

Mass of the Holy Spirit
August 30, 2008
Rev. Michael C. McFarland, S.J.

This is the season for back-to-school commercials. One particularly pervasive one shows a mother sitting in her son's classroom, saying, "I can't write his history papers for him. I can't show everyone how bright and curious he is." But, it turns out, all she has to do is buy him a laptop from Wal-Mart and he will be brilliant. If only it were that simple.

Great marketers know how to grab us, to play on our hopes and fears. As they well understand, during this critical time of transition, when families are sending their precious ones off to school, those anxieties and vulnerabilities are particularly raw and sensitive. It is hard to let go. For many of you it will be a big change. You can't sit in class with them. In fact we don't even let you near their orientation sessions. It is time for them to strike out on their own. All you can do is offer your best advice and share your own hopes and dreams with them, as I hope you did over the last few days and weeks.

Today I want to join you in offering my deepest hopes for them as they begin their journey here. So, to you members of the class of 2012, this is my hope and prayer for you: I hope you get captured. That's right, I hope you get captured, not by terrorists or drug gangs. Your parents wouldn't like that. No, I hope you get captured by an idea, an activity, a community, an ideal, something that draws you out of your own familiar world, challenges your assumptions, expands your mind and your heart, and becomes a focus of your energy and passion. It is what we call falling in love. If that happens in the next four years, I would say this has been a successful gig, for you and for us.

I am not suggesting that this is the easy route to take. It is not so comfortable being a captive. Listen to poor Jeremiah's angry rant in the first reading. He was seized by a power greater than himself, "a fire burning in my heart," as he put it. It was the Word of God that must be spoken. Jeremiah struggled to avoid it, because it brought him nothing but scorn and persecution from his own people; but it was a power he could not resist. Yet that consuming power also brought him greatness, as his words and actions continue to inspire us 2500 years later.

We too often resist being captured. It is too inconvenient, too disruptive. Especially at this stage in your lives, you have put so much effort and angst into figuring out who you are and getting comfortable with your identity. You have struggled to gain some control over your life, to set some directions for yourself, make some plans and begin to carry through with them. Why give up that hard-won freedom and self-possession to have someone or something carry you off in some other direction, where you hadn't planned on going and have no idea where it will lead?

It is a good question, one that Jesus addresses in today's Gospel, as he tries to explain why he is determined to forsake the power and prestige he has gained to face humiliation and death at the hands of his enemies. All he can offer is a paradox: "whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." It is only in denying oneself for the sake of something greater that one finds the real meaning and purpose of one's life. The cross becomes the symbol of that mystery.

Here, under the sign of the Holy Cross, many have discovered the power of that truth. Here I will offer a few examples.

- Paul Leclerq was a very bright, hard-working and successful pre-med student here. But his heart just wasn't in it. What he really loved was French literature. It was not until his senior year that he found the courage to leave the secure path that had been set out for him and follow his real passion for French literature and culture. It was a risky, some would even say foolish, choice for a poor kid from New Hampshire. But, with the help of his mentor, Fr. Al Desautels, he got into the PhD program at Columbia, which began a very distinguished scholarly career that has led him to his current position as the head of the New York Public Library, one of the five great research libraries in the world.
- Maggie Wilderotter, a member of the second class of women to go through Holy Cross, got her start broadcasting men's basketball games on WCHC, the college's radio station. She became fascinated with media and communications technology and their potential to empower people. That interest led her to a stellar career as an executive in the technology industry, a realm still dominated by men. Most recently she went from being the head of Global Strategy and the top-ranking woman at Microsoft to her current position as CEO of Citizens Communications, a Fortune 1000 company.
- Joyce O'Shaughnessy was always interested in medicine; but it became very personal when, in her first year at Holy Cross, her sister died of leukemia. She began doing cancer research during the following summer and continued on with it, culminating with her Fenwick Scholar thesis. She went to Yale Medical School, worked at the National Cancer Institute and ultimately became co-director of the Baylor-Sammons Cancer Center in Dallas, where she is one of the leading researchers on breast cancer in the country.
- Peter Welch attended Holy Cross in the turbulent late '60s, and became deeply enmeshed in the civil rights movement, the war on poverty and other social issues. He became so committed to this work that he left college during his senior year to do community organizing in Chicago. I don't recommend that; but the College was able to arrange for him to finish his coursework in Chicago so that he could graduate. He is now the congressman from Vermont in the United States House of Representatives, where he continues to make trouble, advocating for the poor and the disenfranchised.

These graduates, and many hundreds like them, were able to find a better life by leaving the old, safe, conventional one behind. For each of them, it was not just a matter of seeking a better future; it was an act of faith. Faith gave them the vision, freedom and courage to yield to a higher calling, which ultimately was God's calling. That made all the difference in their lives.

Fr. Pedro Arrupe, former superior general of the Jesuits and originator of the well-known phrase "Men and women for others," put it this way: "Nothing is more practical than finding God, that is, than falling in love in a quite absolute, final way. What you are in love with, what seizes your imagination, will affect everything. It will decide what will get you out of bed in the morning, what you will do with your evenings, how you will spend your weekends, what you read, who you know, what breaks your heart, and what amazes you with joy and gratitude. Fall in love, stay in love and it will decide everything."