

Baccalaureate Mass
May 18, 2006 | St. Ignatius Church

This evening's second reading draws from the well of emotions you may be feeling: "be thankful...and with gratitude in your hearts sing hymns of praise to God." Tonight, you graduates come to this liturgy with feelings of gratitude that embrace family and friends, teachers and classmates, all those who have played a role in making you the persons you are up to this point. That reading further reminds you that you are among "God's chosen ones" — not because you are the one percent of the world with a college education — but because God expects from you the "compassion, kindness and humility" so manifestly lacking in our world. To be chosen by God is not to be privileged above others, but to be responsible for them.

The twice-repeated refrain in the first reading may tap into your feelings about departing from the Hilltop into an uncertain future: "Fear not for I am with you." You realize that God cannot promise you a pain-free life with unlimited success; only that God will be with you, because you — and every human being — are "precious and glorious in God's eyes." Recall the final words of Betsie ten Boom as she lay dying from a beating in the Ravensbruck concentration camp: "We must tell the people what we have learned here. We must tell the people that there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still."

As you celebrate your accomplishments, take time to recall the untold stories and hidden struggles of your own life, and know that God was there with you. Take time to remember those who walked with you during the difficult moments of your journey, and know that God was there with you. Be confident that whatever the future holds for you, "there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still."

The Gospel reading reiterates the vision and mission of the University with images of salt and light, two entities whose worth is measured solely by what they give to others. The knowledge you have acquired here is not for you alone, but for a world that needs what you can give. This University ultimately gauges its success not simply by how much you have learned, but by what you do with what you have learned — by your impact on a world ravaged by war, divided by a widening gap between wealthy and poor nations, and horribly disfigured by starvation, HIV-AIDS, mass illiteracy and grinding poverty. Do not be afraid of the dark places in our world: "...God is deeper still."

Salt by itself is useless. In a time of famine, you cannot eat salt without food. In a time of drought, you cannot take salt without water; to do so would be deadly. But salt, mixed with food or water, adds flavor and is a vital life force. Likewise, we are not meant to live for ourselves alone, but to be the men and women for others called for by the Gospel and our mission statement. In the gospel, salt is not a commodity one gives away; it is the disciple himself or herself: You are salt; you are the life force that renews the face of the earth.

You are light. Who you are and what you do shines as an example for others and keeps hope alive. Your USF Jesuit education is unapologetically idealistic, in the sense that it

calls us to the highest ideals. Failure to realize these ideals is no critique of the ideals, nor does it diminish what you can accomplish when you are true to God's call to be salt and light for the world. You need never be afraid that in answering God's call you will lose yourselves: "No pit so deep that God is not deeper still."

One of you graduates wrote about your experience in El Salvador with a motherless ten year old girl who firmly believed that she was blessed to have a most loving grandmother. You wrote how that little girl was wiser than most of us, and that all of us, instead of asking God for what we don't have, should thank God for all that we do have. You concluded your reflections with this comment, "I discovered in El Salvador a desire to become an instrument of peace and love, a desire to change the world." That desire is planted deeply within each of our hearts. That desire is God's call to be salt of the earth and light for the world.

The Bible opens with God creating lights in the vault of heaven to shine in the darkness on the earth below. You — not the sun or the moon or the stars — are the lights God created to shine through the darkness of this world. God called you, touched you, and enlightened you. God has confidence in you because God created you and sees that you are good.

Let us all accept what God offers us at this table and go forth from here to be salt and light for the world, knowing that we need never, ever be afraid because God is with us.

Now, show the people what you have learned here. Show them that "there is no pit so deep that God is not deeper still."