America. In the midst of our work together the idea was born of going on pilgrimage to Rome. We realized we needed to deepen our friendship, to remove any barriers we could, that we needed to be a sign of unity in a badly fragmented community – a community that is divided racially, economically, educationally, and in many other ways as well. So we thought if we traveled far, we could draw closer – closer to God and closer to one another – and thus be a sign of unity. And while in Rome we thought it would be a good idea to see the Holy Father and to receive his blessing for our efforts – and it doesn't hurt for me to remind you that Pope Francis is Jesuit!

F. We returned last Thursday and I am grateful for the friendship of my colleagues who included Pastor Frank Reid of Bethel AME, Pastor Al Hathaway of Union Baptist, Imam Earl Al Amin of the Baltimore Islamic Cultural Center, Bishop Wolfgang Herz-Lane, the Lutheran Bishop of Maryland and Delaware, Father Don Sterling, RC Pastor of New All Saints, Father Bianco, and, of course, Bill McCarthy, as the head of Catholic Charities. We stayed the guest house where the Pope lives (we didn't see him much, I hear he's pretty busy) – we met with Vatican officials, met the US Ambassador to the Holy See, visited the American seminary in Rome which is packed with 252 seminarians, visited two Roman basilicas, St. Peter's and St. Paul's, walked through the holy doors, and I had the joy of presenting the Baltimore delegation to Pope Francis who received us with great love and understanding. All of that was followed by a flurry of media interviews, so we all came home tired but happy. But as we reflected on the trip, I think we all agreed that what was most valuable was the time we spent in prayer and in conversation, often over a meal. In those discussions I grew in appreciation of the wisdom of my colleagues and it is a bit of their wisdom I'd like to share with you this morning, especially because here at L-B you are striving to become 'men for others'. Let me quickly share with you three points.

III. Wisdom from Baltimore's Faith Leaders

A. A first point is the importance of discernment. As noted earlier, the only Jesuit we met on the trip was Pope Francis and, as you know, discernment is very much a part

of the spirituality of St. Ignatius of Loyola. In the course of the trip I was edified to learn that one of the evangelical ministers had studied the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola and was guided through them by a local Jesuit priest. When he spoke about the deep-seated problems in Baltimore, you could see the influence of the Spiritual Exercises in his thinking. You could see that he was not looking for a quick fix or merely for politically feasible solutions, or for slogans that play well in public... none of that...he was trying to discern the will of God in all of this, and trying to find the good that God wanted us as faith-leaders to take hold of as we grapple with these complex and long-standing problems. As I joined in the discussion with my colleagues, I could see great understanding of the underlying culture that exists in many of the neighborhoods that we hope to serve; I also saw a nuanced and prudent understanding of city and state politics as well as a canny knowledge of what it takes to get things done, even when there is resistance from various sectors, including the government.

Often people ride into town on their high horse claiming to have answers to the problems that beset Baltimore. Sometimes they are just naïve and sometimes politically ambitious. They go about addressing these needs as something to be done to the residents not with them. So, as men formed in the Jesuit tradition, I would urge you to become skilled, even steeped in the art of discernment – discernment of God's will in your life, discernment regarding the quality of your discipleship and the quality of the basic relationships in your life, esp. family & co-workers, and gain the ability to discern the good to be done in complex situations, as well as decisions big and small.

B. A second point is the importance of the family. In our conversations, we spoke about many things such as house, lead paint contamination, poor schools, drugs, gangs, violence, etc. Often, however, our conversation turned to the breakdown of the family. The lack of a stable family life contributes mightily to poor academic performance, to drug use, to violence, to gangs. One of the aching systemic social problems of inner-city Baltimore is the pitifully small number of households that are made up of intact families – a dad who is employed, a mom who is employed, and children in school, hopefully owning or able to afford the rent on a house, and able to get pay at least paycheck to paycheck. Where that exists, young people have a chance at flourishing. As faith leaders we agreed we must do more to work at

rebuilding families, not only preaching and teaching about it, but helping a new generation to rediscover the importance of family life... and we know that it's an uphill climb in our current culture. While those with means can explore alternative life-styles to the traditional family, the breakdown of the family disproportionately affects the poor.

We belong to a church that teaches consistently about the importance of the family. We think of the family not merely as a basic social unit but rather as the domestic church where young people are formed in prayer, faith, virtues and values that will help them be people of faith, productive citizens, and at the end of the day, those people God meant them to be from all eternity. The role of the father cannot be overestimated in building the domestic church and I hope that those of you who are coming of age will see the importance of family, and see it not merely as a life choice but rather as vocation from God. If we get this vocation right, the others will take care of themselves!

IV. Building Bridges

A. A point I would offer is the importance of building bridges. As leaders of faith communities we are about building relationships - relationships with God and with one another in the community of the Church. No one is saved alone but rather we are saved as part of humanity and as part of the People of God ... Yet, as noted earlier, Baltimore remains a divided city, even in its good faith efforts to address long-standing problems. Many organizations, including start-ups, tend to want to go it alone, and much of the rhetoric we hear in this very political year is rough and divisive.

B. As faith leaders we agreed we need to pull in the opposite way. It's not just a matter of being nicer and more cordial. Building bridges is hard work - that requires listening, discerning the good in other people's views and efforts, it requires building up trust, focusing on what is most basic, and it also requires speaking in ways that are civil and constructive.

C. I don't think I need to tell you what is happening in our country as we entering into a very divisive presidential election year nor do I need to tell you how divisive

urban politics can be. As a student of history, I'm not naïve enough to think that there was ever a time when politics wasn't a tough game but it becomes dysfunctional when there is a fundamental lack of trust as well as a lack of shared values and goals - and love of country over love of party - We need more people in our culture to be bridge builders and fewer who will tear down the remaining bridges that we have. Our interfaith group went to Rome to build bridges and so it was that we meant the one who title is Pontifex - Pope Francis - who today is building more bridges across more divides than anyone else in the world... In this Year of Mercy let us follow his lead so that we may all truly be 'men for others!'

God bless you! Thanks for listening!