

Yes, It's All about Relationships

Homily on Holy Trinity Sunday
 10 a.m. Mass at the Aquinas Institute (Roman Catholic Chaplaincy)
 Princeton University
 Princeton, NJ, USA
 Sunday, May 30, 2010

Introduction:

Good morning. I am delighted to be here at the Aquinas Institute and feel right at home. Greeting people at the entrance of the church before mass is exactly what we do in East Africa. Even though I am celebrating my 50th Reunion I just met someone from the Class of 1940 so I feel like a youngster.

Welcome to this Eucharistic Liturgy on the Feast of the Holy Trinity. We proclaim through the frequent *Sign of the Cross* – “in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” -- the heart and center of our Christian faith.

During my many years in Africa we always welcome visitors at the beginning of the liturgy and invite them to stand up. So I invite all those people celebrating Princeton class reunions this weekend to please stand up together with all the present students here at Princeton. Let's give them all a hand.

I am especially delighted that members of my Princeton Class of 1960 are here. We are celebrating our 50th Reunion and some of my roommates from the 1956-1959 years are present. We also want to remember in this mass the seniors (Class of 2010) here at Princeton who will be having their Baccalaureate Mass at the Princeton University Chapel at 4:30 p.m. today and will graduate on Tuesday, June 1.

Homily:

Two weeks ago when I arrived in the USA from Nairobi, Kenya I telephoned Father Tom Mullelly to discuss plans for this Reunions Weekend. When I asked him what he would suggest that I talk about in this homily he immediately said: “Relationships. Our relationship with God and our relationships with each other.” Then I discovered that today is Holy Trinity Sunday when we celebrate the union of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. In today's Gospel from *St. John* Jesus talks about his relationship to the Father and to the Spirit of Truth. Yes, it's all about relationships.

As a seminarian and young priest I always heard that the Trinity was too hard to preach about. That the doctrine of the Trinity was the greatest mystery in our Christian Faith and too

difficult for us humans to understand and explain. But when I went to East Africa I learned something different. I worked with a Tanzanian Bishop Christopher Mwoleka who said:

I think we have difficulties in understanding the Holy Trinity because we approach the mystery from the wrong side. The intellectual side is not the best side to start with. The right approach to the mystery is to imitate the life of the Trinity that is a life of sharing...I am dedicated to the ideal of "Familyhood" because it invites all people, in a down-to-earth practical way, to imitate the life of the Trinity that is a life of sharing.

Yes, sharing. I can't think of anything so profound, and so exciting at the same time -- that God wants to share life with us. God invites us into the Family of God. We become God's sons and daughters. We dare to say "Abba! Father." St. Paul writes in his *Letter to the Galatians* 4:6: "Because you are sons and daughters, God has sent forth the Spirit of the Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" When people in Africa ask me who I am I enjoyed dropping all my titles and answer simply: "I am a child of God." That really gets them thinking. Yes, God invites us to share in the intimacy of the family of God. Yes, it's all about relationships.

At the Catholic University of Eastern Africa in Nairobi, Kenya I teach a theology course on "Small Christian Communities as a New Model of Church in Africa Today." I begin by asking the question: Who is the First Small Community? This is different from the Holy Family (Jesus, Mary and Joseph) being the First Small "Christian" Community. The answer is the Trinity. The close relationship between the three persons of the Holy Trinity is the model and example of all small communities ever since.

Now I would like to reflect on "relationships" from another angle. Namely our gathering together this weekend to celebrate our class reunions. We can talk about the relationships between Princeton classmates and the relationships between Princeton classes. For my classmates and myself this is a big one: 50 years. In our *Princeton Class of 1960 50th Reunion Yearbook* President Shirley Tilghman's congratulations letter to us says: "You are older and wiser even though your grandchildren are appalled that you have never "twittered" or listened to the Jonas Brothers." Having been an English major here at Princeton I enjoy her wonderful use of the word "appalled."

Coming directly from Africa I confess that I had never heard of the Jonas Brothers before, but now I am trying to catch up. I have listened to them on YouTube in the last two weeks. And happily I have joined Twitter and even Facebook. In fact, in Africa I moderate two websites that have Facebook Pages.

Part of this "wisdom" that President Tilghman refers to is contained in one of my classmates' reflections in our yearbook: He writes: "Life has been kind to me, affording me a number of second chances, I feel responsibility to show gratitude and help others wherever possible." I would guess that many of us can identify a variety of second chances in our lives. May we turn them into opportunities to help others. One way of helping others is seen in Princeton's informal motto "Princeton in the nation's service." As Princeton has become more international this motto has expanded to "and in the service of all nations." Sharing in God's

family means sharing in the whole human family across the globe – the good and the bad, the ups and the downs, the successes and the failures, the obstacles and the challenges.

I would like to say word about one deceased member of our Class of 1960 -- Nicholas Robert Cozzarelli – who died on March 19, 2006, at his home in Berkeley, California. Nick came from Jersey City, New Jersey. He majored in biology here at Princeton and went on to become a very well known professor of molecular biology. As a student he was a devoted member of our Aquinas Institute (then called the Aquinas Foundation) and was elected President of our Catholic student organization. I assisted him as Vice President. May Nick and all our deceased Princetonians rest in peace.

I would like to turn to relationships between the classes here at Princeton. Take the relationship between our Class of 1960 and this year’s graduating class of 2010 and the following classes of 2011, 2012 and 2013. First, I wish to thank you young Princetonians and say that you teach me a lot. Only last week did I learn what LOL means. For my 70 year old plus classmates who don’t know, this is a popular text messaging code that means: “Laughing out loud.” My young Princeton friends: please help us older folks always to stay “young at heart, young in spirit.” In Nairobi, Kenya I work a lot with college students. They began calling me “Elder” -- a term of respect. But I said, “No, No. Not yet. Give me another name.” So they gave me the Swahili name *kijana wa zamani* that means “a youth of a long time ago.” That’s much better!

But much more than what we can teach each other, or what we can tell each other, is what we can share with each other. Just as the Holy Trinity does. A beautiful proverb from Uganda in East Africa says: *One hand washes the other.*

In the last four days one theme that has been running through my mind and heart is “unity and diversity.” This is at the heart of the meaning of the Holy Trinity. The unity of the one God and the diversity of the three persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This has also been my experience returning to the Princeton Campus this week. Comparing when I first arrived here in September, 1956 to today, the biggest change and development that I see is the rich diversity of the student body. This includes many thanks to you young women in today’s Princeton classes for the uniqueness that you bring to Princeton and many thanks to you international students from around the world including my beloved Africa for the uniqueness that you bring to Princeton. And the rich diversity in the academic programs and extra-curricular activities here at Princeton.

During these four days of reunions I have been walking around the Princeton campus to “harvest the memories.” One concrete example of the change and diversity. In 1956 Pyne Hall was a Freshman Dorm. I lived in 611 Pyne with three other classmates. Today Pyne is an upper-class dorm and two young women who will graduate in two days now live in 611 Pyne. Time marches on.

But underlying all this diversity is the unity of the Princeton vision and spirit. This is what binds us together and is so eloquently communicated in the Princeton songs that we sing

together. We have enjoyed the Nassoons and Tigertones beautifully singing Princeton songs this week and we participated in the rousing songs in the P-Rade too.

I end with an important “relationship” story and my favorite Princeton connection at this moment. My nephew by marriage is Bob Bradley, Princeton Class of 1980. He played on the men’s varsity soccer team and later became the coach of the soccer team at Princeton from 1984 to 1995. Presently he is the coach of the USA Men’s National Soccer Team that practiced here at Princeton last week before getting ready to play in the World Cup in South Africa in June, 2010. One of the stars of the team is my grandnephew Michael Bradley. Guess where he was born: Princeton, New Jersey.

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Conclusion

I am a storyteller so I would like to end with an African story. In 10 days I will be flying to South Africa for the World Cup of Soccer. The USA’s first game is against England in the city of Rustenburg. Bishop Kevin Dowling of Rustenburg tells the story of celebrating a mass with a group of children and then taking them on a tour of the inside of the church. Then the bishop asked them, "What is the most important thing in the church"? After a long silence, a third grade girl raised her hand and said, "The exit sign." Taken aback, the bishop asked her to explain her answer. She replied, "Well, didn’t you tell us that we supposed to take what we learn in church out into the world?" This is the spirit of African liturgies. The end of mass is lively and we are sent out to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ to others. There is saying: *When you come down from the altar of sacrifice bring not the ashes, but the fire.*

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