

Dean's Vespers Homily -- Sept. 20, 2007 – Msgr. Kevin W. Irwin

Once again this year we are privileged to have the assistance of Dr. Leo Nestor and the students from the Benjamin Rome School of Music in providing what is always characteristically fine music for our Vespers service. Thank you very much.

Allow me to begin these reflections with a story about a doctoral student from the Music School who was doing a minor in Liturgical Studies. I was Director of that program at the time and she came to visit with me about her comprehensives. She was married and was the mother of two children. She had her hands full. In the course of the conversation she spoke of her husband Brian, who was a very devout Catholic. She listed all the religious practices he engaged in as well as his service to others. Then with a glint in her eyes she said "Brian is a saint." And then with a slight arched eyebrow she then said "but you know, it takes a martyr to live with a saint!"

Tonight's Vespers combines for us a commemoration of martyrs and a scripture reading that challenges us to be nothing less than saints of God. Sometimes we confine the "age of the martyrs" to the first centuries of the church's life. Today's feast of the Korean martyrs (killed in the nineteenth century) reminds us that the church in every age has had its martyrs. And in the words of one of the prefaces at Mass for Holy Men and Women we often praise and thank God by saying

You renew the church every age

By raising up raise up men and women, outstanding in holiness

That, it seems to me, is at the heart of the reading from Colossians we have just heard (Col. 3:1-17). One commentator calls the letter to the Colossians “a mystery” in terms of trying to determine its exact provenance, genre, audience and author. My own impression is that it is indeed a “mystery” from another point of view. That is to say that like other Pauline letters Colossians places before us the mysteries of the Christian faith – Christ dead and risen and the baptized clothed in Christ – and the implications which these saving mysteries have for us in leading the Christian life.

In the end we are called to nothing less than holiness....to live the life of God with and among each other, in this community of scholars and in our world. This annual Vesper service is simply a reminder that what we are about in this School is to seek the truth of our faith and to live that faith in our world. It is a reminder that what we do in a rigorous search for truth ought to have its effect in the way we look at life and live the Christian life. It is a reminder that under the umbrella of Catholicism we have a variety of ways of doing theology (e.g. monastic and scholastic) and a variety of schools of spirituality that we can pridefully look to and draw insight from (e.g. monastic, mendicant, missionary etc.). It is a reminder of the intrinsic connection between rigorous, scientific study of theology and the grace filled way we ought to live in this world.

Like other epistles Colossians asserts truths about our faith and then names implications, sometimes very specifically and, dare I say poignantly if we are willing to listen to what the author has to say. One would be hard pressed to find a better examination of conscience than Colossians chapter three. But one ought also to be

reminded that this self examination always follows upon acknowledging what is asserted in the first part of the letter, chapters one and two – what God has done and does for us in and through Christ. It is only because of what we know God continues to do for us in inviting us to grace and redemption that we can attempt to live the kind of life described in tonight's reading.

One of St. Paul's repeated names for the church is "the saints." That is what we are in grace. That is what we are called to be more and more fully as we respond to that grace as we live our lives. One of the terms for this a like of this kind of integration is *spirituality*. And what is Catholic spirituality but living the life of God with and among each other in community, to witness to our world the values of the gospel which is our bedrock, and sometimes to take countercultural positions about things that really matter, such as always seeking the common good over a selfish individualism that is the deathknell of real Catholicism and Catholic spirituality.

About ten years ago I received a call from an editor from *Time – Life* books. That firm was thinking about putting out a series of books on "Spirituality." The editor asked me off the top of my head what authors from the Catholic tradition would I suggest for such a series. I said, "St. Augustine, St. Benedict, Sts. Francis and Claire of Assisi, St. Catherine of Siena, Hildegard of Bingen, St. Ignatius Loyola, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton." There was a distinct pause and then the editor finally said, "oh no, Father, we want nothing too challenging. We want people to feel good about themselves." I replied "So do I. But sometimes that means naming our sin and engaging in deeper and deeper

conversion.” He thanked me for the conversation. (To the best of my knowledge *Time – Life* never published the series)

Deeper and deeper and deeper conversion is what the second part of the letter to the Colossians is all about. Deeper and deeper conversion of mind and heart is one of the things which the School of Theology and Religious Studies is all about. And whether our academic specialization is “Spirituality” or not, one of the goals for all of us in the School is to lead richer and deeper spiritual lives. And within the Catholic tradition we have numberless examples of the preface’s phrase:

You renew the church every age

By raising up raise up men and women, outstanding in holiness....

So much so that we need to critique any kind of spirituality that seeks self help only. After all what good is self help if the only one who gets help is the self? Catholic spirituality is always about ourselves in relationship with others. It is always about what may be an uncommon virtue today – the common good. It is always about accepting the challenge to name where are in the spiritual life and to take deliberate steps to grow in God. It means that our role model and spiritual guru should not be Leo Buscalia. It means our textbook should not be *Chicken Soup For the Soul*.

Rather we should proudly look to martyrs and saints in every age who call us to deeper and deeper conversion, here and now, through and because of our study of Theology and Religion – the words and actions of the living God. Theological ideas should have spiritual consequences. A Catholic kind of spirituality is always nurtured by good theology and the academic study of religion. And our academic study of Theology

and Religion ought to have its effect in the way we view life, in the way we look at our lives and in the way we lead them. Such challenges are not for the faint of heart. After all conversion of life takes a lifetime. And so we need to take the time in life to pray for deeper and deeper conversion, as we do in this Vespers and as we do day in and day out. The goal? To become saints. But saints who are joyful, at peace and at home in God and with each other. The goal is not to become the kind of saint that requires a martyr to live with them!