

Mass of the Holy Spirit

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco

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It is a bit intimidating to stand at the very podium from which the Dalai Lama spoke so movingly to the University community less than a week ago. During his visit here, the Dalai Lama reinforced for us his stature as one of the world's most eloquent spokespersons and compelling witnesses to the presence of the God's Spirit in the human heart. We saw for ourselves that "one and the same Spirit" of compassion and self-sacrificing love in the first reading is not the exclusive possession of any single religious tradition.

If Jesus warned us that not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord enters the kingdom of heaven;" and Augustine reminded us that there are many whom the church has that God does not have, and many whom God has that the Church does not have; the Dalai Lama cautioned us that religion may become a source of conflict and division within the one human family and that it is not enough for religious people to be involved with prayer; rather they are obligated do all they can to heal the world's wounds [FIE 204, 202].

In today's Gospel Jesus assures his listeners that it is God's Spirit of compassion and healing that animates his own teaching, preaching and healing. Likewise, we may be confident that the Spirit of "one and the same God" works through the Dalai Lama's efforts — and our own — to infuse the world with compassion, understanding and forgiveness. His message sounds all the more poignant on this day when we remember September 11 — a tragic instance of perverting religion to perpetrate hatred and violence against innocent people. If today evokes the memory of the worst in humanity, so does it recall those marvelous triumphs of the human spirit that saw firefighters, emergency medical workers, police officers and ordinary passers-by put the suffering of others above their own safety and even life itself.

May the excesses of the fanatically religious temper our own self-righteous impulses to abuse religion by using it as a wedge to drive people apart rather than a magnet drawing people together. May the heroic examples of those who gave up their lives for others open our own hearts to a more selfless way of being in the world — or, as the Dalai Lama said — to be responsive to our suffering brothers and sisters.

In Yann Martel's novel, the *Life of Pi*, the main character for whom the novel is named simultaneously embraces aspects of three different religious traditions: Islam, Christianity and Hinduism. He is rebuked by adherents of each religion who assume that because theirs is the one true religion, Pi's syncretism is an offense against their God. Pi wonders about people who narrowly restrict God's saving activity to their own group:

There are always those who take it upon themselves to defend God... if they perceive a slight against God... their faces go red, their chests heave mightily, they sputter angry words. Their degree of indignation is astonishing.

These people fail to realize that it is on the inside that God must be defended, not on the outside. They should direct their anger at themselves. For evil in the open is but evil from within that has been let out. The main battlefield for good is not the open ground of the public arena but the small clearing of each heart. Meanwhile the lot of widows and homeless children is very hard, and it is to their defense, not God's, that the self-righteous should rush. [70, 71]

Today we hope and we pray together that our conduct of this University and our practice of religion will be inspired by that Spirit of "one and the same God" – whether named the Buddha of compassion, Holy Spirit of God, conscience or human decency; that we may live out of that graced part of our humanity that called Jesus and each of us to be good news for the poor – not their exploiters; to be hope for prisoners – not their vengeful executioners; to be sight for the blind – not the deniers of their medical benefits; and liberators of the oppressed – not blasé spectators of pain and suffering.

What does this message that we hear from Jesus, the Dalai Lama, and the fictional character Pi say to us amidst the harsh realities of our world? The crumbling peace between Palestine and Israel; the increasing violence in Iraq and Afghanistan; the hunger and hopelessness we see in the faces of too many Africans can overwhelm us. This increasingly messy world is what we intend to change for the better. We begin, as Pi said, with the small clearing of each of our hearts. Amidst the cacophony of voices that fill our lives, we begin by listening to the authentically human voice – the Spirit of God — that calls us — among the most diverse Universities in America — to understand and respect differences, to forgive the slights that scar us, to support one another's efforts to become fully human. We begin by taking responsibility for making our piece of USF a more humane and just world.

Let us not reduce the visit of the Dalai Lama and the celebration of this liturgy to an emotional "high" or a pleasant memory with no lasting impact on our lives. Let this be for us an occasion for renewing our commitment and strengthening our resolve to live our lives in God's one Holy Spirit of compassion and forgiveness; to treat all members of the human family as the brothers and sisters to us that they are – knowing that in so doing God's Holy Spirit in many and diverse ways is changing the world, one person at a time beginning with each one of us.