**Parables of Communion**

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Having been at St. Mary’s for more than a quarter-century, as you have heard, I am both humbled and honored to receive this honor for teaching excellence, and to give this commencement address. So thank you to Fr. Brown for the invitation and kind words, and to Dean Laytham for the invitation as well during this 50th anniversary year for the Ecumenical Institute.

 I am grateful that my wife Nancy could be here, as well as my son and colleague, Dr. Mark Gorman, my son and E.I. student Brian, and several good friends from our home Bible study.

 This is not the first graduation address I have ever given, but it is the first in a very, very long time. I gave my first such speech at Woodside Elementary School in Glen Burnie, Maryland. (My mother, by the way, named that school by winning a name contest as it was being built.) Woodside was my alma mater, and the school asked me to come back and speak at the sixth-grade graduation. I was in seventh grade at the time, and I have no idea what my topic was.

My second graduation address was at my own high school, also in Glen Burnie. I remember the topic of that speech: success. By that time in my life I was a practicing Christian and found subtle ways to speak of my faith before my peers. I have no idea if the speech was actually a success, but you can ask my wife Nancy; she was there.

Now, then, I am delivering my third-ever commencement speech, and it is once again at my own institution, and still in Maryland. Someone has clearly put me on the list of “only invite him to be the graduation speaker” if he is associated with a school in his home state as a student, alum, or teacher.... But however I got here, I am glad to be here.

David Brooks recently wrote this about rituals like commencements:

Rituals often mark doorway moments, when we pass from one stage of life to another. They acknowledge that these passages are not just *external* changes but involve *internal* transformation…. Rituals also force a pause. Many wise people self-consciously divide their life into chapters, and they focus on the big question of what this chapter is for. Rituals encourage you to be more intentional about life. People can understand their lives’ meaning only if they step out of their immediate moment....[[1]](#footnote-1)

My topic for this significant, transformational, ritual moment is “Parables of Communion.” Unfortunately, given the end-of-year busyness, I did not have time to prepare a speech. Fortunately for me, however, there has been a recent discovery—a hitherto unknown letter from Saint Paul. I have decided to read that letter to you.

**CHAPTER 1: Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ**, to the graduates, both seminarians and Ecumenical Institute students alike: Grace and peace to you! Congratulations on arriving at this moment! I thank God for you, for St. Mary’s Seminary & University, for your distinguished and hard-working faculty, and for your supportive family and friends. I do long to visit with you, but I have been providentially hindered from doing so. Hence this letter.

I have two gifts to offer you. First: you have no more exegesis papers to write! You can put away that Gorman book, *Elements of Biblical Exegesis*, or give it to a first-year student. Second, of course, is this letter; its theme is “parables of communion.”

**CHAPTER 2:** First, a little historical background. The phrase “parable of communion” comes from the writings and imagination of the ecumenical Taizé community in France. This past January, the two Dr. Gormans team-taught a course on the history, theology, and spirituality of this remarkable community, which I have heard about even in my present location. The third co-teacher was Brother John of Taizé, who was with you for almost a week of study and prayer. He is a remarkable person and theologian.

During the Second World War, a young Protestant man from Switzerland, Brother Roger Schutz, wanted to provide a place of hospitality and ministry to some of my fellow Jews and others in need, and to contribute to the reconciliation of the French and German peoples. With three others, he founded a small, intentional Christian community in the tiny village of Taizé, a community that, I hear, now numbers more than 100 brothers, some of whom are scattered throughout the world. Brother Roger called his little experiment a “parable of communion,” a “parable of community.”

This was obviously an intense, intentional community with a unique mission, a mission that has developed organically with the changing world. Since the 1960s, the ministry of Taizé has focused on young people (who come to the community by the thousands), on spiritual writings, and on prayerful music. (We apostles even listen to the music.) But it also includes ministry with the poor around the world, and the work of racial reconciliation, especially in the U.S., where it is still sorely needed.

**CHAPTER 3:** Brothers and sisters, the lovely phrase “parable of communion” makes me think of St. Mary’s Seminary & University.

In 1791, in the context of political upheaval and Christian martyrdom, the Sulpician fathers in Paris thought that creating a parable of communion there in Baltimore would be a sign of hope during an earlier era of violence in Europe. For more than 225 years now, St. Mary’s Seminary has been a place of formation and fraternal relationships—a parable of intense, intentional community that some of you have experienced now for quite some time. It is what I call *koinōnia*.

In 1968, following the Second Vatican Council and in a time of both hope and violence in Baltimore, St. Mary’s Seminary, encouraged by local ecumenical leaders, founded St. Mary’s Ecumenical Institute. For 50 years now, the E.I. has also been a parable of communion. I know that the E.I. is quite different from the seminary community, but it is nonetheless (as all of you E.I. graduates can attest) a place not only for *information* but also for *transformation*. As you learn from one another and pray together and eat together, you give real if imperfect expression to our Lord’s prayer for Christian unity, and to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s vision of a beloved community. (By the way, some years back I wrote a letter to the American churches that he read many times; you should read it too.)

When the Taizé community speaks of “communion,” they mean communion with Christ, with one another in community, and with others. The late Jean Vanier, founder of the l’Arche communities and a dear friend of Taizé, said, “Community is the place where each person grows towards interior freedom. It is the place where individual conscience, union with God, awareness of love, and capacity for gift and gratuity all grow.”

Communion, Brother Roger rightly said, also means you are no longer alone. You are loved—by God and by others. In other words, communion with God is not complete until it is *shared* with others. (On that score, read my first letter to the Corinthians!) That is why Brother John, in one of the books read in the course, speaks about friendship with *Christ* as including friendship with *others*. We are created to *be* friends and to *make* friends. I understand that all of you—faculty and seminarians and E.I. students—have experienced community at St. Mary’s even in your academic courses.

**CHAPTER 4: [*Your communities, going forward*]**

So what is the shape of such a community of friends, and how might an answer to that question be relevant to all of you as you graduate? I want us to briefly consider three virtues that I also wrote about in my letter to the Roman believers, where I summarized the shape of Christian community, especially in chapters 12-15. That summary, by the way, is in many ways my commentary on key aspects of the Scriptures: to love God and neighbor, and to see God’s goal for humanity achieved: all people worshiping the one true God. I believe that the values and practices I discuss in Romans resonate with those of the Taizé community—and with those of St. Mary’s Seminary & University.

I want to suggest that such a parable of communion will embody at least three critical characteristics.

**First, a parable of communion will be countercultural.**

If the word “countercultural” conjures up images of flower children or Woodstock, then please substitute another word: “alter-cultural”: A-L-T-E-R-cultural. What I mean by either word is that being a parable of communion entails a different way of being human. It means being a culture within a culture, though not segregated from it. As I say in my letter to the Romans: “Do not be conformed to this world [or, “age], but be transformed by the renewing of your minds....” Notice carefully what I do *not* say: I do not say, “Don’t be involved in this world” or “Don’t be concerned about this world.” No, not at all. That would be a very poor exegesis of my words! I do not advocate a sectarian approach to faith that cuts itself off from the world. Rather, I am speaking about a different sort of community with a unique vision, or worldview, or social imaginary, and a different set of practices and values—a different way of being in the world. It is what the German Catholic priest and scholar Gerhard Lohfink refers to as a “contrast-society.”[[2]](#footnote-2) It is what Scripture calls being “holy”: being different because God is holy—because God is different.

This sort of spirituality is sometimes described as “being *in* the world but not *of* the world.” That’s not wrong (in fact it is biblical), but it needs to be articulated more precisely. Being a parable of communion requires an *other-worldly* spirituality that is, actually, but paradoxically, *this-worldly*. As I wrote to the fledgling parable of communion in Colossae: we are raised and seated with Christ but still grounded in the nitty-gritty of this world, in which such concrete practices as costly forgiveness and grace-filled speech are necessary. This is a spirituality that openly engages the world and others without losing its core values and distinctive identity.

Which brings me to my second point about the shape of this parable of communion.

**Second, it will be cruciform, or cross-shaped.**

If you know me or my letters, you will not be surprised at this claim. Indeed, you would likely be shocked were it absent from my letter to you. I understand that one of my recent interpreters has more than 2,000 computer files containing some form of the word “cruciform.” That may be a bit excessive, but it is nonetheless appropriate. I called on the Christians in Rome to treat one another as Christ treated them in accepting suffering and death for *their* benefit, not his own. I encouraged them to *give* honor rather than to *accumulate* it; to esteem the *powerless* rather than the *powerful*; and to love in ways that “this age” can neither imagine nor practice. In fact, I said such things in *all* of my letters. Here I am simply following the teaching and example of Jesus, who called his followers to take up their cross, to welcome the weak, to seek service rather than to pursue power. In fact, I view human weakness as the normal venue of divine power. Listen to Jean Vanier again: “I am struck by how sharing our *weakness* and *difficulties* is more nourishing to others than sharing our *qualities* and *successes*.” [emphasis added]

But since this is the Easter season, I must also emphasize that this cruciform life, even this *weak* life, will be an *Easter-infused* cruciformity. That home computer I mentioned also contains nearly *3*,000 files with some form of the word “resurrection.” For this reason we should understand cruciformity as *resurrectional* cruciformity. It is paradoxically *life-giving* for those who *practice it* and for those who receive its *fruits*, both in the church itself and in the world.

The most powerful icon of such life-giving, cross-shaped living is the word-picture of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet in John 13. That image is meant both as an emblem of caring for one another and as a portrait of what the *missional* life of the Christian community looks like. It is in this text in John’s gospel that the community of disciples is called “apostle,” or sent one. In other words, I am not the only apostolic figure present this evening.

**Third, a parable of communion will be columbine.**

This word will no doubt surprise, if not shock, you. After all, in your cultural context the word “columbine” refers to “Columbine High School” in Columbine, Colorado where the horrible shooting and deaths of thirteen innocent people took place 20 years ago. And then, just two days ago there was another school shooting not far from Columbine. What I wrote to the Romans years ago is apparently still true today: “Their feet are swift to shed blood; ... and the way of peace they have not known. There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

 But the word “columbine” comes from the Latin word *columbinus*, which means “dovelike,” or “little dove.” I understand that the Italian word for dove is “colomba,” while the French word is “colombe.” Think “Christopher Columbus.” “Dovelike” is what I mean by “columbine”: full of peace, of shalom, of wholeness.

You still might think it a bit odd to use the word “columbine” in a positive light, given the connotation of the word in your culture. But I regularly borrow words and baptize them: gospel, Lord, slave, justice, and so on. Moreover, just recently a mother of one of the Columbine victims—pointing to the dictionary’s definition of “columbine” as “dovelike”—said she hopes Columbine-the-Colorado-community will be thought of, going forward, as a place not of violence, but of peace.

Parables of communion are also parables of peace—peace within, peace with God, peace with others. A city of violence, a culture of individualism on the one hand and of deep partisan division on the other, a country of “nones,” a world of unrest and war—all need parables of communion that can be places of hospitality and wholeness.

 The risen Jesus says, “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” It is why I urged the Roman believers, and I urge you, to practice the way of peace with *all*, not just among yourselves, because the kingdom of God consists of justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit, words of mine that are captured in one of the Taizé songs. And it is both why and how you can practice a different way of being human—a holy way, empowered by God’s Spirit, that is both *cruciform* and *columbine*.

**CHAPTER 5: [Conclusion]**

To conclude. Some of you may still be wondering why Taizé uses, and why I have used, the word “parable” to speak of communion: a parable of communion. Why a parable?

According to my fellow Jewish Scripture scholar A. J. Levine, parables “provoke, convict and amuse”—not only in the sense of “ha ha” but in bringing joy.[[3]](#footnote-3)

To be a parable of communion is—to quote one of your professors—to be a living exegesis, a living explanation, of the biblical narrative and of the God to whom it bears witness. That is obviously a huge responsibility. And it means, yes, that you still have much more exegesis to do. Now, however, your exegesis will not take the form of mere words; it will be an exegesis with soul—and with flesh and blood—that is, an exegesis with people, not merely with texts.

**So here is my charge to you:** Go forth from here, committed to working with the Holy Spirit in creating parables of communion: parishes, congregations, homes, small Christian communities, ecumenical mission projects, prayer groups in the neighborhood, multicultural churches, faith-sharing groups, study groups, interfaith discussions, and so on. Pray and work in such a way that, by God’s grace, these communities provoke, convict, and amuse—that is, bring *joy*.

1. David Brooks, writing in late April 2019 in the NY Times. Emphasis added. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *Jesus and Community*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)