

Baccalaureate Mass

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The readings that a group of your classmates selected for this celebration are particularly well chosen. The second reading urges us to “be thankful.” That’s exactly the right tone for this liturgy in which we thank God for your parents and friends, for teachers and classmates, for USF experiences and challenges, for an education that only 1% of the world enjoys, and for the opportunities that await you in a world where each year a preventable death reduces the future of millions of children to less than five years. You have much to be thankful for.

The second reading also reminds you that you are “chosen ones.” Chosen for what? That’s the question the first and third readings address. What does God expect from us? The first reading offers three summary injunctions: do justice, love kindness, walk humbly; and the Gospel reading presents us with the metaphors of salt and light. Both readings communicate the same truth. And the force of their message is not in an insight otherwise unobtainable; it is not in the novelty of a truth not previously known; nor is it in the exclusivity of a message meant only for the religious. The message echoes the deepest chords in every human heart. We know, in the depth of our soul, that we are *for* others, not selfishly and exclusively for ourselves.

While these two readings come from the Jewish and Christian scriptures, their message resonates with every human being because they speak to the universal human hunger for a purposeful and satisfying life. They articulate what we know well, but expend so much time and effort trying to deny or stifle: our ultimate happiness and satisfaction does not rest in “treasures that moths consume or rust destroys.” We are hard-wired for love; when we fail to love, we do damage to ourselves and to our brothers and sisters. Life would be so much simpler if such were *not* the case.

It is ironic that non-religious people, even atheists, sometimes meet God’s expectations better than many of us Christians. I recall a scene from the movie, *Motorcycle Diaries*, where a famished Che Guevara sits down for breakfast on a Sunday morning at a leper hospital only to be told by the nun in charge of the dining room that because he didn’t go to mass, he may not have breakfast. “But sister,” he pleads, “I haven’t eaten in two days.” She replies, “the rule is ‘no mass, no breakfast.’” Che leaves the dining room and collapses under a tree. Later, several lepers come out and offer him their food. Who gets it? God is not concerned with our maintaining a narrow party line, but with our doing simple acts of human kindness. In this instance, God is in the lepers’ generosity, not the nun’s rigidity.

Later in the same movie, on the evening before Che and his friend are to depart from the leper colony --which also happens to be Che’s 25<sup>th</sup> birthday -- the staff are raucously celebrating with music, food, drink and dancing while across the river, the lepers remain confined to cheerless huts on their island refuge. Che wanders out from the party a bit drunk and, to the consternation of his friends, dives into the river and swims to the other side where he joins the lepers. Who gets it? God’s limitless compassion reaches far beyond the narrow boundaries and categories of human convention. God is not concerned with propriety but with the people who are never invited, with those for

whom there is no room at the table. God is in Che's effort to be humbly with the lepers rather than staying with the folks at the party.

On Tuesday of this week, we listened spell-bound to a courageous and fiery Iranian woman speak passionately of her commitment to securing justice for street children and for political prisoners in Iran. She has been imprisoned, faced death threats and survived assassination attempts; none of that has deflected Nobel Peace Prize winner, Shirin Ebadi from her single-minded pursuit of justice against all odds. Who gets it? Not the religious leaders in her country, but this petite woman with a huge heart. God is with Shirin Ebadi in her doing of justice.

A radical atheist and a devout Muslim woman name the God of our Judeo Christian tradition by their actions rather than their words, and so should we. Talk really is cheap. Blessed John XXIII reminded us that if we behaved like true Christians, there would be no atheists. Christianity is not primarily about doctrines and dogmas. It is about Jesus Christ who forgave people without embarrassing them, walked humbly with people without judging them, expended kindnesses on people without making them dependent, and blessed the peacemakers and justice seekers.

To speak the very human language of God should not be reduced to correctly articulating theological propositions and doctrines. The language of God is accessible to every human being, whether they recognize it as "of God" or not. Those who do justice, love kindness and walk humbly together with God are the salt and the light that the gospel speaks of and for which the world looks desperately to us. God's truth is a living reality that took flesh in Jesus and continues to unfold in the flesh and blood, the heart and soul of all those who live selflessly for others.

The Victorian writer and poet, John Ruskin, once sat with a friend in the early evening and watched a lamplighter, torch in hand, lighting the street lamps on a distant hill. The man's form disappeared into the distance, but he left behind a trail of brightly burning lights. "There," said Ruskin, "that is what I mean by real Christians. You can trace their course by the light they leave behind."

Look back tonight with gratitude on the light you leave behind here on the Hilltop and look forward in hope and anticipation of the light that you will bring into the dark spots of our world.

Let us gather now around the *only* table where all are equal and where God nourishes us as only God can.