

Mass of the Holy Spirit

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...we celebrate our mission as God's Spirit working among us, and we remind ourselves that the sensitivity we hope for, above all else, is sensitivity to the Spirit of God calling us from deep within our hearts beyond our fears and doubts to the fashioning of a more just and humane world for all.

Today we continue a 152-year-old USF tradition of invoking God's Holy Spirit over the University at the beginning of another academic year. We listen once again to stories of the early followers of Jesus, so we may deepen our understanding and awareness of that Spirit who graced them and whom we call upon today.

In both readings Jesus' first followers are huddled together in a room with the doors locked, because they are afraid and hiding from the authorities who persecuted Jesus. But once "they were filled with the Holy Spirit," we are told, "they went out to the people" — they moved beyond their fears and went out to speak in so compelling and persuasive a way that everyone understood them, whether they spoke Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Persian or some other language. The Spirit moved those early followers of Jesus beyond their fears to go out and speak a language that everyone could understand.

In 1928 Agnes Bojaxhiu joined the Sisters of Loretto, a cloistered community that taught young women within the confines of their convent. Agnes left Yugoslavia to study English and teach at the Loretto School in Calcutta for seventeen years. In the midst of civil disturbances that rocked the newly-independent India in 1947 and the severe food shortages following, she was sent out from the cloister to secure food for the 300 residents of the convent school.

As she made her way through the city, she was overwhelmed by the carnage — the streets were literally filled with bodies of the dead and the dying. She was stunned by the realization that the wounded and the dying were not simply a civil war phenomenon but a permanent part of the cityscape of Calcutta. The turning point came for her when she stumbled over a woman lying in the street whose body was being eaten by rats. She went in search of help, but found none. So Mother Teresa — that's how she came to be known — rented a shack and got some volunteers to care for the dying woman. That one room hovel launched a worldwide humanitarian effort on behalf of the poorest of the poor that Mother Teresa directed until her death in 1997 and that won her the Nobel Peace Prize.

Mother Teresa was like the early followers of Jesus, hiding behind the walls of the cloister when God's Holy Spirit came through those walls and from deep within her own heart moved her beyond her fears to go out from the cloister to speak the language of loving care that everyone understands.

The New York Times last month ran a story under the headline, "Young fixated on riches." The story mentioned a 24-year-old New Yorker who thought he had arrived when he got a job as a publicist and was able to rent a unit in an exclusive Manhattan apartment building. The young man is quoted as saying, "Yes, I have a nice apartment, a

great job, a great degree, great clothes. But I often feel empty inside.” So he decided to leave his job and begin classes at the American Academy for Dramatic Arts to pursue his dream of acting. He said, “There is so much more to life than material possessions.”

That young man was like the early followers of Jesus, hiding behind the comforts and pleasures of a vapid lifestyle, when the Spirit broke through those barriers and from deep within his own heart moved him beyond his fears to go out and speak the language of art which everyone understands.

On this sixth anniversary of September 11, we memorialize those rescue workers and volunteers who pushed concerns for their own safety aside and plunged into the fiery inferno of the World Trade Center to rescue those trapped within. Like the early followers of Jesus, these men and women were moved from deep within beyond their fears to speak the language of self-sacrificing love that everyone understands.

Finally, and much closer to home, a USF student recently wrote about her experiences as a foster child. She recalled staying as a young child with her mother in rundown motels where rats as large as cats emerged from holes in the walls to search for food in the waste baskets. A subsequent series of failed foster care placements left her motherless and feeling overwhelmed, sad and completely hopeless. Finally, she was placed with a foster mother who helped her regain her confidence and overcome her profound self-doubts and severely deficient academic background to enroll at USF, where she is now thriving academically and socially and devotes time and talents to advocating for youth in the foster care system.

Like the early followers of Jesus, this woman was trapped behind the self-loathing and despair that destroys the lives of so many children taken from their parents and placed in foster homes when the Spirit broke through those formidable barriers and from deep within her own heart moved her beyond her fears and doubts to go out and speak the language of active advocacy for the neglected among us that everyone understands.

We retell these stories of the Spirit so that we may trace the pattern in our own lives and deepen our trust in the voice that calls us from deep within our own hearts beyond our fears and doubts to do something for others and be someone for others. That’s a language everyone understands. No one can tell you specifically how that force works in your own life; much depends on who you are, where you are, and what gifts you have. I *can* assure you that, whether acknowledged as such or not, that force is God’s Holy Spirit given to each of us and all of us, not for our own sakes, but for the sake of our brothers and sisters, for all of humanity, for “the common good” as we say in our Vision, Mission and Values statement.

Today, as we recommit ourselves to the University’s mission of acquiring the knowledge, skills and sensitivities necessary to be well-educated women and men for others, we celebrate our mission as God’s Spirit working among us, and we remind ourselves that the sensitivity we hope for above all else, is sensitivity to the Spirit of God calling us from deep within our hearts beyond our fears and doubts to the fashioning of a more just and humane world for all.

