

ALUMNI DAY 2017

David Fulton

I am honored to have been invited to preach at this Alumni Day mass. I am doubly honored to do so as a member of the fiftieth anniversary class of St Mary's.

My plan is

- to offer reflections on the secular and ecclesiastical culture that the Class of '67 encountered after ordination
- to mention some of the strategies for ministry that we adopted and to suggest how these strategies sometimes got us off the rails
- to propose that, as our focus began to settle on what Paul discusses in today's first reading—the Lord Jesus, crucified and raised-- we came to have hope in our ministry and in ourselves

The class of 67 received a wonderful theological education at St Mary's. Many of our teachers were memorable: Father Addison Wright, who introduced us to the historical critical method; Father Jim Laubacher, who presented Trinitarian theology with clarity and insight; Father Tom Stanks, who convinced us that liturgical theology is not an exercise in magical thinking; Father Maurice Duchaine, who showed us how to combine positive theology with systematic reflection. And Father Ray Brown---a teacher like no other.

We were well-prepared, theologically. But the culture that we were to encounter --both the secular culture and the church culture--was not so ready to attend to us as it might have been five or ten years earlier.

The secular culture in 1967 was called "the year of love." It was notable with its sit-ins at university campuses, with be-ins in San Francisco, with love-ins across the nation.

On its uglier side, this year of love was marred: by the drug addiction and drug-related deaths that grew out of drug experimentation; by the sexual exploitation that was masked under the cloak of sexual freedom; by the disengagement not only from parental values, but from parental love.

Moreover, 1967 and 68 were marked by urban riots, by the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, and by a war that was so brutal, so un-understandable, so unwinnable.

There were, of course, some cultural bright spots in the saeculum: There was Medicare, which had been enacted in 1965, There was the Civil Rights Act of 1967, perhaps the most significant of these bright spots. But in the secular culture men and women were becoming more and more dis-enchanted. Religion was losing its footing in public conversation; tradition was losing its

place as a frame of reference for social action; community was losing its pre-eminence, replaced by insular individualism.

As a result, members of the secular culture of the late '60's and beyond became less confident about their ability to confront ultimate questions in a world in which rationality had been reduced to instrumentalism, and life to self-fulfillment.

Doubts arose about the very possibility of what Jacques Maritain called "integral humanism", with many Americans losing confidence in their ability to propose an adequate description of what human flourishing could be.

A whole generation seemed to lose hope—hope in their individual and collective capacity to construct a society in which human flourishing would be in some way possible.

Participants in the 1967 secular culture were arriving at the conviction that the very best that they could accomplish was to develop mechanisms to "cope" -- to cope with the pressures of an ever-more-confusing world, to cope with an intra-psycho world marked by loneliness and desperation.

Not only was the secular culture problematic: the church culture was, for many of us, in disarray.

Many of the pastors to whom we were assigned were successful clergymen: they had built churches and schools, they had managed debt, they had developed a good relationship with the Brahmins of society.

But these were men whose theological education had been founded in the manuals of dogmatic and moral theology. While they had a pretty good sense of the direction of neo-scholasticism, they had little sympathy for the *nouvelle theologie* of the European continent or for the *ressourcement* of the Vatican Council.

When we arrived on the scene, we were often branded as members of the "new breed"; our clergy shirts were termed "witness shirts"; our hopefulness for church change was viewed as insubordination.

And then, just about a year after our ordination *Humanae vitae* arrived—and with it the resultant battles over church authority and freedom of conscience.

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As we encountered a chaotic culture in the saeculum and in the church, we were, to say the least, daunted and perplexed.

Our theology was either being ignored or was considered as dangerous. Our youthful hope was being interpreted as naiveté or as arrogance. Our confusion was considered to be the result of poor professional formation.

As a result, many of us from the Class of 67 began to construct strategies of ministry that tried to take into account the dismissive disregard of many senior clergy as well as the dis-enchantment of the world that was surrounding us.

Some of us became single-minded apostles of the new theology, in our homilies and in our pastoral care.

Some of us used the categories and language of psychology to serve as the central frame of our ministry.

Some of us, believing that theology could transform our cultures, adopted symbols of the ambient culture to present what we had learned in school: “Things go better with Coke” would become “Things go better with Christ.”

Some of us became social activists, bringing issues of civil rights and anti-war activism into virtually all that we did.

Then, too, there were some of us whose ministry aimed at our becoming good businessmen, and whose focus was to establish financially secure churches and schools---with a little bit of Jesus-talk icing the cake.

And then there were folks like me who really went to the dark side, and got involved in the delights of canon law.

Unfortunately, each of these strategies resulted in our going off the rails. Theological warfare led to our weakening of ecclesiastical communion. Psychological focusing led to our reducing the possibility of transcendence. Social activism led to our forgetting the way that, for Christians, love needs to transform justice

Moreover, when we relied on the strategies of the business model, the needed place and prominence of the *basileia* –God’s Kingdom--got forgotten, as finance became more central than faith.

And for those of us who sold out to the world of canon law---nothing really needs to be said or added. . . . except to note that the Code of Canon Law, in its 1917 and 1983 incarnations, does not actually contain all the stuff that Jesus really meant to say.

As we found ourselves going off the rails: *We* became dis-encharnted; *We* became disillusioned.

We wound up on the verge of losing hope: hope in our church, hope in our futures, hope in ourselves

But, significantly, we did not wind up losing sight of what must be the object of our hope: Somehow we did not enter a place where hope had to be abandoned.

We turned to the place where all hope was lost and all hope regained: the cross of Christ.

I think I can speak for the class of '67 in noting that it was when we took a long and hard look at the cross of Christ and our connection with the cross that our ministry got back on track.

We got better at grasping that, as a result of our trying to become God on our own terms, we had distorted the image of God in ourselves.

We got better at realizing that—despite our stupidity, despite our sin-- the good God has not given up on us but, as Romans 8 declares, has re-created us in the image of the Son.

We got better at comprehending that the Son has revealed the meaning and reality of unconditional love through his cross

We got better at discovering that it is on the cross where Jesus discloses that-- in the words of David Hollenbach—“compassion, not malevolence is the ultimate attribution of the One Presence within the shards of our fractured world.”

And, as we got better at all these things, we came to understand that we ourselves needed to adopt a posture of--to use the language of Professor Mike Gorman—*cruciformity*.

As our ministry took on cruciformity, we surrendered the effort to construct meaning through our theological battles or our social activism or our psychological categories or our managerial successes.

In our cruciform ministry we experienced what it means to be adopted by the Father of Jesus and to be made new in the power of the Holy Spirit. We came to discover that the Lord alone has the power to move us in from darkness to light, from chaos to confidence, from isolation to communion.

We the members of the Class of 67 have not done all this perfectly; we continue to be damaged goods, shattered shards. But as shattered shards we have nonetheless been able to reflect—to *image* --the image of God. And in this we have discovered that we have the capacity to give one another reason to hope.

Acknowledgement and adoption of cruciformity are not peculiar to the class of 1967. The men forty years ordained have gotten wise to it; the men 25 years ordained have gotten sensitized to it; the men 10 years ordained have adopted it. And the men studying for priesthood at St Mary's are being formed in it. Moreover, I am convinced that cruciformity has become the bedrock of the spiritual and ministerial lives of all of us, priests *and* non-priests.

We have all confessed our faith in Christ crucified.

We have all constructed---more or less-- a cruciform way of living.

And thus, we can all come to hope that, as the Lord touches us in our lives and in our time, neither we nor the world we touch need ever be quite the same again.