

Opening Mass at SJTI – 6th February 2014. Homily by Fr S. David OMI

The start of a new year is the point where many different thoughts and feelings coincide. There is the excitement and newness of a new project which will be experienced by newcomers to the Institute. There will be the joy and anticipation for those who return for the final year. There will be trepidation for some and joy for others. There might even be fear of the unknown as some commence tertiary education for the first time. The thought of having to read not just one page but a whole book might be terrifying for some but do not be alarmed – this is all part of the experience of being at a place like St Joseph's Theological Institute. These are the ingredients with which, and through which, we have to encounter the divine and to discern God's will for us.

I said to the first year students on Tuesday that one of the biggest obstacles to a good formation and a good education is peer pressure. Perhaps we could phrase that more accurately – the biggest obstacle to making progress in formation and in tertiary education is not peer pressure *per se*, but *the bowing down* to peer pressure. As soon as we give in to demands that take us away from our vocations then we start to go wrong. On the other hand, we start to blossom when we decide to be firm in living out our vocational choices. And when this happens we start to experience Gospel joy. This is the thesis statement of Pope Francis' *Evangelii Gaudium*.

In this regard our first reading is most encouraging. The last words of a dying ancestor are to be regarded with all seriousness and are to be followed in great detail. This is true of most cultures. It is certainly true of the biblical culture. That is why King David on his deathbed charged his son Solomon to become strong and to become a man. In other words the son is not yet there but must grow and develop into his role – into the vocation God has mapped out for him. The verb indicating David's statement to his son is expressed in a very strong way showing divine insistence and even divine power to make it happen. David did not merely tell his son to grow up, he commanded him to do so. The instruction to Solomon is presented in such a way that it becomes a solemn declaration and a formal instruction – at least that is what the syntax tells us. The attentive Bible reader will sit up and take note. And what is this instruction? – Simply that the ways of Lord are to be observed. Those familiar with the syntax will also note that Solomon had no choice but to listen. And how is this to be done? According to the text the growth in maturity which David had in mind for his son comes through observing God's law. This is the way out of peer pressure and the way out of the slippery slope of mediocrity. There is after all a big difference between a formation community centred on Christ and a street gang with its tendencies towards toxic lifestyles, false masculinities, and insistence that people to do what everybody else is doing. The formation community is not interested in what everybody else is doing – it is a Christ centred community intent on following the demands of the Gospel.

Now where does one find this charter of God's ways? We can find it in a generic way in the Bible and in the Catechism. We can also find it in a particular way in our Constitutions and Rules and in the legacies of our founders. For those who do not belong to religious congregations the text of Deuteronomy 30:11-14 is highly recommended. This text informs us that God's will for us is in our hearts. What is required is vigilance and patience and the courage to look beyond what peer pressure and the soap operas of the world are telling us to do. For those who have been evangelized by peer pressure and the soap operas, formation and education are merely obstacles to be negotiated in order to attain a goal. The degree is the goal and as long as I get the degree or am called to ordination then that end will justify the means. Whereas in the soap opera the end justifies the means in formation the opposite is true. Each and every day has to be fully lived. Formation is not an obstacle course – it is the means by which we get to know the Lord so as to discern our true calling. Rather than shrink away from the demands of formation we ought to embrace the process, not so much as a means to an end – but as the way of life God has chosen for me. Yes indeed – my being here is in response to a call and it is missionary in every sense of that word. The mission right now is to engage in formation and to form our minds so as to give ourselves ever more deeply to what Jesus sends his followers to do.

Our Gospel passage for today, like the OT reading, shows us a divine command. The twelve are not merely asked to go out – they are commanded to do so. One of the details they are charged with is to be stable. They have to stay in the same place – in other words they have to be focussed. In the language of today's Church this is a call to accountability. Accountability is not something added on to formation – it *is* formation. It simply means to be where I have been sent and to do what I have been sent to do.

Continuing with the need to be focussed, Jesus charges them not to carry any excess baggage. This is similar to the call the Holy Father has been making to ministers of the Gospel over recent months. The word he used is *smarmy* – a low frequency word which had me running to the dictionary. He urges the priests of the world not to become smarmy priests – living a soap opera lifestyle that is far removed from Gospel values. For those seeking to be ordained you will be comforted to know that you have not been left out in the papal call for renewal. The Pope warns against careerism and clericalism which can turn candidates into (and I quote) *little monsters*. He himself lives a simple lifestyle and engages with the poor – even feeding the homeless. His recent birthday celebration was celebrated with homeless people. His call to the Economic Forum in Davos recently saw him act as an advocate for the disadvantaged of the world. His challenge to us is clear. We have to strip ourselves of everything that contradicts the Gospel message and become more focussed in what we are called to do. This is the only way in which we will have authority over unclean spirits of our time.