

ST. MARY'S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY
Baltimore, Maryland

Alumni Day Homily
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Feast of Saint Luke, The Evangelist

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Class of 1968

The Gospel for the Feast of Saint Luke (Lk 10:1-9) reports Jesus sending 72 of his disciples on mission. He instructs them to go in pairs to the towns and villages, to proclaim *shalom* (peace) and to bring next to nothing with them. They are told to cure the sick, eat what's set before them, and promptly move on. Their mission is to prepare crowds for Jesus' arrival. Their message is his: "The Kingdom of God is at hand for you." This is a miniature church on the move.

In the Second Letter to Timothy (2Tim 4:10-17b), Paul details personnel problems impeding his ministry. He asks Timothy to bring his cloak and a few scrolls and parchments. This is the Pastoral Epistle which contains Paul's most poignant peroration: "I am being poured out like a libation. I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith." (2 Tim 4:6). If a priest, after fifty years in ministry, can say that, he can say a lot.

I Themes for a 50th Jubilee

Fifty years ago, my classmates left for the towns and villages of their future ministries. For another purpose, God determined that I should remain in seminary formation. Our ministries have been different, but our mission has been like those seventy-two disciples whom Jesus sent out. At this stage, it resembles St. Paul's sentiments towards the close of his missionary travels. Today, however, we are united in common seminary memories – the places where our vocations came to fruition -- St. Mary's Seminary at Paca Street, St. Charles Seminary College, and St. Mary's Seminary & University in Roland Park.

On our 50th anniversary of priestly ordination, it would not be proper to dwell on the scandalous revelations of last summer. My themes for Alumni Day invoke gratitude, joy and courage. Scripture commands us, "Do not grieve the Holy Spirit." Still, we carry a sadness and grief in our hearts over what has happened to the image of the priest and bishop. Were things so different at the beginning? Did not Judas who shared in the Last Supper – one of the original Twelve – betray his Master? Did not Peter – the Rock – deny Jesus of Nazareth to protect himself? Yet, Christ broke the bread of his body and drank the cup of sacrificial love in the Upper Room and did so with Judas and Peter present. He went to Gethsemane singing a psalm. In the garden, he renewed his courage in prayer there and renewed it alone. Renewing the priesthood has been the Sulpician mission since 1641. It took courage to get it underway.

II Courage

As pastor of the Church of St. Sulpice on the Left Bank in Paris, Jean-Jacques Olier founded the Sulpicians and their distinctive approach to priestly formation in 1641. After the French Revolution when some Sulpicians were martyred, it took a daring vision for Father Emery to send Father Francois Nagot on a dangerous sea journey of three months to establish a seminary in Baltimore, Maryland. St. Mary's Seminary Chapel on Paca Street, designed by the French architect, Maximilian Godefroy, is the motherhouse of our Sulpician identity in this country. American Sulpicians later founded St. Charles College where the extraordinary Jenkins Memorial Chapel still serves the Charlestown Community. In 1929, enrollment at Paca Street demanded that St. Mary's expand to a new building at Roland Park – in the same year the New York stock market crashed beginning the Great Depression. This chapel where we celebrate Alumni Day was not built at Roland Park until 1954 following the Depression and the Second World War.

There's a lesson for us in the courage capable of outlasting setbacks and of enduring postponements. The Paschal Triduum lasts a mere three days from Holy Thursday through Good Friday to the Easter Vigil and Easter itself. Redemption is not instantaneous. It demands a lapse in time. First, comes suffering, death and what seems a permanent entombment. Then, life bursts forth again. The postponements of rebirth in ordinary human lives take much longer than a liturgical triduum does. But, they will come in God's time. In the meantime, the church and the priesthood are forced to live down the fate of shame to live up to a renewed mission. It takes courage to endure all that.

Priestly vocations may suffer from this in the short run. But, from a few courageous spirits, new beginnings happen and victories over despair. The spirit of mature courage and joy in this seminary community is quite extraordinary in these circumstances. I felt a new *esprit de corps* in young seminarians as a rector once. I have seen it grow steadily over the past decade. The wise spiritual leadership of the seminary's president-rector and the faculty is already making a difference. When I teach theology today at St. Mary's, the faith of an older man is strengthened by that of young men with a mature commitment to Christ and unblinking honesty about what awaits them. Courage is essential in human life. In William Shakespeare's play, *King Henry V*, English literature gives us a paradigm of the rhetoric which gives birth to courage when fear and fate threaten to overwhelm it.

In that play, brilliantly adapted for the screen by Kenneth Branagh, King Henry delivers an impassioned speech on courage to his troops on St. Crispin's Day. That was the day a small de-spirited English army under King Henry's command would find itself face to face across a battleground with a much larger French army. The words of King Henry V before the Battle of Agincourt are meant for us now. Winston Churchill, who knew something about fear and danger, wrote, "Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because it has been said, it is the quality which guarantees all the others." For his anxious troops shuddering in fear in the misty dawn at Agincourt, King Henry declares:

‘He that outlives this day and comes safe home will stand a tip-toe when this day is named and rouse him at the name of St. Crispian...’

“We few, we happy few, we band of brothers; for he today who sheds his blood with me shall be my brother; be he ne’er so vile, this day shall gentle his condition;”

“And gentlemen in England now a-bed shall think themselves accurs’d they were not here and hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks that fought with us upon St. Crispin’s Day.”

The phrase, *Band of Brothers*, as you know, was the title for Stephen Ambrose’s book on the bravery of the 101st Airborne in World War II. Fortitude, bravery, nerve, daring, or as Italians say, *coraggio* – call it what you want – this is exactly what Catholic laity, seminarians and priests need today in the aftermath of the scandals of clergy abuse. Protestations of contrition and shock are not enough. It takes courage to face the full truth about abuse and what caused it. It takes courage to pay the price for it. It takes courage to reform the church we love to be a better witness to the Gospel. It takes courage to be priests when others might walk away from this vocation and walk away for good reasons. The priesthood, in the words of Shakespeare, can “outlive this day.” My vocation as a priest began in other circumstances and at another time and place.

III Beginnings

As a young boy I was kneeling at the foot of the altar at St. Lawrence O’Toole Parish in Hartford, Connecticut serving Latin Mass when the first idea of the priesthood formed in my imagination. Our pastor, Father John J. Kelly, was vested in a Baroque chasuble richly embroidered with gold thread. In a solemn whisper, he intoned the opening words of the Mass, *Introibo ad altare dei* (“I will go to the altar of God”). My memorized response was delivered as I knelt at his side, *Ad deum qui laetificat juventutem meum* (“To the God who gives joy to my youth”). The church behind me was utterly silent. The smells of the votive candles and the incense were reverentially intoxicating. As a priest who has gone to God’s altar and table now for fifty years, I don’t want that little altar boy’s declaration of joy in me ever to be taken away. I will fight for it with all my strength. A priest must renew joy in himself over and over. It is the mood of the resurrection.

When our ordination class arrived at Roland Park in 1964, it was with trepidation not joy. The massive façade of Roland Park was anonymous and overwhelmed us. St. Mary’s Seminary at that time was the West Point of U.S. seminaries. Enrollment at Paca Street and Roland Park exceeded five-hundred seminarians. A vocations crisis was simply inconceivable. Lost as individuals in a crowd of black cassocks, altogether we were blessed to hear the rhetoric of courage.

Angelo Roncalli was all of seventy-seven when he was elected as Pope John XXIII in 1958. No one expected much from him. Then, this old man convoked the Second Vatican Council to reform and renew the church. President John F. Kennedy was forty-four years old when he told us at his inauguration in 1961: “The torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans, born in this century, tempered by war, disciplined by a hard and bitter peace, proud of our ancient heritage.” As young seminarians, we imagined he was talking about us though we

were un-tempered steel. In 1963, a thirty-four-year old Black Baptist minister, Dr. Martin Luther King, took his pulpit gifts with him from Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta to the Lincoln Memorial where he announced a transcendent vision of justice and brotherhood rooted in the Bible and in the U.S. Constitution. In words like these, young seminarians like us found our courage and hope. We held on to it even when postponements and defeats came instead.

John XXIII died in 1963, the same year Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. In the springtime of 1968, as we were preparing for ordination, the voice of Dr. Martin Luther King was silenced by a rifle shot in Memphis. As we settled into our first assignments as priests, Bobby Kennedy, then a candidate for the presidency, was slain by a bullet as he campaigned in Los Angeles. We had barely finished a month of our homilies when the papal encyclical of Paul VI on artificial birth control appeared. It broke open a wound in the church that has yet to heal. We tried for fifty years to heal it.

“History is a woman,” declared Friedrich Nietzsche in one of his startling aphorisms. He meant that no one is ever prepared for what history delivers. It deals a dream one day, and an agony the next – a joyous supper with the Messiah followed by his arrest and crucifixion. Then, an empty tomb and reports of encounters with the Risen Christ. It took courage to believe it and to build a mission on such reports.

We band of brothers from fifty-years or forty years or twenty-five years have won some of the wager in church reform and renewal thanks to grace and we have lost enough of youthful enthusiasms to make us humble in defeat. Today, we stand side by side at the Lord’s Table with younger men ordained ten years or five years or just sixteen months. We few, we happy few, we band of brothers. We return to draw inspiration from old memories and beg new courage from the Holy Spirit. The Eucharist we celebrate is all about remembrance.

IV Memories of the Class of 1968

It doesn’t take much to make my classmates remember. I just need to say a few faculty names and tell stories about classmates from long ago. Father Daniel Fives, S.S. at Paca Street taught us the history of philosophy, lispng lines like this so we would not forget – “Spinoza began as a lens grinder in Holland and later went into philosophy to make a spectacle of himself.” One of the great philosophers of the second millennium reduced to a pun! Spinoza for Idiots!

The CBS sitcom, “All in the Family” was iconic for the political discontents of the 1970s. The program opened with Archie and Edith Bunker singing about the old days: “Boy, the way Glenn Miller played; Songs that made the Hit Parade; Guys like us we had it made; Those were the days!”

According to the schedule the Archives gave me, our ordination class arrived at Roland Park on Friday September 11, 1964! The high temperature was 95.5, the low was 72. On Saturday morning at 9 a.m. we took a Latin exam. Then the retreat followed. At the end of the week, there was tonsure. Those were the days!

Dorm rooms in 1964 were the same as now, except ours had bunk beds and came with a roommate. Most guys wore “Roomy” Toomey “Zephyr” cassocks made of polyester. A few could afford exclusive silk-lined Gammarelli’s, Italian tailor to high churchmen, and to

seminarians who aspired to such. None of these were dry cleaned much, as I recall. So, the seminary had the scent of an authentic Parisian religious house – male body odor.

Those were also the days when we wore cassocks, surplices, and birettas to chapel for Sunday Vespers, doffing our clerical hats reverentially at the “Gloria Patri...” Many years later, when no one wore or even had birettas, a Protestant woman pastor turned up here looking to buy one. She tried it on with bobby pins, said she planned to preach in it!

In second or third year theology, the rector and faculty gave us permission to recite a peripatetic daily rosary, walking on the seminary’s front lawn. A neighbor who lived in Roland Park at the time told me many years later how confusing that spectacle was to strangers like him – hundreds of men in black robes meandering the seminary grounds lost in thought like depressed inmates at some asylum. Those were the days!

The seminary we entered was not for sissies – a grand silence, silence at meals, hardly a day off, no cars, no radios, no TVs, no nothing. We were treated like eighteen-year old army recruits. It was crazy and outdated, but we kept our sense of humor, grew in faith and spiritual life, and learned a great deal about Catholic scripture and theology at the cutting edge.

V Experience is the Great Teacher

Upon ordination, my classmates received their first parish assignments in June. The Archbishop of Hartford reassigned me to doctoral studies at Roland Park where I became a teaching assistant in systematic theology.

You can imagine what a heady experience it was as a newly-ordained priest in fall 1968 to be sitting in Faculty Council alongside my former professors. I was now taking afternoon seminars on Scripture with Father Raymond Brown, S.S., and then in the evening joining him for a cocktail and pizza. We watched his favorite detective show, “Mannix.” Then, abruptly in 1971, Raymond Brown packed up his library and left for the Auburn Professorship at Union Theological Seminary in New York. I left for my studies with the philosopher Paul Ricoeur in Chicago and later in Paris.

In that first decade after priestly ordination when a young priest is finding his sea legs and discovering his voice, my classmates were already leading parish renewal programs, adult education and Bible study, prayer groups, social justice outreach. They were collaborating with religious sisters and the laity in parochial ministry. Some were saving inner city parishes where demographics had changed, and poverty ate away at hope. Many were coping with pastors who resented Vatican II. A few took doctorates and one became a leading U.S. theologian at Georgetown specializing in faith and science. I still had my head buried in books, bunkered in the ivory foxhole at Roland Park while my classmates were making things happen in the real pastoral trenches.

In 1980, unexpectedly and out of season, I was elected president-rector of St. Mary’s. In no way was I formed or prepared for the challenges which faced me then. Like my classmates in parish ministry, experienced laymen and laywomen taught me how to lead. My trustees were lawyers, doctors, bankers, businessmen, developers, and some well-respected bishops, clergy and religious. I knew something about philosophy and theology and spiritual direction, but nothing about leadership. The job description the board handed me for a president-rector was not in the Sulpician playbook. Then again, a similar situation of unpreparedness confronted my classmates

in parish ministry. They were trying to implement the reforms of Vatican II during what amounted to a cultural tsunami.

A guy normally grows up when he takes a wife, fathers a child, and holds down a serious job to provide for them. A seminarian grows up when the red ink of a parish balance sheet wakes him up, when the empty pews scream at him to do something new and better, when the school of hard knocks leaves bruises on his soul and teaches him how to bounce back from his defeats, when he begins to realize that the faithful need him and that he needs them even more!

On my fiftieth anniversary of ordination, I can say being rector at a young age made me grow up. As president-rector, I became the pastor of future priests for a few years hoping that something I said or did would help them in ministry. My responsibility became matters I did not feel personally responsible for such as the failing reputation of the seminary or the vocations crisis or the arbitrary decisions of bishops or the staggering deficits when I first took the reins of office. These were not something I caused, but they immediately became mine to fix. On my fiftieth anniversary I am thankful that divine providence pushed me into an arena where the challenges were man-size challenges. They made a man out of me.

Looking back, it's the grace of God at work, is it not? To that grace I owe everything I am as priest. The faith others put in me and the love and support they gave me – that was a grace undeserved – and it changed me in ways I never would have expected. I owe a debt of gratitude to the teachers who demanded that I learn to think and argue, and not simply mouth religious platitudes. And, I am indebted even to the challenges I had to face which no one and nothing could have really prepared me for.

VI The Arc of Salvation History Bends to Reform

I cannot offer any solutions for the crisis the church and priesthood are in today nor will I try. But, the long arc of history holds lessons about religious reform which provide perspective. And, perspective is what courage needs.

A thousand years before Jesus Christ, David became king in Israel. Five centuries after King David, the monarchy collapsed like a house of cards. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. After the Babylonian Exile in the 6th century BCE, Ezra and Nehemiah rebuilt Jerusalem and laid the foundations for post-exilic Judaism. Five centuries after them, a rabbi from Galilee, Jesus of Nazareth, reformed the religion and renewed its hopes with his message of the coming Kingdom of God. From the crucifixion of Christ and his resurrection, the Christian Church was born.

After the hard work of the first missionaries and after so much blood had been shed by the martyrs, the church linked its institutional fortunes to those of Rome. Rome fell to the Vandals in the 6th century of our era. Western culture and the church plunged into the Dark Ages. But, Christian monasteries kept the light of learning alive by candlelight in scriptoria. In the 11th century – five-hundred years after the Vandals pillaged the city of Rome – there was the Gregorian Reform and the beginning of mediaeval chant and the great theological syntheses. Christianity entered the age of a papacy exalted as a political institution and scholastic theology.

Five-hundred years after Pope Gregory, an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther attacked massive abuses in the church fed by undisciplined theological speculation and ecclesiastical ambitions. The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century sounded the death knell on the Holy Roman Empire. The church entered what is called the secular age.

It is 501 years from October 31, 1517 when Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses on the cathedral door at Wittenberg to this very day -- October 18, 2018. After five centuries, it seems, one great reformation in faith seems to wear itself out and another reform is needed. Something collapses, and something new rises in its place. We all stand at the cusp of this today.

All of us in the church now understand contrition and penance much better after clergy abuse. We ache with spiritual lamentation. We read Ezekiel's accusation against the false shepherds and are not surprised. In some dioceses, priests find themselves in the moral equivalent of the valley of the dry bones. The Living God is asking them and us, as the same God once inquired of the prophet Ezekiel in Babylon, "Mortal, can these bones live?" And, we should not be slow to answer, "Yes, Lord, they can." Then, God will say to us as he said to Ezekiel, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord." The new evangelization begins in earnest.

A fully catholic faith educated by the history of salvation has no fear walking in the shadows of the church's hour of *Tenebrae*. It is not afraid of a mission under the spell of a new Good Friday and Holy Saturday in the church. We believe in the Resurrection from the dead. Easter has come, and, in another form, it will come again. But, the precondition of resurrection is death and a tomb. This is where Christianity began. Its recommencement is often in graveyards of different kinds. So, do not be afraid, as the risen Christ said to his startled disciples when they saw him thinking it was some ghost. Take courage. He lives. *Coraggio*.

VII The Chapel and the *Sedes Sapientiae*

Look around you in this chapel where your soul once drew strength and where our successors as priests do now. Gaze up at the statue of Mary under the skylight at the center of the Atrium. Mary, symbol of the church, she is cradling the infant Jesus in her arms. What you see is a Marian sentinel for the protection of children – *Auspice Maria*. To say an *Ave* and *Angelus* before the *Sedes Sapientiae* is to vow to protect the vulnerable human being.

Above us in the chapel is the High Cross where Jesus hangs eternally suspended over time as a reminder of the price of sin and redemption in history. The forgiveness of sins does not come about by waving an easy absolution over the wreckage of grievous crimes. A penance must be imposed even when contrition is sincere. Often history imposes heavy penances on those who did nothing wrong. Blessed are those who do not resent carrying a heavy cross though innocent themselves. Happy those who follow the *via crucis* of reform.

Coda on Joy and Courage

Each of us has a private reverie to indulge in our few moments together before Alumni Day is over. Many classmates and teachers are gone – but the chapel at Paca Street remains. In this part of America, Roland Park and Theological College now carry the Sulpician flame of priestly renewal into the future. When the foundations of the church and priesthood shake as they have, it is some comfort to think on this, to walk these terrazzo marble hallways again, to break bread together in hope, joy and remembrance.

Meanwhile, and not just for this day and for this hour, let us remember the psalm which goes, *Ecce quam bonum et quam jucundum habitare fratres in unum* ("How good and joyful it is for brothers to dwell in unity"). We few, we happy few, we band of brothers do so in good faith gathered in this holy place dear to our memories. We sing our school song, the *Salve Regina*, and

invoke Mary's intercession on this seminary she will protect. We pray for Pope Francis, *Papa Francisco*, an old man like Pope John XXIII, but one who still bears the vigor and the joy and the courage of a young man within him. *Coraggio*, he would tell us. *Avere coraggio*.

When this chapel was built in 1954, the Sulpicians glossed the interior with words from the Gospel of St. Luke – *Magnificat Anima Mea Dominum* and *Mane Nobiscum Domine* “Remain with us, Lord.” On the outside walls of the chapel, the Sulpicians inscribed sentences from the Gospel of John. One of those sentences tells seminarians: “Go, and bear fruit, fruit which will endure.” There is your mission, my brothers. *Coraggio*.