

Baccalaureate Sermon, Carroll, May 6, 2006

Fr. Thomas R. Flynn - The Cathedral of St. Helena

Dear graduates of the Carroll class of 2006. Your Liberal Arts education has given you a sense of the power of words. How they can generate confidence or suspicion, peace or war. How racist or sexist words can create a climate of disrespect and implicit violence among people. In contrast, we have just heard the striking words of St. Paul writing from Greece to the young community of Jewish and gentile Christians in Rome:

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. But how shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe unless they have heard of him? And how can they hear unless there is someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent? ... Faith, then, comes through hearing, and what is heard is the word of Christ. (Romans 10:13-14)

Paul's words remind us how important it is that we "hear" the word, that we experience Christ's love, that it touch our hearts, that we make it our own. *For each of us is here today because someone else believed.* That has always been a sobering thought for me. It first struck me when I was having a Seder Supper with a Jewish family with which I've grown especially close over the years: the father reminding the children at table of the tradition they are continuing. And we this morning at the altar table being reminded by our Father Bishop of Jesus' words: "Do this in memory of me." Paul's words written less than thirty years after Jesus' public ministry have echoed through the centuries to reach us this morning in this beautiful Cathedral, which itself bears witness to the faith of those who labored here before us. Each of us is here because someone else believed. Faith comes through hearing and there was a moment, an occasion, perhaps an extended relationship, maybe something so intangible as an "atmosphere" of reverence, when that message, that "word" touched us and we resonated in faith.

I would ask you to recall that person or those persons whose "word" conveyed the reality of Christ's message of love and forgiveness to you; that made you glow with the realization of being the object of such love. Perhaps it was a parent or a sibling, possibly a friend or a teacher—maybe a teacher here at Carroll. (I can think of several who played that role for me when I was a student here.) Many of you, I'm sure, will think of Fr. Gene Peoples in that respect. Recall the admonition of St. Francis: Preach the Gospel at all times, sometimes even by speaking! Think of that person or persons whose courageous authenticity enabled you to glimpse the dignity of a truly Christian soul. Each of us can be a grace for the other. Indeed, since "grace" means "gift," each of us is a gift to the other. The "word" you've received at Carroll is a gift meant to fortify your life with meaning.

Many years ago one of my students came to me after class for some practical advice. She was a Sophomore and deciding on a major. She confided: "I can't decide whether to go pre-med, pre-law, or switch to the Business School"—apparently her only conceivable options. "I don't know what will make me happy," she explained. I responded that she had asked the wrong question. She should have asked how she can become the sort of person who is *capable* of being happy. Failing that, she will be a disillusioned Doctor, a cynical Lawyer or a miserable C.E.O.

The gift of your education in an institution that fosters the values to prepare you "not just for school but for life," as Carroll's motto reads—that gift is a grace to be reinforced by being shared. That's the difference between material and spiritual goods. Unlike the former, the latter are enhanced by being shared. When you give a needy person a five dollar bill, you're

out five bucks. But when you share it with them out of respect and love, you've grown in your capacity to love. The increase is yours. "What you received as a gift" admonishes St. Paul, "give freely."

The word we have received is the "word of life," a promise already partially realized but still to be completed in a joy beyond our imagining, a love that knows no end. That is the hope, the joyful hope of which the liturgy is about to speak this morning, the hope that gives meaning and direction to our lives. That is the hope which a religious education conveys as its richest legacy to its graduates. It is a hope that sees us through the adversities of a lifetime. It shows us where true happiness lies. It's our gift to pass on generously to others. But a word of caution: that "wisdom" is not of this world, as St. John warns us.

Three months before the Berlin Wall came down, I had the opportunity to visit the only Catholic seminary in what was still Communist East Germany. The occasion was a gathering of the alumni of that school for a week of continuing education. At a break in the lectures, I was walking around the courtyard of that venerable institution where Father Martin Luther had once taught scripture with an old priest whose parish had been cut off from its Bavarian diocese by the Iron Curtain, leaving him and his congregation for decades a distinct minority in East Germany. As we walked along, I noticed the tombs of two previous bishops of the Erfurt diocese, one whose dates included the Nazi period and the other who served under the Communists. The inscription on the coat of arms of each made reference to suffering and the cross. These men knew what they were getting into. I turned to the old priest and remarked: "It must be difficult to be a Christian in the East Zone." The old man paused a moment and responded: "*And where is it easy?*" I suddenly realized how foolish my question had been. My assumption was that it was easier in America, of course. After all, we had many more TV channels than they did, our streets were in better shape and our automobiles far superior to those little "Trabants" that chugged along the East German roads powered by their washing-machine engines in the back—and it was easier to be a Christian!

What a foolish assumption. Easier to be a "Cultural Christian," perhaps; someone who conforms to external behavior of the respectable majority. But not easier to be an authentic Christian whose belief translates into action. I recall Msgr. Joseph Mavsar of East Helena, who had fled the Communists of Tito's Yugoslavia, on a return trip being told by the Bishop that he almost wished the Communists were back in control. "Why on earth would you wish for that?" Joe asked. "Because then you knew who the real Christians were!" was the Bishop's reply. Practicing Catholics were deprived of teaching positions and government posts. They paid a price for their faith. For authentic Christianity is *counter cultural*. That's the scandal of Christianity and why the ancient Romans called us "atheists." We are uncompromising in our opposition to idolatry—whatever those idols might be. That includes, but is scarcely limited to, the worship of money, of career, of the State—of anything in the pursuit of which we are willing to sacrifice the love of God. That is Carroll's gift to you. And it is your gift to your generation, starting with that part of the world where your gift makes the greatest difference.

Liberally educated, not merely trained (training will come now), you've come to recognize that life-giving word which is your heritage and your trust. Each of us is here because someone else was faithful. Please God, your families and friends, your co-workers and acquaintances will recognize that faithfulness in you, and those who follow will thank you for it.

May the joy, which is the gift of the Spirit, permeate your lives on this great day and always.

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