

Sunday: Ordinary 29 B

Mass for University Students

Holy Rosary Cathedral

20 October 2012

Dear Fathers Anicet, Rob, Fernando, Justin, Hien, Joseph, Bill; dear University faculty, staff and students; dear friends in Christ:

Introduction

It is always a great pleasure to celebrate with you this University Mass at the outset of the Year of Faith, when we gather to praise the Lord together and to recognize our common vocation as those involved in higher education called, like Blessed John Henry Newman, whose icon is situated in the sanctuary, to allow the radiant light of Gospel truth to shine on our studies, research and life. You know better than I do the tremendous but exciting challenges that confront those who take their faith seriously on a university or college campus and who want it to be relevant to what they are studying, how they are now living and to the vocation that they will embrace on their journey through life.

I certainly wish to thank those who have organized this Mass this evening: the Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministry of the Archdiocese, the SFU Catholic Chaplaincy, St. Mark's Catholic Campus Ministry at UBC, Redeemer Pacific College, and Catholic Christian Outreach - Vancouver. You give hope to me and to all of us through your apostolic initiatives on the campuses in the Archdiocese, providing sacramental opportunities for students and encouraging them to be

co-responsible for the Church's mission.

Now I would like you to think about your place in this vast and stupendous universe that is our present home. And against this backdrop of near mind-boggling infinity, I want you to consider, and even make your own, the famous prayer of St. Augustine: “You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”¹

Our Desire for God and for the Infinite²

First of all – and this is so simple that we might overlook it – is the fact that we are creatures of God. I know that the word “creature” might seem a little odd or old-fashioned, even perhaps demeaning in its connotation. People today prefer to think of human beings as complete in themselves, the absolute masters of their own destiny: “masters of the universe” as the Wall Street high rollers used to refer to themselves. To say that we are “creatures” is disdained, because it involves an essential reference to something else or, rather, Someone else. And that Someone cannot be managed or manipulated by us.

But the very first truth of our existence – the fact that “I am” – is that we are dependent on a Creator, the One who wanted, created and loved us into life. Unfortunately, it is this dependence from which modern and

¹ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, I, I, I.

² Much of this section is adapted from Benedict XVI, Message to the Rimini Meeting of Communion and Liberation (12 August 2012).

contemporary men and women seek to free themselves. But they are mistaken. It is precisely because we are created in the image and likeness of God (cf. Gen 1:26-27) that we have such great dignity: we have been called to life to enter into a relationship with Life itself, into a dialogue with God.

Essential to our being creatures, however, is our freedom – and that freedom can be abused. Following the pattern established by our first parents, who violated their relationship with God, people through the ages, right down to us, have been tempted to believe that they could do without the Creator. Nonetheless, even after our sin, “human beings are left with this all-consuming desire for this dialogue, almost as if the Creator himself had branded their soul and their flesh with it.”³ Every fibre of our flesh and our soul is made to find its fulfilment in God. That’s just who we are.

Moreover, this aspiration for the infinite in the human heart is indelible. Even if God is rejected or denied, the thirst for the infinite that dwells in you and your colleagues, indeed all men and women everywhere, is not slaked. Instead a frantic, sterile search for “false infinities” begins, ones that can satisfy them at least for a moment. Unbeknown to themselves, they are reaching out for the Infinite – but in

³ Benedict XVI, Message to the Rimini Meeting of Communion and Liberation (12 August 2012).

mistaken directions: in drugs, in a disorderly sexuality, in immersion in social communications, in the absolutizing of science and technology, in success at every cost and in deceptive forms of so-called spirituality. Even the good things which God has created as paths that can lead to him often risk becoming idols that replace the Creator.

Recognizing that we have been made *by* God and *for* God entails our turning away from all the “empty promises” that seduce and enslave us. Truly to understand who we really are and the true source of our dignity means that we must acknowledge – and not begrudgingly but joyfully – that we are creatures, dependent on God.

The possibility of a truly free, full and happy life is linked to recognizing this dependence — which in our inmost depths is the joyous discovery of being God’s children (cf. I Jn 3:1). The fundamental point, therefore, is not to try to eliminate dependence which is part and parcel of being a human being, but to direct that dependence to the One who alone can truly set us free.

Now let us see what light the Sunday readings shed on what I have been saying.

Light from Hebrews 4:15

Once we recognize our dependence on our Creator, it might seem that an unbridgeable gap opens between us: between our fragile mortality and the sheer greatness of Almighty God. Is God distant from us in his

infinity and thus unconcerned, even indifferent, to the plight of his creation and to each of us as individuals? Many philosophers have wrestled with such questions, but their answers inevitably come up short. Why? Because, as the Second Vatican Council put it so succinctly, “The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For [only Christ] fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”⁴

In Christ, the infinite God took a finite form. We just heard proclaimed in the Letter to the Hebrews: “For we do not have a high priests who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15).

The seemingly unbridgeable abyss between the finite and the infinite was filled by the Incarnation, from the moment in Nazareth when the Word became flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary. The eternal and infinite Son of God entered into time, immersing himself in human finiteness. God did not only appear as if he were a man, but he truly became one of us, Emmanuel, the “God-with-us” who was not content with looking down kindly upon us from the throne of his glory, but plunged in person into human history, becoming “flesh” or, in other words, a fragile reality like ourselves, conditioned by time and space (cf.

⁴ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

Jn 1:14).⁵

For God, therefore, nothing is trivial or insignificant in the history of the world or in each one's journey through life. We are made for an infinite God who became flesh, who took our humanity to raise it up to himself. Thus it is that everything, every human relationship, every joy, as well as every difficulty, is not merely a passing experience swallowed up in nothingness but an opportunity for deepening our relationship with God. Our finiteness reaches out and touches the Infinite. His voice continually calls us and invites us to discover that adherence to him is what fulfils the humanity he has given us.

Light from the Gospel

When we turn to this evening's Gospel we hear a question posed by two of Jesus' closest disciples, James and John, which seems to contradict the notion of the disciple's dependence on God. They rush up to Jesus and say bluntly and with childlike confidence, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you" (Mk 10:35). And the Lord, with his patience no doubt tried at their lack of understanding of his teaching, nonetheless kindly replies: "What is it you want me to do for you?" (Mk 10:36). Their answer? "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory" (Mk 10:37).

The Apostles didn't want the suffering Jesus had spoken about

⁵ Cf. Benedict XVI, General Audience (5 June 2005).

moments before (cf. Mk 10:33-34), but what they imagined to be his glory. Jesus responds that they don't know what they are asking, but they persist. They didn't understand what their dependence on the God who became man entailed.

Jesus had to spell it out for them: what it meant to with him “in glory.” They would have to drink from his cup; that is, the cup of suffering which Jesus prayed might pass from him (cf. Mk 14:36). And they would have to be “baptized” or washed in the blood of his crucifixion.

What this interchange then leads to, in light of the indignation of the other “ten” Apostles who thought that Jesus was somehow privileging James and John, is a teaching on what dependence on God means in the life of a disciple. Jesus points out to his Apostles a completely different conduct from that of the rulers of the Gentiles who “lord it over” their subjects (cf. Mk 10:42): “But it is not so among you” (Mk 10:42). His community is to follow another rule, another logic, another model: “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all” (Mk 10:43-44).

Once again we return to the fundamental point. God's greatness, revealed in the humanity of his Son, Jesus, is not meant to overwhelm or crush us, but to save us: “For the Son of Man came not to be served but to

serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). True greatness is not shown by domination but by service. *Diaconia*, being a servant, is the fundamental way of life of Jesus, and therefore of the disciple and of the Christian community.⁶

It all boils down simply to this: to recognize that we are creatures made in God’s image means that we should live our dependence on him as a gift and not as a burden, as a service to him and to others, a service which leads each one of us, in his or her own way, to the foot of the Cross.

Conclusion

As we continue now our Eucharist this evening, let us ask the good Lord to open our minds to understand more clearly the almost “unthinkable closeness of God”⁷ and to live more resolutely as disciples of his Son, imitating his life as those who want to serve and give their lives for the sake of him and of our brothers and sisters.

And may Mary, Queen of the Holy Rosary, continue to guide us, protect us and watch over us on our way!

✦ J. Michael Miller, CSB
Archbishop of Vancouver

⁶ Cf. Benedict XVI, Homily, Public Consistory for the Creation of New Cardinals (20 November 2010).

⁷ Benedict XVI, Homily, Ash Wednesday (22 February 2012).