ST. MARY’S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY

Baltimore, Maryland

Alumni Day Homily

October 18, 2018

Feast of Saint Luke, The Evangelist

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Class of 1968

The Gospel of Luke 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, Paul reports about his troubles, but thanks God for the strength he has been given in meeting them. He names a man named Luke which is why this reading was chosen for the Feast of Luke the Evangelist today. Paul asks Timothy to bring his cloak and a few scrolls and parchments. Later in the letter we hear the voice of a missionary coming to the end of his journeys. “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 can say that after fifty years, he can say a lot.

I Themes for a 50th Jubilee

Fifty years ago, all my classmates moved on to the towns and villages of their future ministries. For another purpose, God’s grace determined that I should stay in seminary formation. Our ministries have been very different, but our mission has been the same as those first seventy-two disciples Jesus sent out. It is now more like St. Paul’s sentiments in the Letter to Timothy towards the close of his missionary travels. Today, we are united in a single memory of spiritual homes where our vocations came to fruition: St. Mary’s Seminary, Paca Street, St. Charles Seminary College, Theological College, and St. Mary’s Seminary & University in Roland Park.

On this 50th anniversary of priestly ordination, it would not be right or just to dwell on the revelations of last summer. My themes today are those of gratitude, joy and courage. Scripture advises, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit.” All the same, something our hearts are heavy. Scandals, Jesus said, would come. Betrayals of trust started in the Upper Room itself. When Jesus celebrated the Last Supper, was he not aware of the betrayal of trust in Judas and the moral weakness of Peter? Even so, he still broke the bread of communion with them and drank the cup of suffering and went off to Gethsemane singing a psalm. He renewed himself in prayer there and faced his passion with love and courage. Renewing the church by renewing the priesthood is the Sulpician mission of St. Mary’s Seminary & University.

II Courage

It took great courage for Jean-Jacques Olier to launch his French Sulpician mission of priestly renewal in 1641. It took daring and endurance for Francois Nagot, S.S. to sail from St. Malo, France in 1791 at the invitation of Archbishop John Carroll to establish our nation’s first Catholic seminary. The French architect, Maximilian Godefroy, later designed a perfect little gem of a chapel at Paca Street. The Sulpicians later founded St. Charles College with its extraordinary Jenkins Memorial Chapel which now serves the Charlestown Community. In 1929, the Sulpician mission expanded to Baltimore’s Roland Park – in a year when the New York stock market crashed, and the Great Depression began. A proper chapel could not be built at Roland Park until twenty-five years later following the Second World War.

There’s a lesson to be found in the kind of courage capable of outlasting trouble and enduring postponements of hope. The Paschal Triduum, as the word itself conveys, lasted for three full days from Holy Thursday through Good Friday to the Easter Vigil and Easter itself. The lapse of time is essential to redemption. But, the postponements of rebirth in ordinary human lives takes much longer than a liturgical triduum. It certainly will take much longer for the church and priesthood to live down the shame and anger which is now our fate and to live up to mission of Jesus’ disciples which is our calling.

Seminary enrollment may suffer even further from this in the short run than it already has. I am not afraid. The spirit of joy and courage in this seminary community is extraordinary now. I felt that courage and *esprit de corps* as a rector once, and I have seen it grow steadily over the past decade. The leadership of the rector and the faculty is making a difference. When I teach seminarians theology today my own faith is strengthened by their own mature commitment to Christ and unblinking honesty about what awaits them. The virtue of courage is central in human life. No better example of the rhetoric for it can be found than in William Shakespeare’s play, *King Henry V*.

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 Henry’s command would find itself face to face across a battleground with a much larger French army. The words of Henry V before the Battle of Agincourt are ones we can draw strength from too. Winston Churchill once said, “Courage is rightly esteemed the first of human qualities because it has been said, it is the quality which guarantees all the others.” Here is how King Henry stirs courage up in the hearts of his anxious troops huddled in the misty dawn at Agincourt.

‘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.”

*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, or as Italians say, *coraggio* – call it what you want – this is exactly what Catholic priests, seminarians and laity need today in the aftermath of clergy abuse. The courage to face the truth about it. The courage to pay the price for it. The courage to reform the church we love to be a better witness to the Gospel. The courage to be priests when others might walk away from this vocation. And, do so for good reasons. The priesthood can “outlive this day.”

My vocation as a priest began 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. Father John J. Kelly was vested in a black fiddle back chasuble which was 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 was utterly silent. The smell of the votive candles and incense was 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.

When our ordination class arrived here in 1964, it was less with joy than with trepidation. The massive and anonymous façade of Roland Park itself 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 inconceivable. Lost in a crowd of black cassocks as we all were, those years nevertheless were inspiring ones. Here’s why.

Angelo Roncalli was all of seventy-seven when he was elected as Pope John XXIII in 1958. No one expected anything from him. Then, this old man convoked the Second Vatican Council for reform and renewal in the church. 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 seminarians, we imagined he was talking about us though we were untampered steel and had enjoyed the fruits of the peaceful 1950s. 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 had our hopes elevated by rhetoric. They were “profiles in courage.” But, postponement came instead of immediate fulfillment.

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 while campaigning in Los Angeles. We had barely finished a month of our homilies when the papal encyclical of Paul VI on artificial birth control was published. 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 prepared for history’s paradoxes and reversals. Sometimes she deals out to us the beginnings of a Royal Flush and the game is all but won. Sometimes, she gives us nothing we can play. If it seems like that now, be prepared for surprises the next time around.

We band of brothers from fifty-years or forty years or twenty-five years have won the wager of church reform thanks to grace and 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 lisping memorable lines like this – “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. Yes, 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. I must say she looked much better in the three-cornered hat and pom-pom than any of us did.

In second or third year theology, as I recall, the rector and faculty gave us permission to say our 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 the spectacle was to strangers like him – what looked like hundreds of men in black robes individually meandering the grounds lost in thought like 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 and learned a great deal about Catholic scripture and theology and learned it 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 with Father Raymond Brown, S.S., then in the evening joining him for a pizza with anchovies from Alonzo’s on Cold Spring Lane. We watched his favorite detective show, “Mannix.” Then, abruptly in 1971, Father Brown packed up his library and left for the Auburn Professorship at Union Theological Seminary in New York, and I left for studies with 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 of Father Olier and Father Nagot. Then again, the same was true for my classmates in parish ministry trying to implement Vatican II during 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 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 like 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. These were not something I caused, but they became mine to fix. On my fiftieth anniversary I am thankful that 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 themselves which came my way and which no one and nothing could have prepared me for.

VI The Arc of Church 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 that give us perspective. And, perspective is what we need.

A thousand years before Christ, David became king in Israel. Five centuries after David, the monarchy he established collapsed like a house of cards. Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. After the exile, 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 his cross and resurrection, the Christian Church was born.

After the work of the first missionaries and the blood of the martyrs had been shed, Christianity 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 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.

Five-hundred years after Pope Gregory came Martin Luther who attacked massive abuses in the church fed by undisciplined theological speculation and ecclesiastical ambition. The Protestant Reformation in the 16th century sounded the death knell on the Holy Roman Empire. The church entered the secular age.

From October 31,1517 when Martin Luther posted his Ninety-Five Theses which began the Reformation until this very day -- October 18, 2018 – that is precisely 501 years! After five centuries, it seems, one reform in faith to wear itself out, and another reform and renewal must begin. We all stand at the cusp of this today.

We priests now understand contrition and penance better. We ache with spiritual lamentation. Somewhere we hear Ezekiel’s accusation against the false shepherds and they ring true. In some places, priests find themselves in the valley of the dry bones. The Living God is asking them and us, as God once asked Ezekiel, “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.”

A fully catholic faith has no fear walking in the shadows of the church’s hour of *Tenebrae*, doing the mission under the spell of the Good Fridays and Holy Saturdays of ordinary life. We know about the Resurrection. Easter has come, and it will come again. A resurrection requires a death and a tomb as its precondition. Christianity began at a tomb. It will renew itself there again. So, do not be afraid, as Jesus said to his startled disciples when he appeared to them. 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 do now. Look 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. Look closely again. 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 wake up. The baby sleeps, but we must keep vigil.

Above us 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 grievous crimes. A penance must be imposed even when contrition is sincere. Often history imposes penances on those who did nothing wrong. Blessed are those who do not resent carrying a cross though they are innocent themselves. Happy those who follow the way of Christ.

*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 joy and remembrance.

Meanwhile, 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. On the outside, they inscribed words from the Gospel of John. One of those words inscribed in Latin says this: “Go, and bear fruit, fruit that endures.” Amen, brothers. *Coraggio*.