

St. Mary's Seminary & University

Homily
Alumni Days Vespers
Memorial of St. Ignatius of Antioch

October 17, 2018

Once again, welcome home to St. Mary's for Alumni Days 2018. Welcome to you who graduated from St. Mary's and went on to lives of service as pastors; to you graduates of St. Charles or St. Mary's never ordained who have gone on to lives of service in other vocations; to those of you ordained who at some point left active ministry and went on to lives of service as spouses, parents and in so many other ways; welcome to wives and family members who have come with you; and our prayers for those who have passed away or otherwise who are not with us today. The beauty of God's providence is that wherever we end up in life, our formation experiences in seminary have made us, in important ways, who we are today, especially through the spirit of service and commitment they cultivated in us.

I want St. Mary's Seminary & University to be known as the "cradle of pastors"; that is what we are and have always been all about here: providing the People of God with the kind of pastors they deserve. We Memorialize St. Ignatius of Antioch today not as a martyr but as a pastor.

First Peter reminds us this evening that God's flock is in our midst; he admonishes us "Give it a shepherd's care. Watch over it willingly, as God would have you do, not under constraint, and not for shameful profit either, but generously. Be examples to the flock, not lording it over those assigned to you . . ." Then, I believe as a concession to human weakness, he goes on to say "so that when the chief Shepherd appears, you will win for yourselves the unfading crown of glory." I recommend that we do it not to win a reward, but because that's who we are; because that's who we became through our Catholic upbringing and the human and pastoral formation we received during our seminary years and continue to cultivate.

We come together this year once again under a cloud. Our idealism and our commitment, our efforts to be good shepherds, once again overshadowed by scandal, caused by men who followed the same path we followed, but somehow deviated and began to seek other ends, perhaps just fell into the clutches of disease, demonic compulsion, weakness resulting in doubts and weakening of faith, or perhaps even a cynical abandonment of real faith. Whatever the cause, it ought not to prevent us from praying for them and caring for them in the ways that we can, though not at the expense of full accountability for the wrongs they have committed, as angry as we might also be, for they remain God's children, however errant. If we allow the bad behavior or some and resultant scandals to rob us of compassion, we will have lost everything; we truly will no longer be who we are and who we have been called to be. But let's not avoid the fact that we do come together once again under a cloud; let's not fail to acknowledge the elephant in the middle of the room that no one used to talk about, but that now everyone is talking about, to every priest and bishop's chagrin. How did we end up in this situation yet once again?

I think we can answer by asking ourselves what we took away with us from seminary. In seminary we learn the theological concept of the three *munera* of the priestly office of teaching,

governing and sanctifying. I have to ask myself if too many priests move on from seminary well-versed in the three *munera* but insufficiently mindful of the evangelical concept of giving God's flock a shepherd's care; of watching over it willingly, not under constraint nor for shameful profit, but generously, mindful of being examples to the flock. I say *too many* priests - not *many* priests. Most of us, I am convinced, go forth impelled by a proper understanding of what it means to be a priest, of what it means to be a pastor; but one priest contaminated by hubris, not made whole by humility, is one too many, and we know there have more than one, some rising to high rank where, if anything, the greater temptations lie; enamored with the power of office rather than the poetry of religion.

M.L. Menken, no great friend of religion, said this almost a hundred years ago about our religion:

The Latin Church, which I constantly find myself admiring, despite its occasional astounding imbecilities, has always kept clearly before it the fact that religion is not a syllogism, but a poem. . . . *“Rome indeed has not only preserved the original poetry of Christianity; it has also made capital additions to that poetry -- for example, the poetry of the saints, of Mary, and of the liturgy itself.*

Perhaps too many have too easily forgotten the poetry in favor of the power. Could that be where the problem lies: hubris instead of humility; the quest for power obscuring the poetry of faith? In ordination a priest is given the functions of teaching, governing and sanctifying; but do too many, though not many, get it backwards: Are they enamored with the role of *teaching* the faithful, while forgetting what we have to *learn* from the faithful? Lording it over them with powers of governance, instead of governing themselves? Anxious to sanctify through the sacraments but missing the fact that it is the faithful who sanctify *us*?

Alumni Days are a great homecoming; homecomings are about getting back in touch with things that formed us early in life: ideals acquired; things to strive for during the dramatic struggles of adulthood; an experience of renewal – a time to remember and deepen the ideals that set us on this path in the first place: for priests, the desire to serve, to care for others, to give God's flock a shepherd's care; ideals too easily sidetracked by temptations to power, prestige, cupidity. Homecomings are a time to renew one's strength against such disastrous temptations, to get fully back on track in order to re-enter the battle fully armed with humility, gratitude, one's spirit once again enamored with the poetry of it all; friendships renewed, faith fully restored, hope strengthened, re-convinced of what faith promises; re-dedicated to service, to giving a shepherds care to God's flock; not discouraged by those who have failed and tainted our image, but even more determined to prove them wrong by who we are: the 96% of priests and bishops faithful to their task, not tainted by the quest for power, marked not by hubris but humility. Let these Alumni Days 2018 be a time of refreshment and renewal of spirit so that we will all go forth re-dedicated to teaching, guiding and sanctifying, but all the more so to giving God's flock a shepherd's care, to being the kind of priests, the kind of pastor's the People of God deserve.