

Rev. Scott R. Pilarz, S.J. - Homily, Mass of the Holy Spirit, Sept. 2, 2004

Posted 14 September 2004

**REV. SCOTT R. PILARZ, S.J.
HOMILY, MASS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT
SEPTEMBER 2, 2004**

The following are remarks delivered by University President Rev. Scott R. Pilarz, S.J., at the Mass of the Holy Spirit held September 2, 2004, in the Byron Recreation Complex.

First, to returning students, faculty, and staff, welcome back. And to those who are new to the University, welcome. We are very happy to have you here. I know that these first days can be fraught with anxiety, but at Scranton those feelings will quickly pass.

Last week I was walking up the steps here in the Byron Center within earshot of two new members of our cross country team. After a long run, they looked stiff and awkward – perhaps a metaphor for their emotional state. I overheard one of them say, “I hate being a freshman again.” Thinking back to a year ago, I know just how he felt. Like him, last summer I had just left a well-loved place for uncharted waters – adrift in a sea of new faces, struggling to learn new names, getting lost, more than once, in the wilds of Dunmore.

I have to admit how much easier it is to start my sophomore year at Scranton. It is home now: familiar but still fresh. Familiar enough for me to share some insights related to today’s readings. Fresh enough to inspire high hopes and great dreams for our University community.

Insights first.

Last year I pledged to do a lot of listening. Here’s one thing I heard loud and clear: at Scranton we care passionately about the quality of community life. And in the words of the author, Margaret Wheatley, “there is no power for change greater than a community discovering what it cares about.”

Our care for community is our hallmark. People notice it when they visit our campus, and for those of us who share the privilege of living and working here, it is what keeps us coming back. Our care for community results from the recognition that we are profoundly interdependent, a truth that St. Paul makes in our second reading. We are one body in the spirit, many and diverse parts, but one body in the spirit, and each part relies on all the others. Therefore, each part must be concerned for all the others. As St. Paul puts it, “if one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy.”

At Scranton we try to embrace Paul’s truth, acknowledging that we have been “blessed with remarkable comrades and collaborators.” We are, in phrases dear to the first Jesuits, “companions”; we are “friends in the Lord.”

Permit me a reflection on my own experience of interdependence at Scranton and of some new friends. I don’t know about you, but I used to think that university presidents were individual operators, lone rangers, who did as they pleased. After a year in the job, I’ll let you in on a secret. Never in my adult life have I been so dependant on others, and it is a wonderful experience - a humbling, humanizing and wonderful experience.

Quite literally I would not get by without a lot of help from my friends from all across this campus: Kathy Howell, Rosie Wahl, Carolyne Plunkett, Elsa Nelson, Bob Lilly, Ann Marie Lawless, Sharon Sporer and Judy Gunshannon. And though I’ll probably regret admitting it in public, I also need help from the dynamic work study duo, Terrence Morely and Vinny Solomeno. I need all those folks just to get me through to ten o’clock in the morning. And I haven’t even mentioned taking care of the dog.

The truth of my own interdependence is clear to me, and if you are honest, you know that truth as well: the truth that life works cooperatively, not competitively, through networks of relationships where each depends on the other.

Will our network of relationships always make life at Scranton neat and tidy? Absolutely not. Expect it to be messy at times. Sometimes I ask myself what kind of president I want to be. If you saw the movie *Moonstruck*, I want to be like Olympia Dukakis presiding over the breakfast table where people come together. We face one another and our mutual infidelities; we talk about what matters most; we fight; we make up; we welcome new members; we love each

other because we are a family of sorts. And in my family at least, messiness has its place. We need it any time we want better thinking or richer relationships.

In time, if we listen to one another, the deeper order will show itself, but only if we allow some messiness early on. We can't be creative if we refuse to be confused. Change usually starts with confusion. That's how the Holy Spirit works. Think of the apostles cowering in the upper room after the resurrection. The spirit stirs things up in order to start us thinking about the common good.

That brings me to hopes and dreams for our University. Last year, I heard many express hope that we can renew our commitment to the common good. We know that when we work for the common good, we experience each other in new ways. We don't worry about our status or traditional power relationships. We worry about whether we'll succeed in accomplishing what needs to be done. And in the doing we learn what trust is, we learn the necessity of good communication.

These conditions bring out our best – we're focused on something we care passionately about – The University of Scranton. We work intensely together, inventing solutions as needed: we take risks and tackle hard decisions.

These experiences give us the chance to change our minds about each other. We can see each other free from the roles and routines that conceal most of who we are. And when we are that free in the spirit, we are more likely to ask, "what's possible" rather than "what's wrong." We can face our problems head on, solve them and still celebrate our promise. This requires us to move with the spirit's help beyond the illusion of us versus them. My friends, there ain't no "them" at The University of Scranton. There's just "us."

Is our community perfect? Of course not. No community is this side of heaven. That's why we need the Mass of the Holy Spirit. Is our community sometimes compromised? Of course it is. We're all sinners. At least I am. But as today's Gospel reminds us, we are also a community of sinners that believes in reconciliation. "Receive the Holy Spirit," Jesus says, "if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven." My highest hope is that all of us, whether we've been here for a week, a year or twenty years will heed those words: "receive the Holy Spirit, forgive sins." Because if we only allowed the sinless at The University of Scranton, only our Lord and our Lady would be here. Even poor St. Joseph would have to park the donkey on Linden Street and wait for them.

Sometimes, at the end of the day when I'm alone in the office, I hear the train coming down the tracks, I hear its plaintive whistle in the middle distance, and it conjures up one of my favorite images of our church and our University: we're on a train ride together, pulling out of Steamtown and headed into the future. It's an image aptly described by my home state's poet laureate: he writes, "grab your ticket and your suitcase, there's thunder rolling down the tracks. I will provide for you, stand by your side for you; you'll need a good companion for this part of the ride. This train carries saints and sinners. This train carries losers and winners. On this train, dreams will not be thwarted. On this train, faith will be rewarded. Big wheels rolling through the fields where sunlight streams, meet me in a land of hope and dreams." I believe that's where God's spirit wants to take us here at Scranton: to a land of hope and dreams. I pray that all of us will have grace enough to grab our ticket and get on board. God bless you. God bless Catholic and Jesuit higher education, and God bless The University of Scranton.