

Baccalaureate Mass

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

May 17, 2007 | St. Ignatius Church

Readings: Micah 6:6-8; Col 3:12-17; Mat 5:13-16

The second reading's exhortation to "be thankful" probably echoes your own heartfelt sentiments on this, the eve of your graduation from USF. I encourage you to cherish those feelings of gratitude and appreciation for your family and friends, your classmates and teachers as we celebrate this final liturgy together.

That same reading tells you what you already know: that you are among the "chosen ones" of this world. How many times have you heard that you are among that 1% of the world's 6.5 billion people with a college education? The difference that your USF Jesuit education makes for the other 6.4 billion people who will never enjoy the advantage that you have is up to you. This is worth pondering as you begin to plan for life after USF.

If you ask yourself how you will use your education other than to simply make a living, recall the reading's other admonition: clothe yourself not with Prada, Dior, Gucci or Louis Vuitton, but with compassion, kindness, humility and patience. In other words, resist the relentless message of the media that what you *have* is more important than who you *are*, or that you can buy what it takes to be successful as a human being. "Human being" names individual entities such as you and me, but in this context it is important to recall that it also refers to a way of being in the world that distinguishes us humans from other beings. There are distinctly human ways to be in the world and inhuman ways of being in the world. What steps will you take to "be humanly" in our inhumane world?

In the novel, *All is Quiet on the Western Front*, the injured Paul Baumer wandered through a World War I field hospital filled with the mangled bodies of his wounded comrades — not unlike the images from Iraq we see daily in the media. Reflecting back on his own university education, Baumer offers this poignant critique:

How senseless is everything that can be written, done or thought, when such things are possible. It must be all lies and of no account when the culture of a thousand years could not prevent this stream of blood being poured out, these torture chambers in their hundreds of thousands.

Paul Baumer's perspective in the novel resonates with that of this evening's Bible readings: the value of education is gauged by how well it equips and inspires us to improve our little piece of the world. The success of your USF Jesuit education and your success *as a human being* will not be measured by how much you acquire in terms of wealth, status and prestige, but by what you do for a world so badly scarred by violence, poverty and immense, needless human suffering.

The Gospel images of salt and light are metaphors, not blueprints, for being humanly in an inhumane world. Salt and light speak to who we *are*. We do not *have* salt and light; we

*are* salt and light. Without salt, food is flat and tasteless. To be “salt of the earth” is to make the difference between a dull, senseless life for our brothers and sisters and a hopeful one.

Without light, people stumble aimlessly around in the dark. To be “light of the world” is to offer a way out to those enveloped in darkness. The Gospel defines our humanity not in terms of what we have, but who we are for one another, especially for the weak and the powerless among us.

In this Gospel it is not the “teaching” of Jesus — not doctrine and dogma — that are salt and light for the world, but people whose deeds witness to the God who calls to us in the depth of our hearts to “do justice, love kindness and walk humbly together through life” rather than a god who absolves us from doing so.

Tonight’s readings do not threaten or accuse us, but encourage us and give us hope by recalling who we are for one another and who God is for us and for our world. The world experiences goodness and hope in people whose lives reflect the goodness of the God who created us all and expects us to be salt of this earth and light in this darkened world.

Tonight it is particularly appropriate to recall Jesuit Fr. Joseph Neri, a physics professor at then St. Ignatius College (now USF), who used an electro magnetic machine in 1874 to power three search lights that illuminated all of Market Street from the church towers and gave San Francisco its first experience of electric lights. A contemporary wrote, “The light is such as to be seen at a distance of two hundred miles.” Today the light that USF offers the world does not emanate from search lights in a tower — it really never did. The light has always been you graduates who have absorbed and live the knowledge, sensitivities and values of an education that combines the best of human learning with the wisdom and humanity of the Gospels.

May the light of wisdom, compassion and love ever shine brightly in your lives, and let us go together to the table and receive the nourishment and energy that God offers us to be salt of the earth and light of the world.