

Baccalaureate Mass

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I remind us that the three readings for our commencement liturgy were selected by representatives of this graduating class. I asked myself why is it that you chose these particular passages from over two thousand pages of text in the Bible? I assume that these selections speak for you as you join with family and friends to celebrate the completion of your USF education. In my comments this evening I hope to echo and amplify what I think these readings say to you and about you to your family and friends and all of us gathered for this liturgy.

The first reading highlights the realization that your USF Jesuit education entails responsibility for that ninety-nine percent of the world who will never have what you are celebrating. This reading signals your willingness to exercise now your responsibility “to the nations,” not just to yourself or your family or your circle of friends. Unlike the individual in the reading, you are neither too young to go where you are needed nor too tongue-tied to say what must be said. Your willingness to take on the challenges of “rooting up” injustice and “tearing down” walls of hostility and suspicion in order to “build up” the human family and to “plant seeds” of hope wherever you find yourself – whether in a hospital room, a board room, a classroom or a court room – are a source of encouragement for us all.

This first selection further reminds us that we need never be afraid. When we struggle to do our part in building a better world or speaking healing words or extending a helping hand – whether we acknowledge it or not – we are doing what God asks of us, and God is with us in our efforts whatever the outcome. Our efforts are part of a larger and elusive-enterprise that will only be revealed to us when we finally see God face to face. For the hope and encouragement you give us, we thank you.

The second reading about one body with many parts underscores an important truth: no one – individual or nation – is an island entire unto itself. We are all members of the one and only “race,” the human race. Together – and only together – we possess the variety of abilities, experiences, skills, talents, sensitivities and knowledge that are the tools for fashioning a more humane and just world. We need one another, and the world needs the incredibly rich mix of gifts distributed across in the human family without regard to national boundaries, gender, color, level of income or sexual orientation. As our bodies need a full complement of organs and limbs to function effectively, so does the global body politic. Differences need not divide us. It is precisely our need for the widely distributed and differing gifts that can bring our fragile human family together. In this second selection you challenge us to work harder at understanding, appreciating and reconciling the differences that we may fear and that all too often blind us to our common humanity which we share with men and women of every race, language and way of life. For that challenge, we thank you.

Finally, the gospel passage you chose carries a simple and direct message: “love one another.” This not an invitation with a RSVP attached. “This is my command: love on another.” I suggest that this “command” comes not from an external authority – not from an agent above and beyond us – but wells up from deep within. I suggest that this “command” is the heart of our humanity, because it is only in reaching out to the other in love that we find that joy which completes us. This divine imperative to love echoes what we know deep in our hearts, but exert much energy trying to suppress. The truth is that our ultimate satisfaction as human beings will be never be found in what we acquire – whether wealth, power, status, pleasure or whatever. Because I am not about me; I am about you, and we are about us. Because my joy cannot come at your expense, nor our joy at their expense – whoever “they” are. That is the truth that sets us free. We may embrace and live that truth/God and find the joy that completes us. If we choose some other God or truth, then God’s joy will never be ours, and our ‘we’ will never be complete.

A recent graduate from a Jesuit university working in Chile with abused and abandoned girls wrote this story about her experience:

I was talking with a six year old, to get to know her and her situation. I began by asking her if she had any questions for me. The young girl said, “yes.” Then she asked, *como es el amor. What is love?* I wasn’t sure exactly what she meant, so I probed a little, and she responded that she hears love talked about all the time, but she didn’t know what it meant. I thought at that moment, as I looked into her sincere face with the deep brown questioning eyes, that my heart would break, because love is something she had never felt during her short little life. I struggled to give her Spanish synonyms that ended up being completely useless to her...how does one answer such a tremendous question? [*Accompaniment*, Spring, 1997]

In selecting this gospel you poignantly and powerfully remind us that there are billions of people whose lives of desperate poverty and degradation cry out to us, *como es el amor*. “What is love?” How do we answer such a tremendous question? Probably not with words; better a plate of rice, a cup of water, a compassionate embrace, a warm sweater, a word of encouragement, an unsolicited visit.

In selecting this gospel, you give us the courage to honestly acknowledge the billions of people in our world who do not know love. You exhort us not to evade the tremendous question that the poor pose for us, but to answer it as best we can for the people whose lives touch ours. For that encouragement we thank you; and tonight we congratulate you for your readiness to put to the test the education of mind and heart that we hope you received here. We pray tonight and always that your education has changed you and that you, in turn, will change your family, your neighborhood, your world.