



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP

Mass of Convocation 2020

Newman Theological College

*Homily*

[*Sirach* 15: 1-6; *Psalms* 8; *Ephesians* 1: 15-23; *Luke* 12: 8-12]

Throughout the course of the pandemic, we have found many new and creative ways to employ old, familiar words. We can think of vocabulary like: distancing, curve, contact and screens. At this convocation mass, where we implore God's blessings upon our graduates as they are sent forth for the work of ministry, one word in particular merits our attention: bubble.

Normally this term brings to my mind a thin film of liquid inflated with air. Yet now we use it to speak of things like a cohort bubble, an NHL bubble, or even a travel bubble. In these cases the idea conveyed is that of a protective shield, preventing anyone outside the bubble from entering and bringing the virus with them.

When graduates of Newman Theological College are sent forth, their mission is to "burst bubbles." Clearly, I am not speaking here of the bubbles formed to guard against the virus; those must be respected, of course. What I have in mind are the many other kinds of bubbles that have formed around persons or groups long before we ever heard of COVID-19, shields of self-enclosure that separate peoples from one another, or even estrange individuals from the truth of themselves. These bubbles are not externally imposed, but arise from within, formed often by false conceptions of God or misapprehensions as regards the meaning of human existence. Ironically, these bubbles are anything but protective. Rather, they yield easily to the virus of anxiety, and thus collectively become super-spreaders of despair. These are the bubbles that the graduates of Newman Theological College are sent to burst.

We do this, every disciple does this, by announcing Jesus Christ, or, as Our Lord himself puts it in the Gospel text, by acknowledging him before others. A number of ways that this might happen can be considered. Where like-minded people enclose themselves in bubbles such that they speak only among themselves, unwilling to engage with others of differing viewpoints, acknowledging Jesus Christ is to announce the One whose mercy brings down barriers and enables people, separated by suspicion, hurt or fear, to find the way to one another. Where bubbles of homeless persons settle down in camps, as other bubbles of very busy citizens float quickly past, acknowledging Jesus Christ announces the One who summons us not to breeze by but to love one another, as he has loved us. Where individual bubbles of loneliness bounce off one another, creating an increasingly atomized society, acknowledging Jesus Christ announces the One who shows us how properly and fully to live as human beings, in relationship with God and one another. Acknowledging Jesus Christ before others bursts these and any bubbles that separate us from God, one another and our true selves, since in him we encounter the truth of divine love and the hope-filled destiny that together we have in him.

Now, in order for us, disciples all, to embark on the mission of bursting bubbles, there is one bubble with which each of us must reckon. That is the bubble of limit and weakness. When the Lord commissions us by Baptism and, in some cases also by Holy Orders, he sends us forth to do that which we are powerless of ourselves to

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accomplish. Without exception, we are, each of us, marked by limit. Yet, for the disciple of Jesus Christ, this is cause not for frustration or despair but excitement and hope. To acknowledge limit is to embrace truth; to admit weakness is to open the door of our lives to a power that is not our own, a power we call the Holy Spirit. From St. Paul we hear today the wondrous assertion that the power given by God to those who believe for service to Church and world is the very power by which the Father raised His Son from the dead. This power is always without limit to do good and forever victorious over all that is evil.

All that is asked of us is that we not resist the Spirit. When Jesus speaks of the unforgiveable sin, he means total resistance to the Holy Spirit as power for repentance and conversion. God forbid that that particular bubble of pride ever enclose us! Yet there is also implicit in this admonition a warning not to resist the gifts given by the Holy Spirit for ministry. Unaided, we cannot do that to which the Lord calls us, that for which Newman Theological College has prepared its graduates. But in the power of the Spirit, all is possible. The Holy Spirit leads us to Jesus Christ and equips us to acknowledge him before others, especially where the bubbles of resistance to the Gospel seem especially difficult to break. As Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit will not fail to teach us, at the very instant it is needed, how we are to speak and give witness to the liberating truth of divine love.

Long ago, Sirach spoke of wisdom, which he promised would be granted by God to those who seek it. In the light of the Gospel, we learn from Jesus, who is Wisdom incarnate, that the truly wise disciple is the one who accepts peacefully the truth of human weakness and relies joyfully on the gifts of the Holy Spirit. As we offer this mass today for our beloved graduates, we pray that their hearts be always open to the gifts and promptings of the Holy Spirit, in whose power they now go forth to burst the bubbles of fear and fracture with the penetrating hope that is given uniquely in the acknowledgment before others of Jesus Christ as Lord.

Most Reverend Richard W. Smith

St. Francis de Sales Chapel

October 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020