

Mass of the Holy Spirit

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco

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Today the University of San Francisco comes together to pray. I know you realize that very few of this country's 3,000 colleges and universities begin their academic year the way that USF does. We celebrate today in the hope that the unity of this gathering will endure beyond the time frame of this ceremony and the confines of this church. We celebrate today in the faith that the Spirit whom we invoke is not a distant deity, but the creative force at the core of our humanity. This humanity which all of us share equally -- no matter our religious tradition, ethnic heritage, first language, gender, sexual orientation, GPA or LSAT scores -- this humanity beneath which the poet saw that

“This Jack, joke poor potsherd, patch matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.” [G.M. Hopkins, *That Nature is a Heraclatean Fire...*]

Our humanity breathes God's breath and houses God's Spirit. God's Spirit -- the human spirit -- one and the same Spirit who humanizes and divinizes us simultaneously.

In his book, *Hiroshima*, John Hersey wrote about the aftermath of the first ever atomic bomb. [I note parenthetically that ours is the only country to have used nuclear weapons of mass destruction]. Hersey describes thousands of people stampeding out of the city in a desperate effort to escape the devastating destruction at the epicenter of the explosion. They ran oblivious to the agonized cries of people burned beyond recognition and pinned beneath collapsed structures. Hersey suggests that individuals in the crowd were too preoccupied with their own survival to hear the pain-filled pleas for help. But he goes on to write about those exceptional persons who heard the cries and stepped out from the crowd to help. One of those was Pedro Arrupe, a young Jesuit who thirty years later as the superior general of the entire Jesuit order wrote that the goal of Jesuit education is “men and women for others ... persons who will not live exclusively for themselves ... persons completely convinced that love of God which does not issue in justice for all is a farce.”

You know that USF's mission is educating “men and women for others”: educating women and men who are not too timid or fearful to step out from the crowd to do the right thing; educating women and men who witness to God's Spirit housed within them by acts of peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control; women and men who resist our culture's call to violence, instant-gratification, egotism and dominance over others; women and men faithful to that deeper and more authentically human voice which our Catholic tradition names God's Holy Spirit.

To celebrate God's Spirit is to celebrate our graced human minds and hearts; minds and hearts moved by human suffering; minds and hearts that impel us to leave the vast crowd of rugged individualists stampeding towards their own material success so that we might do God's work: “cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers and drive out the

demons” that warp our culture and harden our hearts. Demons that would have us be selfish men and women who live exclusively for ourselves.

God’s Spirit – the authentically human spirit – of peace, kindness, generosity – is no stranger to academia. The profoundly human desire to know the truth about ourselves and our world is but another manifestation of the Holy Spirit of inquiry. The bits and pieces of the truth that we digest only whet our appetites for more. This intellectual restlessness is at once the driving force of the university and a salient facet of our “immortal diamond.” In our Catholic tradition, any movement towards meaning and truth is movement towards God, the fullness of truth. In other words, to pursue truth, beauty or goodness under whatever guise is to pursue God, whether named as such or not. The path to truth is marked-out by evidence, and fidelity to evidence may require that we abandon long-cherished but untested assumptions, inherited but unquestioned prejudices, or self-protecting opinions masked as dogma.

The Spirit who calls us to gentleness, faithfulness and generosity is the same Spirit who calls us to the limits of our intellectual capacity. It is not a coincidence that in the Western world both the hospital and the university emerged out of the faith community. For one and the same Holy Spirit calls us to the truth – truth that we grasp with our minds, cherish in our hearts, and do with our hands.

Two weeks ago I listened to a law student describe his summer’s work on behalf of a death row inmate in Mississippi. The inmate’s family took him into their home and their hearts. The student explained, a bit self-consciously, that one Sunday he was introduced to the family’s African American church congregation as someone who “was doing God’s work.” He appeared uncomfortable with this characterization of his work, but I thought to myself that the pastor who introduced him saw more clearly than many of us that our work truly is God’s work, when we are responding to God’s Holy Spirit calling us to know and to love and to do what is true and good and beautiful. To be faithful to God’s Spirit is not to be afraid because the Spirit of God does speak through the words and deeds of those who are faithful.

It is with good reason, then, that we begin the academic year by invoking the Holy Spirit that God has gifted each one of us with. Let us pray that USF’s education will clear our minds, warm our hearts and open our hands to do God’s work. Let us pray that the unity we experience at this liturgy will keep us together as a community of learners; keep us together in our resolve not to blindly follow the crowd; keep us together in our faith that this “joke poor potsherd” through the power of God’s indwelling Spirit “is immortal diamond.”