

Commencement Address: WTU Graduation, Friday, May 7, 2010:

Congratulations to you, our graduates, your families, loved ones, and supporters

- the faculty, administration, and trustees of our school are proud of you, believe in you, support, and encourage you, both today and in the future.
- on occasion some of you may have gotten the impression that the faculty were more like adversaries than helpers or friends, like opponents to be overcome or avoided, but that was never the case: rather we have always known what's best for you. . . . And if you believe that, there's a bridge in Brooklyn that I'd like to interest you in.

The culmination of an educational program, the public awarding of an academic degree, in our culture is viewed as a major milestone in our lives; its one of the events that stays with us, mentioned over and over again in our personal résumés, on job applications, on self-descriptions of all sorts.

I hope that this occasion is such a "life marker" for you, memorable, perhaps even a turning point. But let me try to make it a transforming moment in another sense. I want take this occasion to influence your spiritual life, your theological attitude, your practice of prayer – not radically, just a little – in a Spirit direction.

This is in harmony with our run-up to the great feast of Pentecost, our celebration of the outpouring of the Spirit, and in harmony with the hymns at this morning's liturgy, "Come, O Spirit of God," and "Come Holy Ghost, Creator Blest."

The Holy Spirit is down-played, neglected, given relatively short shrift in the Roman Catholic tradition, especially in relationship to the Son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. The Spirit is sometimes referred to as "the forgotten God." This comparative neglect is called our "pneumatological deficit."

The Second Vatican Council went a long way toward making up that theological deficit, but it still remains at many other levels of our church, including our disciplinary rules and practices, our popular piety, and our personal consciousness.

[An illustration of the down-grading of the Spirit in the liturgy: when renewing our baptismal promises, we respond in faith ("I do") to separate statements about the Father and the Son, but the Holy Spirit doesn't get equal and separate billing, but instead:

"Do you believe in the Holy spirit, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting." The Spirit is reduced to one among a bunch of truths.]

What we need, each of us and our communities, is a greater awareness of the Spirit, a lively attentiveness to the Spirit, beyond an openness, rather an active seeking, searching, asking, begging – both as communities and as individuals – for the assistance of the Holy Spirit.

Our church has profound convictions about the Holy Spirit's areas of influence, zones of activity in the life of the church, and in the life of its members:

In each category I'll offer a "proof-text," from the New Testament or the II Vatican Council, and then a suggestion about attending to the Spirit.

- 1) The Spirit animates the church, gives the Body of Christ life and movement, like the soul does to the body, and just as the Spirit did for Jesus. As the angel explains in Matthew's annunciation: "It is through the holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her" (Mt 1,20). The Spirit is the vital source of the church's activity and of ours as well.

Why is it that when we are mired down in a meeting that seems completely lifeless, everyone either turned off or nodding off, that we don't think of calling a brief time-out for a prayer to the Holy Spirit, the giver of life?

- 2) The Spirit is the source of the church's communion, the source and seal of its unity and cohesion. "Communion" names the graced connection between we the baptized to the Triune God and to one another. Communion is of the very essence of the church, and it comes from the holy Spirit.

Yves Congar once wrote that when there is division in the church, it is a sign that the Spirit has departed – rancorous discord, bitter opposition that sometimes can sunder a parish, a pastoral council, a ministerial team. Why is it that we don't realize that we must implore the Spirit to return so that unity and harmony can be restored?

- 3) The Spirit sanctifies the church and its members. All grace is given by the Holy Spirit. All of our worship is carried out in the Spirit: to the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. We, the faithful, receive the Holy Spirit in every one of the sacraments.

Jesus said in the Jerusalem temple at the feast of tabernacles: "Let anyone who thirsts, come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the scripture says, rivers of living water will flow from within him. He said this in reference to the Spirit that those who came to believe in him were to receive" (Jn 7, 37-39).

We think of our sacramental events as encounters with Christ, and so they are, but are we equally conscious that they are also vital contacts with the Holy Spirit?

- 4) The Spirit preserves the church in truth. The Spirit makes "the living voice of the gospel ring out in the church . . . leading those who believe into the whole truth" causing the message of Christ to dwell in them in all its richness (DV 8). The Spirit arouses and sustains a "sense of faith" in the universal body of the faithful, so that they cannot be mistaken in belief (LG 12).

Jesus said in his “farewell discourse,” that when the Spirit comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide us to all truth (Jn 16, 12). The holy Spirit that the Father will send in my name – he will teach you everything and remind you of all that I told you (Jn 14, 26).

Do we invoke the help of the Spirit of truth when we’re trying to understand a scripture passage or interpret a point of doctrine or compose a homily or outline a lesson plan? [Our president reminded us this morning that the word of God is the vehicle of the Spirit. Sometimes we need to ask for driving instructions.]

- 5) The Spirit leads and guides the church. The Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan, and then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the desert (Jn 3, 22, 4, 1). Jesus spoke of his mission when in the synagogue at Nazareth in terms of Isaiah’s prophecy:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord” (Lk 4, 17-19).

As with Jesus, so with the church; we in the church, are directed by the Holy Spirit in our pilgrimage toward the Father’s kingdom (*GS* 1).

Do we consciously and actively seek the Spirit’s guidance when making decisions, when initiating new projects, when taking on new responsibilities?

- 6) The Spirit builds up the church by means of the Spirit’s gifts. The Spirit apportions gifts to each person individually as the Spirit wills, and among the faithful of every rank the Spirit distributes special graces by which they are rendered fit and ready to undertake the various tasks and offices which help the renewal and building up of the church, as Paul wrote to the Corinthians: “To each individual is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (1 Cor 12, 7).

Do we ask explicitly for the Spirit to show us how to “mix and match” our gifts with those around us: in our marriage, on our ministry team, in our parish, in our religious community?

- 7) The Holy Spirit is God’s pledge for the future. The church journeys on its pilgrim path through history under the guidance of the Spirit, looking forward as well as backward. Christ, when lifted up from the earth, sent his life-giving Spirit down on his disciples, and through the Spirit he constituted the church as a sacrament of salvation. Its earthly project is advanced through the mission of the Holy Spirit and continues by means of the Spirit. The Spirit points to the future, and constantly reminds the church that everything is provisional as we await the fulfillment of all things in Christ.

Do we dare to place our future, our hopes in the hands of the Spirit? Do we ask for the Spirit’s help when looking forward?

If we are truly convinced these actions of the Holy Spirit in relation to the church and to each

one of us, as the New Testament and the Second Vatican Council assure us,, then should we not make the Holy Spirit a central part of our spiritual life, of our prayer life, of our faith reflections?

Say “Amen.”