

“The Centrality of the Seminary to the Life of Heaven”
Homily at the Mass of the Holy Spirit at St. Patrick Seminary
Celebrating the New Academic Year and the Oath of Fidelity of the New Rector

Introduction

In keeping with a venerable tradition, we celebrate this Votive Mass of the Holy Spirit to begin this new academic year. The lectionary offers a wide range of choices for readings for this Votive Mass. To be honest, though, I was not inclined to choose the reading from the Prophet Joel for the first reading, but when I recalled the natural phenomenon occurring in our part of the world today, I thought that maybe God was giving me a sign when the words of the prophecy jumped out at me: “the sun will be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood.”

Renewed Hope

Of course, we need to be careful not to read direct messages from God into natural phenomena, even one as rare and intriguing as a total eclipse of the sun. At best, such phenomena can serve as reminders to us of truths we already know from revelation, or as metaphors for helping us to read the signs of the times.

The Prophet Joel was doing precisely that in the prophecy we just heard proclaimed: his people were enduring a bitter plague of locusts and a drought, which were now coming to an end. Joel understood how the hardships of the times under which the people lived affected Temple worship. The cult of the Temple was a focal point of his preaching: “everyone shall be rescued who *calls on the name of the LORD*” is a reference to this. As the people emerged from this plague, Joel foresaw God doing something new for His people; thus, his reference to the “remnant”: “on Mount Zion there shall be a remnant ... and in Jerusalem survivors whom the LORD shall call.” That is, God will, indeed, come to the rescue of His people, to all those who remain true to Him, even if a small remnant.

Are we not now living in a similar time? We sense a darkness coming over our own land, as the light of faith is being eclipsed by a predominating nihilism that pretends that reality is determined by one’s willing it, which effectively translates into a self-indulgent

hedonism that exalts the myth of the “autonomous individual” and makes community relations and cooperation for the common good impossible, ending in a society in which might makes right. Yes, our society finds itself in a new sort of a spiritual and moral drought, as those values and virtues which we know – and used to be universally esteemed and promoted – as essential to the flourishing of the individual and of society as a whole, are now disparaged as being antiquated and oppressive, opposed to progress.

But just as those of us here in this geographical location today were outside of the “path of totality,” so this eclipse of faith in our society is only partial. Yes, God has left a remnant – and in my own observation, a rather large remnant, at least potentially so – of those who recognize truth, beauty and goodness, and are on fire with faith and love of the Lord Jesus and sharing that love and faith with others. Many others are searching for the same, and are open to being enlightened by the life of faith, if they just had someone to show them the way.

The Work of the Seminary

Which brings us to the work of this institution: seminaries must be a beacon of faith, a source of light for all of society but especially for those who accept and strive after a deep life of faith, seeking an ever deeper understanding and appropriation of the riches of the truth that Christ reveals to us. Seminaries must be signs of encouragement and support to them, and form men who will be such for the people they will, please God, one day serve as priests.

That is why the work of the seminary is so central to the life of the whole Church. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI pointed this out in receiving participants in a plenary assembly of the Congregation for Catholic Education, when he called seminaries “one of the most important [formative institutions for which the Congregation is responsible] for the life of the Church” (February 7, 2011). In an address he gave almost two years later (January 20, 2012) – shortly before the end of his Pontificate – to the professors and students of the diocesan seminary of Rome, he elaborated on this idea, saying:

Formation for the priesthood ... requires integrity, maturity, asceticism, constancy and heroic fidelity in all aspects. All this must be founded

upon a solid spiritual life animated by an intense relationship with God, as individuals and in the community, with a particular care for liturgical celebrations and frequent recourse to the Sacraments. Priestly life requires an ever-increasing thirst for sanctity, a clear ‘sensus Ecclesiae’ and an openness to fraternity without exclusion or bias.

This lofty mission is accomplished through an intricate and well-functioning network of those responsible for the life of the seminary: professors and formatters, administrators and workers, pastoral mentors and benefactors, all motivated by the mission of the seminary for God’s glory, not their own. This, then, is the oft-cited teaching of St. Paul in First Corinthians on the many members making up the one Body, which we heard about in our second reading. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank you all of you who, in these various roles, give yourselves so generously in commitment to our Seminary and to vocations to the Priesthood, furthering the mission of the Seminary and contributing to its success.

Yes, it requires a diversity of gifts, all working together in harmony for the health of the Body. To put it simply, it is the principle of teamwork. Now, imagine if everyone on the team were fighting to play the same position! How many games do you think that team is going to win? No, every position is unique and critical, from the pitcher to the right fielder. Just because the right fielder isn’t on the mound or behind the plate calling the pitches doesn’t mean that his job is any less important or critical to the overall success of the team! And so it is with the Church and her mission: every position is essential for the team to succeed; each one must discern his or her gifts given by God for God’s service and glory in their particular vocation, as both the path to their own sanctity and their contribution to the mission and the Church, building up the Body of Christ in strength and vibrancy.

With an Eye to Eternity

What happens here is great; indeed, there can be nothing greater: it no less than touches on eternity. The priests who are formed here will form the people of God in their people’s response to God’s call to salvation in their own lives. The formation the men

receive here, and the formation they will give to their people in the future, they will take with them into eternity.

Notice the appearance of our Lord to his apostles after the Resurrection, as recorded by St. John: because the apostles were slow to believe, “he showed them his hands and his side.” His wounds. And we know what happens in the next post-Resurrectional appearance: unlike the first time, Thomas was there this second time, and comes to believe when the Lord invites him to touch the wounds and see that they are real, and that it is truly him, risen from the dead in his human body. Notice: Jesus retained the wounds of the crucifixion *in his resurrected body*. Which means that he took those wounds with him into heaven, for all eternity. It is no less for us: what we suffer for him, all that we do for him, we will take with us into eternity. Those are the goods that last forever; everything else passes away.

What we take with us to the next life all begins here, in sacred space, in our worship. The prophet Joel understood the interconnection between worship secular events. But rather than allow what happens in the world to affect our life of faith, even invading what we do in this sacred space, as missionary disciples we are, on the contrary, called to take the faith we nourish here out into the world so that the world might be shaped by the light of faith.

Conclusion

And so, at the beginning of this academic year, we invoke the Holy Spirit, asking the Spirit to imbue and direct this august institution, and her leaders, with divine wisdom, that it might truly serve well the central task of priestly formation, and stand as a beacon of God’s truth and mercy to all: to those who are near and to those who are far off, drawing those who are in darkness – whether partial or total – into God’s wonderful light.

This is the worship of God in spirit and in truth, in the fullest sense of the word. I can do no better than to conclude with the words of Pope Benedict in that address he gave to the seminary of the Diocese of Rome: “Such worship,” he said, “must become ... a process whereby man himself, as a being gifted with reason, becomes worship and glorification of the living God.”