

Sunday, August 11, 2013
Our Lady of the Alleghenies Shrine – Loretto
Mass for College Students
Homily

It's great to see all of you here this evening in this beautiful place. This Mass is especially for our young men and women who are returning to college by the end of this month and especially those who are going to college for the first time.

Where are all of our new and veteran college students? You know I love you and that's why we are celebrating this special Mass to pray with you and for you. Let's hear it for all of our college students.

As I was reflecting on the readings, a few words caught my attention and I would like you college students to pay attention to them.

- The Book of Wisdom mentions
 - Knowledge and
 - Courage
- The Letter to the Hebrews talks about
 - Faith
 - Promise
 - Trustworthiness and
 - Obedience
- In St. Luke's Gospel, Jesus talks about being
 - Prepared

The word *knowledge* has an obvious connection to this Mass for all of you college students since much of your life at this time is devoted to increasing your knowledge, especially in regard to your major area of study in pursuit of your college degree.

I am sure that you know that having a lot of *knowledge* is not the same as being smart. Which reminds me of a few observations from younger siblings of college students.

1) Rachel, age 12 said to her friend Allison, "My older brother just graduated from high school and he thinks he's so smart. Mom told him to

get three packages of hot dogs and buns for a cookout with some of his friends. He is not going to look so smart when he gets home from the store.” Allison asked, “Why is that?” Rachel said, “He doesn’t know that hot dogs come in packages of 10 and the buns come in 8 packs.”

2) Eileen, age 7, said to a friend, “My sister is going to college and she’s going to be involved in campus ministry.” Her friend asked what that means. Eileen said, “I think she will be doing church stuff at college.” Her friend Amy said, “I hope she knows that you should never try to baptize a cat.”

3) Sarah, age 12 told one of her friends that she went along with her mom and older sister who wanted to get stuff for her dorm room. Sarah’s friend said, “I bet that was boring.”

Sarah replied, “Actually, it was quite interesting. My sister is supposed to be so much smarter since she’s going to college, but she forgot the number one rule when you are trying to get mom to buy the stuff you want.” Her friend asked, “What’s that?” Sarah said, “If you want a kitten, start out by asking mom for a horse.”

4) Michael, who is age 13, told one of his friends, “My older brother was home from college this summer and one day he borrowed the car without asking. Michael’s friend asked, “What happened?” Michael said, “Apparently my brother doesn’t know that when your Dad is upset and asks, ‘Do I look stupid?’ you’re not supposed to answer that question.”

All of you young men and women who will be back in college in a few days are obviously smart enough to be accepted as a student at this next level of your education. Many, if not most of you, are motivated to continue your education because a college degree will put you in a better position to find a job.

But the reading from the Book of Wisdom reminds us that there is more to it than that. It says that God’s people found great *courage* in facing the fear, anxiety, and uncertainty of the Passover of the Lord, because of their certain *knowledge* in the oaths they put in their faith.

Taking an oath means making a commitment. The Jewish people were committed to God, even though it was a scary thing to experience the Passover of the Lord because it meant

- Persecution for those who did not keep the faith and their oath, or
- Salvation for those who kept their oath of faith in God.

During your years of college studies, you will probably experience moments of anxiety about an important test, or uncertainty about the choices you are making or need to make; and you may even experience fear if you failed because you did not study or you did not start a term paper until the day before it was due.

But like the Jewish people remembered in the Book of Wisdom, you can have ***courage*** if you keep the faith and keep the oath, the promise that you made to God. Your parents and godparents made that promise for you when you were baptized as infants. Now you must do your part.

And you need to remember that God will do his part in helping you and being with you at every moment of your life. Every time we celebrate the Holy Eucharist, the sacrifice of the Mass, we celebrate the Passover of our Lord Jesus Christ, who suffered and died on the cross for our eternal salvation.

Jesus kept his oath to do the will of his Father so that right here and now, or wherever you find yourselves in life, including a new college campus, new ways of learning, and new roommates and friends, you can find ***courage*** and you can get the most out of those experiences by keeping your oath of ***faith***.

I know that all of you college students have high hopes. Look around you here this evening and you should be able to see that a lot of other people have high hopes for you as well. We are here to pray for you and with you.

The Letter to the Hebrews reminds us of the connection between ***faith*** and ***hope***. It says, “Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen.”

These words are meant for you today because you are on a quest for ***knowledge*** during your years of college study. In your studies you will be challenged to seek the truth in historical facts or verifiable scientific formulas or philosophical theories.

And you are well aware that these arts and sciences seek to find knowledge and more evidence of things that are not seen.

But there is more to life than history or philosophy or science or mathematics. You and I are people of faith. Our faith, our knowledge, and our commitment to the person of our Lord Jesus Christ are not incompatible with what we can learn from science or history or philosophy.

You should learn as much as you can in your college studies, but don't forget to keep in mind that the things that you hope for are made known to us through the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Keep in mind the most important truths:

- That God is love
- That God has made each one of us in his image and likeness; which means the dignity of everyone here and every person in every place is a human dignity that is God-given; that cannot be taken away, no matter what others think or say
- That God loves each and everyone one of us without exception and without qualification
- That God calls us to love him and to love our neighbors and love ourselves in the way that God loves everyone of us
 - with full respect for our God-given human dignity
 - with the utmost respect for our final destination; eternal life with God
 - with full respect for our God-given human *freedom*

The reading from the Letter to the Hebrews does not explicitly mention the word *freedom*, but it does discuss the response that we can and should make to God's expectations and the expectations of your parents and everyone here has in wanting you to succeed. That response is *obedience*.

The last words from today's Scripture readings that we should consider are *preparation* and *trustworthy*. In the Letter to the Hebrews it says that Abraham found God to be trustworthy and God found Abraham to be trustworthy. Jesus tells us in the Gospel that he wants to find every one of us trustworthy.

Being *trustworthy* means to fulfill the oaths and promises that a person makes. God fulfilled his oath and his promise especially in the life and mission of his only begotten Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.

What are the oaths and promises that you make as you begin a new academic year at college? How will you fulfill them? The Lord Jesus tells us

in the Gospel to be prepared. He tells us not to sit around doing nothing, and he tells us not to go wild and out of control when it doesn't seem like God is near.

You have been preparing for college for a very long time with help from the Church, from your teachers, and especially your parents. I would like to remind you of some things that your parents have tried to communicate with you over the years and would like to say to you now. You know what I am talking about and you know that they are right, but please listen one more time.

- 1) Remember who you are.
 - You are a human person and every human person is made in the image and likeness of God. You have an awesome dignity. It's a gift from God and God wants that gift to be your core for your whole life.
 - As part of that awesome human dignity you have a mind, a body, and a soul to take care of. Don't take that for granted and don't let others take that for granted.

- 2) Take care of yourself. What does that mean? I hate to remind you, but your Mom is right.
 - A little pizza or ice cream once in awhile is OK, but you really do need to eat healthy.
 - And even though you might stay up late once in awhile and get up 5 minutes before your first class, you need to get plenty of sleep at night.
 - If you don't eat healthy and get enough sleep, your brain will not work; and guess what? You do need your brain to function when you are at college.

- 3) There is something else that goes along with taking care of yourself. Stay away from sex, drugs, drinking and smoking.
 - Do I really have to explain that to you? If you want me to, I would simply have to tell you the real stories from young people who came to see me so messed up; so stressed out; or so unhappy after getting high or drunk at some party and being used for some someone else's sexual gratification or even using someone else for their gratification.

- I am not talking about it being wrong just because that's what God tells us. I am talking also about how that kind of self-indulgence will demolish your awesome human dignity or the dignity of someone else.
- 4) Be careful who you make friends with at college.
- You are going to meet a lot of new people and hopefully many of them will be good. Some of them will be friends for life. I certainly have been blessed with friends that go back to my years in high school and college.
 - It will absolutely happen that you will be tempted to make decisions based on what everyone else is doing. You may say that won't happen to me. Right? Just think about what happens if the crowd you hang out with doesn't have the best judgment. In that situation things can get out of control so fast you may not even have a chance to realize what's happening until there is already some kind of trouble.
- 5) Remember why you are at college.
- The people of Israel followed the Lord God through the great Passover even though they were afraid. They followed the Lord because they found him to be trustworthy. They were convinced that God has the real truth, the big truth. You are going to college in search of something really big; in search of job skills, and information, and knowledge, and I almost forgot: truth. That's right. Even if you graduate with a 4.0 and you don't find the truth while you are in college; you didn't get your money's worth.
 - It means you have to study. And don't study just to get a 4.0; study so that you can learn; and learn so you can grow in awareness of who you really are and what you can and should be in our world. Remember your identity; your God-given dignity as a human person.
- 6) Don't leave your Catholic faith at home.
- I tell young people like you all the time how awesome you are and how proud I am of you because of your faith. I mean look around. You are here for this special Mass, right? And what is it about that faith that I am talking about?

- Let's go back to the person of Abraham who is mentioned in the Letter to the Hebrews. Abraham went out to a foreign land, not knowing where he was to go. He had a lot of questions and like every person he had dreams and expectations.
- Abraham sought answers by doing something that you already know how to do. It's called prayer. You need to do that every day, even while you are in college.
- Abraham listened to God, just as the disciples in today's Gospel listened to Jesus. It is very clear from what he said that Jesus cared about them so much that he wanted to tell them the truth.
- How can you listen to Jesus? That's what we do when we read the Bible; the Word of God. You need to do that while you are in college. I know that you will have a lot of reading to do with your studies, but I challenge you and encourage you to read the Bible for just 5 minutes a day. And I know how much college books cost, so if you don't have a Bible and you promise me that you want to read the Bible, let me know. I will buy you a Bible.
- I already mentioned that the Passover experience of God's people in the Old Testament reminds us of the Passover of our Lord Jesus Christ when he passed from death to life through his crucifixion and resurrection. That Passover of Jesus is what we celebrate in the Holy Eucharist.
- When you are at college, you need to get to Mass every Sunday; maybe even more often during the week. In case you don't know, in most colleges and universities they have Mass in the afternoon or even on Sunday evening so you can actually sleep-in that day.
- And I don't have to remind you what goes along with that do I? It's the sacrament of Penance or Reconciliation. Yes, you need that too because Jesus also wants us to be prepared to receive his love, his grace, his life, his very Body and Blood, by satisfying one of the strongest human needs that everyone has; the need for mercy; for forgiveness; for reconciliation, for peace in our hearts.
- The sacrament of Penance is so awesome. It's the antidote for our failures, and trust me, when you go away to college and experience all that freedom and you are not too careful in exercising the responsibility that goes with it, there are bound to

be failures. But you know that already; we all learned it in 2nd or 3rd grade; it's called sin.

- Prayer, the Word of God, the Sacraments. Don't leave home with out them. They are all about staying connected with the ultimate friend that all of us would ever want; Jesus Christ. He is your friend, your Savior, your strength, your peace, your hope. Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life; your life. A joyful life, a fulfilled life, an eternal life.

So you are going to college for the first time or you may be returning for another semester. I wish you all the best. I'm praying for you and for your parents who are going to be worried that it all goes well for you.

Don't forget what your parents have taught you and don't ever be afraid to call them and ask for help. And listen one more time to your younger brothers and sisters.

- Don't be surprised when you find out that they put 10 hot dogs in a package and only 8 buns.
- Be prepared to ask questions and to answer questions in college, but remember, if your dad or your teacher asks 'Do you think I am stupid,' do not answer.
- If you go shopping with your Mom and you want a cat, you should first ask for a horse. But when it comes to the real knowledge and truth that you seek as you head off to college, show the Lord Jesus that you believe that he is trustworthy and that you want everything that he promises; his love and his life; and believe that he will give it to you.