
Bishop Bird's Homily at Graduation Mass

Australian Catholic University, Ballarat - March 16th, 2013

Over the past few days, around the election of a new Pope, television coverage has shown pictures of the Sistine chapel. You may have seen the images of the cardinals going into the chapel and taking their oath of secrecy before the election. Then there were pictures of the cardinals in the Sistine chapel again, celebrating a Mass of thanksgiving after the election.

The Sistine chapel is famous as the place where Popes are elected. It's also famous for the paintings on the walls and ceiling. Perhaps most famous are the paintings by Michelangelo on the ceiling and his painting of the Last Judgement on the wall behind the altar. Michelangelo was certainly a brilliant painter. But he had many other talents as well.

He was a sculptor. He carved the beautiful marble statue of the Pietà, showing the figure of Jesus taken down from the cross and placed in the arms of his mother Mary. He carved the Pietà when he was just 24 years of age – a work of great maturity for a relatively young man. Michelangelo was also an architect. He designed the great dome that crowns St Peter's Basilica.

When we see his work in these various fields, we might wonder: Was Michelangelo mainly a painter, or was he mainly a sculptor, or was he mainly an architect? Towards the end of his long life, he explained how he saw himself. He did not refer to himself as a painter or a sculptor or an architect. Rather, he spoke of himself as a "workman". He wrote: "I am simply a workman. I keep plodding along, using whatever talents God has given me."

Michelangelo was an extraordinarily talented person but he realised that his talents were indeed like the talents in the gospel story – talents given by the master to the servants to use as well as they could. He realised that his talents were gifts of God and that his task was to make the best use of those gifts – in thanksgiving to the God who gave them and for the benefit of people he served.

Perhaps our talents are not as many or as brilliant as Michelangelo's but we do have our talents. Each one of us has gifts from God and we have a mission to use our gifts in thanksgiving to God who gave them and for the benefit of the people we serve.

The second reading this morning referred directly to the various gifts that come from the one Holy Spirit of God. "There are different kinds of gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same God who produces all of them in everyone. To each individual the manifestation of the Spirit is given for some benefit. To one is given through the Spirit the expression of wisdom; to another the expression of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit; to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit. One and the same Spirit produces all of these, distributing them individually to each person as God wishes."

Australian Catholic University is a community dedicated to developing the gifts of God in each student so that each one might use their gifts to the full. In this Graduation Mass we give thanks for these gifts and for the way these gifts have been developed through our studies. We also pray that the talents that have been developed through our time at the university will be of great service to people in the years ahead.

Sometimes we might be unsure of our gifts. We might worry that we don't have what we need for the tasks ahead. If we tend to be like this, we might draw some comfort from the first reading. The great prophet Jeremiah also felt inadequate to the task God was calling him to do. He protested to God: "Ah, God! I do not know how to speak. I am too young." But God answered him: "Do not say 'I am too young'. Have no fear because I am with you to deliver you."

In our Mass now, let's pray in a spirit of thanksgiving for all the gifts we have received. Let's pray that we might use our gifts well – to serve God and to serve one another. Let's pray that we will have the confidence we need to fulfil the mission God has given us.

*+ Paul Bird CSsR
Bishop of Ballarat*