

Homily -- Dean's Vespers

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Basilica of the National Shrine

As some of you know my own professional training is in liturgy and sacraments. And among the principles that I use which I have learned in this field for my study and teaching is the simple phrase – “trust the liturgy” This is to say that liturgy by its nature is not something you “make up as you go along” despite the trubador’s plaintive song at the start of Bernstein’s *Mass*. No liturgy is a given The rites and signs and symbols of the liturgy are a given The texts of the readings and prayers are a given What happens in liturgy is not a surprise in terms of structure and content. What happens at liturgy sometime sis a surprise in terms of the ways that God can work among us, redeem us and sanctify us It is, after all, “amazing grace” on which we rely and which we receive in and through the liturgy.

At the same time it is the case that, like this evening, the celebration of the liturgy is surprisingly beautiful, notable and impressive. Something along the lines of what Dr. Nestor and his colleagues offer us year after year in this very special Vespers, with specially rehearsed and newly composed music.

What this also means is that the psalms, prayers and the reading for tonight’s Vespers are basically the same whether Vespers is celebrated in monastic abbey choirs, mendicant chapels, parish churches, campus corridors, or seminary chapels or by clerics on their own whose voices blend with the whole church throughout the world on behalf of the needs of the whole world

One particular part of Vespers that has been the same from time immemorial is the praying of the *Magnificat*, which hymn places on Mary’s lips the paradoxes of the gospel:

He has scattered the proud in their conceit
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones
He has lifted up the lowly
He has filled the hungry with good things
And the rich has sent away empty...

These are the among the paradoxes of the gospel proclaimed for us day in and day out.

In addition at tonight’s Vespers the central paradox of our faith is elaborated on in the scripture reading assigned for today from 1 Peter That paradox is that dying leads to rising, suffering leads to glory, obedience leads to fullness of life. All liturgy is paschal

in that it always celebrates and draws us into this central mystery of faith. Precisely because it is paradoxical we need to be reminded and drawn into it more deeply and fully. It is the bedrock of our faith. But it is a paradox that can sometimes be hard to appropriate.

There is a school of thought that says that at least some in the community that first received this letter were newly baptized and were basking in the new life that was their in Christ's resurrection from the dead. But that fact does not make them immune from having to suffer trials so that their faith could be the more genuine, rich and firm.

In this you rejoice, although now for a little while you may have to suffer through various trials,
so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that is perishable even though tested by fire, may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ

Sometimes the work that is set before us as a premier school of Theology and Religious Studies can be difficult. It can be hard work. There is an asceticism that we must embrace in the academic life that means making sacrifices -- of time and energy, of pride and slothfulness -- at the altars of our desks and before computer screens that deliver data that may well challenge our well worn ways of thinking. This means embracing a path of intellectual conversion through individual study and dialogue with others as peers as well as through prayer, for in the end prayer is an important manifestation of our willingness to change, to be the more converted, to be less self centered and more other centered.

We celebrate these Vespers tonight in our School at a time that I judge to be very important, not to say crucial, in terms of the possibilities and the promise of new life, new growth, new opportunities. But sometimes facing into things that are new is difficult, even scary. We need to pray these Vespers for our collective will and wisdom to move forward as a School.

Every academic community is a work in progress. Each year at least a quarter of the students graduate and move on. Each year we accept a new class of younger, inquiring scholars. In this School this year we accepted over eighty new graduate students and over twenty undergraduate majors. This year we welcomed eight new faculty members, last year two and the previous year, five. Our plan for the year ahead is to hire five new faculty members. This means that in a four year span of time half the fulltime faculty will have changed.

What is stable and has been the same from the founding of the School to this day is that we teach Theology and Religious Studies on behalf of and for both an undergraduate and graduate student population. What is always a work in progress is the shape of the faculty and of the student body. Each year we welcome entering students in first year college or first year seminary or first year graduate studies. And when we do so we are all affected, influenced and changed. Students' questions evolve and change. Faculty know

that. In fact master teachers rely on those changed questions and new ways of inquiring in order to do our jobs well – with all the insight we can muster. If not to answer the questions immediately, then to ponder them and allow them to help us shape our research, our way of thinking, our way of looking at our disciplines and our way of presenting material, some of which is ever ancient yet some of which is ever new.

There is a temptation in any institution -- dare I say even / especially in academe -- to say and rely on the phrase “We’ve always done it this way.” But that does not wash in an evolving and ever new and evolving academic world

It does not wash when students are inclined to study less and less on their own and more and more collectively in group.

It does not wash in an age when the “Catholic literacy and Catholic familiarity” that could have been presumed of my generation of Catholics simply cannot be presumed at all

It does not wash in an age where “Blackboard” is not something in a classroom onto which we write with chalk but is a tool that facilitates the dissemination of research material, student discussion and feedback that was simply unknown and unimaginable fifteen years ago.

Commentators tell us that the curious phrase “gird up the loins of your mind” (vs 14) towards the end of the 1 Peter reading in effect means to prepare ourselves for hard work. It means to “roll up our sleeves” and get to work, not to shirk our awesome responsibility and privilege – to pass onto the next generation of scholars what we have come to know and love. And in the process to revere their questions, their ways of inquiry, their appreciation of the truths of our faith and to respond in kind.

I would also say that this means that the veterans of the campaign within the faculty, the juniors and seniors majoring in Theology and Religious Studies and the graduate students who are “ABD” recognize that those who have recently joined us are fellow inquirers in this life long vocation to study about God, for God and for the church. It means doing what St. Benedict urges in his *Rule for Monks* (chapter 3) namely to realize that “the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best.”

I suspect that there is a temptation that we who have been here a while, who are the more mature judge that we should be kind to those who have not had our years of experience or publishing or who do not yet know the ropes. In fact I want to argue that the recently arrived should also be revered and respected for the kinds of questions they ask of us and the kind of School which they will forge during their years here. “We’ve always done it this way” does not wash.

It was Paul Tillich who said that you cannot receive an answer to a question you have not asked. We need to listen to the questions each of us – whether here for three weeks or three decades – are asking about God and the things of God within this community

which is comprised of among the most highly trained and professionally skilled theologians I know. Some have been here for years. Some have just arrived.

We need to sustain a culture where new questions are asked and the tried and true wisdom of our enterprise is shaped, molded and refined by a new generation of faculty and students in STRS.

It was Carl Peter who said to me (in his inimitable style!) “don’t let history determine your future in this School.” It was he who said “we’ve always done it that way” can be an excuse for inertia or an unwillingness to see things differently and to change things.

Allow me to conclude by reiterating these sage words from a distinguished former Dean. “We’ve always done it this way” is not an adequate reply. The real questions to ask are whether and why we do what we do and how we can do it better in a community of the recently arrived and the veterans of the campaign. One of the paradoxes of the academic life is that the questions of the young can be the best of questions.

What we celebrate at every act of liturgy are the paradoxes of our faith. I suggest that an additional paradox tonight at this Vespers is that the younger and more recently arrived are indeed colleagues, fellow sojourners in our quest for excellence in probing the things of God. As St. Benedict said “the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best.”

For reference

CHAPTER III *Of Calling the Brethren for Counsel*

Whenever weighty matters are to be transacted in the monastery, let the Abbot call together the whole community, and make known the matter which is to be considered. Having heard the brethren's views, let him weigh the matter with himself and do what he thinks best. It is for this reason, however, we said that all should be called for counsel, because the Lord often reveals to the younger what is best.