

Homily -- Dean's Vespers

Sept. 24, 2009 -- Msgr. Kevin W. Irwin

2 Timothy 4:1-8

Once again I want to acknowledge the musical compositions and contribution to this Dean's Vespers by Dr. Leo Nestor and the chorus from the Rome School of Music, especially those students in the program in Sacred Music.

In Sept., 1985 the then Dean of (the then) School of Religious Studies William Cenker, O.P. started the tradition of hosting Dean's Vespers. His idea was to gather faculty, students, staff, spouses and friends for a prayer service and festive reception to mark the beginning of another year spent in serious academic study and in the pursuit of religious truth. Hence "Dean's Vespers" has become part of the "rites of fall" for our School. In discussions with the Executive Committee of STRSSA (the STRS student organization) I explained that I understood this event to be part of what I suspect today might be called "orientation extended" for the incoming graduate students. In particular I judged it a good way for them to meet a variety of fellow learners – students as well as faculty of STRS. And so I extend a particular welcome to our new STRS undergrad majors and grad students.

A dozen years ago for me personally and for five years thereafter part of the annual "rites of fall" concerned my preparation for and running in the New York marathon. (As a self styled "New Yorker in exile" there was really no other race I ever wanted to run since the course is all five boroughs and it ends in Central Park in Manhattan. For a New Yorker it doesn't get any better than that!) For those of you who are marathon runners you know well that the key is planning for the race by methodical and serious preparation. Literally months are required before a marathon lest you injure yourself. Marathon preparation means long runs, short runs, drinking sufficient water, eating correctly, getting sufficient sleep. I often said that the challenge was never the race itself. After all with literally hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers lining the streets to cheer you on how could you not run well? If nothing else pride would get you through! Then again if you are a long distance runner you realize that sometimes there is no pride left. Dare I say it is a very "earthy" experience!

The real challenge was the day to day very serious, long term preparation. Running is not an occasional experiment – it is a habit. That, in fact, is the thesis of the novel written in 1978 by John J. Parker entitled *Once A Runner*. It is about a young man's highly disciplined regimen of running day in and day out to prepare himself for elite races at which he succeeded brilliantly. But "once a runner," "always a runner."

By now we are all into the semester. Students know what their classes are and will require. They know the research papers and reflection papers they have to write. They know how rigorous it is to learn a new language (or languages) to unlock ever deeper meanings of the texts we are studying. For us more seasoned professors we may well be

engaged in learning how to use “Blackboard” and “Sakai” if the H1N1 hits us as some predict. For new professors by now they are able to negotiate this campus which is new to them. By now we know what these next months will require of us. And we have already set in motion how we are to accomplish it.

While that is true for each and every student on this campus, what marks the particular academic challenge for us in this School is that what we are about is nothing less than the search for truth and for the living God. We cultivate here a “love for learning” in our desire for nothing less than communion with the living God – a God “in whom we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). What is Vespers but part of the church’s daily rhythm of prayer offered to us so that we give voice to the prayer of our hearts and shape to the lives we live before and in God?

The academic life is not unlike the runner’s marathon preparation. It is methodical, exacting, sometimes taxing, requiring mental skills and time management. It is about learning various perspectives and ways of looking at and being immersed in religious truths. It involves discipline and hard work. It can sometimes have elements of loneliness (as in *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*). One of our contemporary challenges is to appreciate that to engage in the craft of theology takes time. We live in a world of text messages, IM’s, emails on Blackberrys (Crackberrys, blueberrys, etc.) twittering and tweets! We can and do presume to communicate some things quickly and with little effort.

The academic life is different. It is a painstaking, exacting, and very long process. There is nothing instant about it. It is about learning texts in context and needing to know a great deal about genre, time, and place of composition and the meaning that words contained at times and places different from our own.

For example, in this Year for Priests we can reflect on the way that the epistles of the New Testament give us diverse church orders, ministers, and structures with generous use of the words “the twelve,” “apostles,” “disciples,” as well as “deacons,” “elders,” “presbyters,” and “bishops” with some similar job descriptions and functions but also important differences among them. There is a wealth of material there that we need the Biblical Studies faculty to help us sort out. We can reflect on what it means that while we pray in the Roman Canon for “Benedict our pope” and “Donald our bishop” in fact the Latin word which we translate as “bishop” is *antistite* meaning “presiding priest” at the Eucharist and over the diocese. I need to consult with my own colleagues in Liturgical Studies to appreciate what it means to call a “bishop” “the presiding priest.” We can appreciate anew that St. John Chrysostom’s treatise *On the Priesthood* is as much about the episcopacy, the diaconate and the importance of preaching as it is about those we now call “priests.” We need the Church History faculty and specifically the experts in patristics to help us sort out what was said and meant in this important text. We can appropriate the insight intended when the documents of Vatican II consistently refer to the ordained priest as one who acts “in the name of Christ the head of the Church” and deliberately do not use the term *alter Christus*, “another Christ.” For that we need the expertise of the Systematic Theology faculty and the historians of Vatican II. We can pray over the Latin texts of the ordination rites which speak about being ordained to the “order of presbyters” not “priests” since both terms have important, technical meanings.

Again, my Liturgical Studies colleagues are a first line of collaboration to “unpack” what these rites say and mean theologically. Such insights take time to absorb and appropriate in coming to terms with an adequate theology of ordained ministry in the Catholic tradition.

One of our responsibilities as faculty is to exemplify for students what the academic life is all about. Notice I said “academic *life*” and not the academic *work* we are engaged in. I say that because one of the chief goals of this School is to encourage each of us – faculty and students – to continue to make what we do here a *vocation*, not a job, a life’s work, not a terminal occupation for a time; nothing less than the never ending search for God, not just knowledge about God.

The subplot of the novel *Once a Runner* is that once you are a runner you are always a runner. As the faculty knows well, once you are a student of theology and religious studies, you are destined always to be a student of theology and religious studies.

It is always about being eager to learn new things, and sometimes to learn things anew.

It is always about building on what we know in order to know it better and more fully and more deeply.

It is always about the honest search for wisdom as well as truth.

It is always about challenging ourselves to be the kind of teacher St. Paul speaks of in the admonition to Timothy - “unfailing in patience.”

When we are patient we encourage each other as fellow students to be our best selves in the highly disciplined search for truth among and with each other. We are all fellow learners. It’s just that some of us have had something of a head start on the race. None of us can yet say with St. Paul that we have as yet “finished the race,” even those who will defend their doctoral dissertations in these very days. Once a student, always a student.

During this semester some of us may hope to complete several credits toward our degree, so that part of the race will be over. Or it may be language exams, comprehensives, thesis proposals, chapters written and eventually dissertations defended. These are all markers in the race and important things to accomplish. But the greatest task and goal will be that our lives of study here will lead us to become life long learners and people who are enveloped by and immersed in nothing less than the God we worship tonight.

Even worse than “cheap grace” would be “cheap theology” - ideas gleaned too rapidly and too facilely without the requisite hard work. The gaining of theological knowledge comes not from Instant Messaging, or Facebook notices, or computer generated fact sheets. It comes from application of study and reflective habits over the long haul for the long view. Please remember that what we are about is “the love of learning and the desire for God.” I hope you will enjoy all of your studies here. Please enjoy those moments in this semester that will be moments of tremendous accomplishment, those markers on the racecourse of your academic lives. But please remember that what we

are about in this particular school is a *life*, an academic *life* in the pursuit of truth and assimilation into the living God.

It is my prayer tonight that the novel *Once a Runner* can become our real life story and stories – *Once A Student, Always A Student*.

Welcome to Dean's Vespers. And welcome to the "rites of fall."