

Homily for the Mass of the Holy Spirit and Celebration of Assumption University

Chapel of the Holy Spirit, September 6, 2020

Very Rev. Dennis Gallagher, A.A.

Scripture readings: Ezekiel 33:7-9; Romans 13: 8-10; Matthew 18: 15-20

"If your brother sins [against you], go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have won over your brother. If he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that 'every fact may be established on the testimony of two or three witnesses.' If he refuses to listen to them, tell the church. If he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector. Amen, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, [amen,] I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them."

I hesitate to say this, but the Gospel today is about protocols. Oh no, not that. Maybe we should agree to retire this word from the language once the pandemic has left us.

But these are protocols not for the purpose of keeping people safe from physical disease, but for keeping intact the bonds of charity that bind the members of the Christian community to one another. Those bonds have been at least temporarily weakened by one member's sinning against another.

So how do you proceed, what are the protocols? It's quite interesting how specific this is There are three steps: first, take up the matter, one on one with the person himself; if no reconciliation comes from that, you bring in one or two others as witnesses; and if nothing comes from that, then you bring the matter to the whole church.

A couple of thoughts on this ...

At each of these levels, an appeal must be made to something that all the parties involved understand as binding them together. This is a community that is centered in Christ, who is the measure for everything that takes place in the community.

The other thought is in the form of a question: why go to this bother for one brother who has sinned? Through this rather elaborate protocol? Because much is at stake here, there's a great good that needs to be upheld: that's the unity in the community and by extension the good of the offending brother whose own well-being is tied to being a full member of this community.

So, does this have anything to do with what we are celebrating today, Assumption's becoming a university? Well, let's see… Unity… university…. There must be something.

I'm struck by a certain irony. If someone asks you why Assumption qualifies to be a university, you say, well, Assumption has a number of different schools now and a nursing program and several other new programs. So, it sounds more like what we mean by a university. The irony is that we've become a uni-versity by dividing ourselves into parts.

So it's a fair question to ask: what is it that unites our collective efforts as faculty, students, administrators, trustees? What makes us a university, not according to the conventional meaning of the word, but something closer to its original and essential meaning? What is it that we can appeal to that gives substance to our claim to be a university?

I think the answer to that is that we are all seekers after truth. At its heart, Assumption university is a community of learners bound together by a search for the truth. This is our common enterprise, this is what unifies us and gives meaning to all of our efforts both inside and outside the classroom. That search may look different according to the modes of inquiry in our respective fields of study, but it remains the defining character of our life as a university.

And it means something. It's not rhetorical candy. If we are true to it, it distinguishes us, sets us apart from two of the most powerful currents in our time, both of which render unnecessary the painstaking effort to seek the truth. One is relativism, which effectively denies that there is a truth to be found; the second, different forms of ideology which impose a meaning on reality

before it has a chance to reveal itself to us.

Catholic liberal education is a great adventure that invites us to reverently attend to the mystery of human existence. It has an intrinsic connection to what we are doing here today, coming together to receive that which we cannot give ourselves, with the recognition that most everything truly important in our lives is given to us, which we receive without asking, and often enough without deserving.

So today we are bound together by a celebration of our common enterprise, the educational mission that has been entrusted to us. We're also bound together by a great sense of gratitude. As someone whose life has been connected to this place for a long time, my mind's eye travels far and takes in hundreds of students for whom an Assumption education has meant the world. For so many of them, this is the place where they have found their life's work, met their spouses, were touched by a love of learning, and set on a path to thoughtful and generous lives. For the teachers who helped them to see more clearly the painful beauty of the world, the heights and depths of the human condition, and the wisdom contained in our religious tradition; to the classmates and friends who accompanied them along the way; to parents and benefactors who made possible such an education, we give thanks.

We give thanks above all to the God who has guided Assumption from the beginning, from its founding by a small group of French Assumptionists in 1904, through its years of educating the sons of Franco-American families in New England, through the devastating tornado of 1953, the building of this campus on Salisbury St., through its period of growth, its economic crises, and here today in this particular moment of trial. As we invoke the power of the Holy Spirit on the year ahead, we ask also for the protection of our Lady of Assumption and her maternal care for us. May she keep watch over Assumption University and keep her safe. Through her intercession, may God keep us always humble in his service, so that Christ may be formed in us .