ARE WE TO FAST TODAY?*

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We all gather today around the table of the Lord to give thanks to Him for many blessings. First, with deep gratitude we thank Him for those of us who are graduating this school year — those who are receiving civil or church degrees and those who are finishing the seminary or CEFAM programs. You may have noticed a new item in the listing of degrees. That item is “church degree”. Yes, we also want to say “Maraming salamat, Panginoon!” because LST’s most cherished dream has come true. Today, in our first-ever commencement exercises, we shall finally grant church degrees — no longer through Fujen University but through Loyola School of Theology. Last but not least, we also wish to thank the Lord for Benito A. Salinas who retires on 21 March after thirty years of dedicated and outstanding service as Library Maintenance Staff.

The readings for today are from Friday after Ash Wednesday. Both readings are about fasting, a theme not quite in tune with what we are celebrating this morning. But if we were to pause a while, I think that the theme of fasting is not entirely off-key.

In the gospel, John’s disciples question Jesus: “Why is it that while

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we and the Pharisees fast, your disciples do not?” Jesus’ response: “How can wedding guests go in mourning so long as the groom is with them? When the day comes that the groom is taken away, then they will fast.” Perhaps we can be allowed to adapt these words to our celebration and say: “How can we go in mourning so long as our graduates are here with us? When graduation day ends and the graduates are gone, then we will fast and the rest of us will have to go back to our books and finally take the final exams.”

But joking aside, I would like now to turn my attention to our graduates. Let me share three points that I wish to leave with you, a sort of pabaon, as you begin your exciting ministry of proclaiming God’s Word.

First, please do not think that when you leave LST, your task of theologizing will stop, that your reflecting in faith will at last end. In fact, I think that your ministry will force you to reflect and discover what God is trying to say to you and to your people in your portion of God’s vineyard.

Over the past several months, I have received e-mail messages that often force me to think and even rack my brains in order to find ways of answering questions that people pose to me.

For example, there is this couple whom I prepared for marriage seven years ago. The young wife writes: “Dear Fr. Vic, we have been discussing our parish priest’s homily last Sunday on forgiveness. Does God have feelings, too? Is it easy for him to say ‘I forgive you’ to us? If we lie and sin, does he get hurt? With Jesus, he died for us, but it was 2000 years ago. Does he feel for us still? What about God? When people tell lies against us and we hear that lie, it affects us, makes us angry and hurt. For my husband it is hard for him to say ‘I forgive you’ How is it with God? What feelings does he have?”

Then there is the businessman who regularly attends Adult Catechesis. He writes: “Dear Fr. Vic, tomorrow’s readings bother me
a great deal — kind of difficult to pray over them. The first reading from the book of Judges talks about the sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter. I thought that God expressed His distaste for human sacrifice in the story of Abraham and Isaac. The story of Jephthah and his daughter reveals an image of God which is inconsistent with the God of Abraham. How can we even accept such a vow like that of Jephthah? … When I look deeply into my experience, the God I know is gentle, generous and forgiving, a loving parent who ‘does not give a scorpion when asked for an egg’ and I believe, will not give the scorpion if asked for a scorpion. But in Judges 11, Jephthah was meaning well by making such a generous, be it misguided offering. And yet God took Jephthah’s word. Isn’t this a rather harsh image of God?”

When you get to know the people in your ministry, you will find out that they are very hungry to hear God’s nourishing Word. And they will want to understand His word. And they will also expect you to help them answer their questions and difficulties. How will you answer the young woman’s question on God’s feelings as it relates to forgiveness? How will you answer and explain the businessman’s question on the harsh image of God? No, my friends, your work of reflecting in faith does not end when you leave LST — it will just be beginning, and to a massive degree. I trust that you will not disappoint them.

The second point comes from what I recently read about St. Thomas Aquinas and Karl Rahner. Karl Rahner is quoted as declaring: “Thomas’ theology is his spiritual life and his spiritual life is his theology. With him we do not yet find the horrible difference between theology and spiritual life which is often found in later theology. He thinks theologically because he needs it in his spiritual life as its most essential condition, and he thinks theologically in such a way that it can become really important for life in the concrete.”

Harvey Egan, who provided the quotation above, went on to say

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about Rahner: “What he says about St. Thomas can certainly be said of Rahner himself. I knew him as a mystic of everyday life, as a priest who constantly surrendered to God’s loving incomprehensibility through a life of self-giving love, a theologian whose thinking was inseparable from his own spiritual life ... I knew him as one whose theological thinking definitely flowed from his spiritual life and whose spiritual life was nurtured by his powerful Christian thinking.”

Allow me to repeat and underline some sentences from the quotation. From Rahner: “Thomas’ theology is his spiritual life and his spiritual life is his theology.” From Egan: “I knew him (Rahner) as one whose theological thinking definitely flowed from his spiritual life and whose spiritual life was nurtured by his powerful Christian thinking.”

My second point, I think, does not need much elaboration. Those quotations are very powerful statements about the relation of theology and spiritual life. When you start your ministry and you take time to theologize, your theologizing, your reflecting in faith will have genuine depth and substance, if they flow from your spiritual life and your spiritual life will find genuine nourishment, growth, and vibrancy in your active theologizing. This means that as your apostolic ministry inevitably forces you to theologize — that is, if you are intent in being faithful tellers of God’s Word, then it will also be necessary to keep nourishing and nurturing your spiritual life.

The third point comes from the first reading, Isaiah 58. It declares that fasting, if it is merely empty ritual observance, is unacceptable to the Lord. Rather the fasting that the Lord wishes is: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke, setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; sharing your bread with the hungry; sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; clothing the naked when you see them; and not turning your back on your own. Here a commentator points out that genuine fasting is now directed to a concrete action for the other. Fasting is no longer simply directed for the self, but more importantly, directed for the other, especially the oppressed and

\[\text{Ibid.}\]

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the marginalized. Then God will accept our fasting.

Let us take our cue from that insight: in the same way that genuine fasting is directed to the other, our theologizing and our pursuit of the spiritual life are really meant to serve the other, to serve especially the oppressed and the marginalized. It is not surprising then to hear Gustavo Gutierrez’s enlightening clarification when he says at the end of an interview about theology of liberation: “Personally, I do not believe in liberation theology. I do not believe in theory. I believe in persons. I believe in God. We must not forget the meaning of this reflection. What is important is our faith in God and to meet God in our neighbor, especially the poor.”

Dear graduates, as you begin your ministry, I hope that you will continue your task of theologizing, your reflecting in faith. But theologizing and reflecting in faith must go hand in hand with your spiritual life. Otherwise your theologizing will be like a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. No, let your theology flow from your spiritual life and let your spiritual life be nourished by your theology. But in the end, all our theologizing and the pursuit of our spiritual life are meant to bring us to encounter God and to meet God in our neighbor.

Where I began, there I end. Are we to fast today? How can we go in mourning so long as our graduates are with us? When graduation day ends and our graduates are gone, then we will fast and we will have to return to our books and finally take our final exams. No, we shall not fast today! Amen.

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