

OPENING OF SCHOOL YEAR, 2014
Thursday of 20th Week in Ordinary Time; August 21

When you see red vestments at Mass, you normally assume that the Church is commemorating a martyr, the red symbolizing the blood that the martyr shed. However, today we have red vestments for a different reason. The prayers are those for a Mass of the Holy Spirit, and the color red symbolizes the fire of the Spirit's love, that love of which St. Paul speaks in his letter to the Romans when he writes that "the love of God has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). There is a foreshadowing of this great truth in our first reading, from the prophet Ezekiel, through whom the Lord says: "I will give you a new heart and place a new spirit within you, taking from your bodies your stony hearts and giving you natural hearts" (Ezek 36:26). In the ancient Hebrew language, the word that we normally translate into English as "heart" refers not only—or even primarily—to the seat of our emotions but also to our intellect, our power of rational thought, and at times even to our entire personality. This means something remarkable: that when we pray for the grace or aid of the Holy Spirit, as we are doing at this Mass, we are not merely praying for a renewal of the way we *feel* but also of the way we *think* and, indeed, of our very *being*. We are asking to be totally transformed. And one of the key aspects of our faith is that the God-given power to effect such transformation is *always* offered to us. We have only to cooperate with that offer, to be willing to have our lives turned more and more in a Godward direction.

This is actually what our Gospel reading is all about as well, although its parable is harder to interpret. In fact, as written it almost sounds unfair. We hear of all of these people suddenly brought in from the highways and byways to partake of the blessings of the kingdom, which is here likened to a wedding feast, and then one poor guy is kicked out because he isn't wearing a wedding garment. You might well be asking yourselves: Well, how could anyone

suddenly brought into the banqueting hall from the streets even be expected to be wearing the right kind of clothing? A perfectly good question! The solution to this conundrum, as you might have guessed, is that what we have here are what were originally two separate parables, rather artificially brought together as one because they both concern a wedding banquet. The second of the two is really saying that it's not enough just to be offered something wonderful by God, symbolized by the wedding feast, for we also have to be rightly disposed, symbolized by having on the right kind of clothing. After all, if you were invited to some special celebration, perhaps the wedding of an older brother or sister, you wouldn't be welcome if you came dressed in a torn T-shirt and dirty jeans. That would be a total insult to the person who kindly and generously extended to you the invitation.

Against that background, let's now get down to the more practical, nitty-gritty matter of how all of you students should be *prepared* for the school year just beginning. If that key word "heart" can refer not just to our feelings but also to our intellect and even to our entire person, then you should rightly relish and welcome the opportunity to grow in all sorts of ways during the coming year. Some of that will involve developing your body, your physical strength and coordination, through our school's multifaceted program of intramural and interscholastic sports. Some of it will involve developing your social skills and simply having fun at such events as the school picnics and dances and outings of various sorts. (Indeed, some of you new students had a wonderful outing just last night at Nationals Park, where you saw one more nail-biting win by that remarkable team.) But most of all it will involve developing your mind through the various courses you will be taking. To do that well obviously requires dedication and discipline, but it is also something that you should positively *want*. As you surely know, in some parts of the world young men and women have little or no opportunity to have a good education—or any education

at all. Some are put to work in the fields at an age younger than any of you. Even worse, as we know from the news in recent days and weeks, some are so caught up in war-torn regions that they are living in refugee camps or, worst of all, are being brutally murdered just because they aren't of the so-called "correct" religion or ethnic group. How different are things here. It is truly a privilege for us on the faculty to be able to teach in a school like ours, just as it is a privilege for you students to learn from the remarkable range of courses available. I will briefly refer to some of the courses you can take—with apologies in advance to those of my fellow faculty whose disciplines I won't have mentioned.

Earlier this year, the journal *Scientific American* published excerpts from a book titled *Our Mathematical Universe*, by Professor Max Tegmark of M.I.T. At one point, he explains what it was that led him to become a mathematical physicist. And even though only a small percentage of you might follow him into that particular field, all of us can surely relate in one way or another with these words of his: "When our human imagination first got off the ground and started deciphering the mysteries of space, it was done with mental power rather than rocket power. I find this quest for knowledge so inspiring that I decided to join it and become a physicist, and I've written this book because I want to share these empowering journeys of discovery, especially in this day and age when it's so easy to feel powerless."¹ You yourselves can share those journeys of discovery through courses we offer not only in mathematics but also in earth science, physics, chemistry, biology, computer science, and introduction to engineering.

Another whole world opens up with courses in the fine arts, languages, and literature. The Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature four years ago, once expressed in a very inspiring way what we gain from reading great novels, poems, and plays. In his words, literature "has been, and will continue to be, one of the common

denominators of the human experience through which living creatures recognize themselves. As readers of Cervantes, Shakespeare, Dante, or Tolstoy, we understand each other and feel ourselves members of the same species. We learn what we share as human beings,... Nothing better protects a human being against the stupidity of prejudice, racism, xenophobia, religious or political sectarianism, and exclusivist nationalism than literature.... [And perhaps] the greatest contribution of literature to human progress is to remind us (without intending to do so in the majority of cases) that the world is badly made; that those ... who pretend the contrary are lying; and that the world could be better, more like the worlds that our imagination and our language are able to create.... Good reading leads to the formation of critical and independent citizens who will not be manipulated and who are endowed with a permanent spiritual mobility and a vibrant imagination.”² To be able to read such works in their original language, whether it be Latin, French, Spanish, Arabic, or whatever, is a huge benefit that becomes available as you learn some of these languages in our school.

I should also say something about the field in which I teach, religion or theology. Sadly, sometimes one gets the impression that religion courses are mainly about a lot of do’s and don’ts, but in fact they allow you to ponder questions that really matter, issues such as those named in a famous document of the Second Vatican Council almost exactly fifty years ago. In the opening section of their Declaration of the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, the bishops at that council wrote the following: “People expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir our hearts: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what is sin? Whence comes suffering, and what purpose might it serve? What is the way to true happiness? What are death, judgment, retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate

inexpressible mystery that encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?”³ These are questions that all of us should be pondering.

As you may know, the very word “school” comes from a Greek and Latin term that connotes leisure, and in the best sense of the word, a school should be a place of leisure. This doesn’t at all mean doing nothing, but rather having the time and space to think about the things that really matter. Some of you may have seen a book review in last Sunday’s *Washington Post*, a review of a work by a prominent professor of English at a major Ivy League university who was lamenting the lack of that leisure at his and similar institutions, where he said many of the faculty are “so hyper-specialized that they never push students to grapple with big questions.” Instead, we might say, their students are channeled to learn “more and more about less and less.”

It’s not for me or any of us to say whether that professor’s diagnosis of his own institution is fair, but I trust it could not be said of us. Instead, we intend to offer what he described as the real heart of a genuine education. In his words, a good school offers you the opportunity “to stand outside the world for a few years ... and contemplate things from a distance,” [and from that distance] “to start to answer for yourself that venerable pair of questions: what is the good life and how should I live it?”⁴ We faculty are here to assist and guide you in that search. At the beginning of this new school year, I wish all of you an exhilarating and indeed joyful journey with “a new heart” and “a new spirit.”

1 Max Tegmark, "Is the Universe Made of Math?" *Scientific American* (Jan. 10, 2014), online at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article/is-the-universe-made-of-math-excerpt/> (accessed Aug. 21, 2014).

2 Mario Vargas Llosa, "Ergo Literature," *Georgetown Magazine* (Summer 2001), 32 & 34.

3" Vatican II, *Nostra Aetate*, no. 1.

4" William Deresiewicz, *Excellent Sheep*, quoted by Carlos Iozada, *Washington Post*, August 17, 2014.