

## HOMILY ON COLLEGE DAY

Dear friends in Christ,

The word “angel” comes from the Greek “angelos”. It simply means a messenger. Although unworthy to be imagined as an angel, let me be a person who humbly carries a message to you today. The message is about teaching and learning.

While I was learning about Roman law at St. Paul University in Ottawa, I was struck by the wisdom of the Romans regarding detailed analysis of human conduct and their precise and meticulous laws to regulate human behavior. In *the Institute of Justinian*, which contains a collection of Roman laws, I found inspiration on teaching and learning. Since the thought of the Roman lawyers on the art of exposition of the laws to their students was in perfect harmony with my experience, the following idea captivated my mind.

If at the outset the minds of students are overloaded with a multitude and variety of topics while yet new to the subject one of two things will happen. They will either abandon their studies or often after great toil or distrust to themselves will be led to the goal of their education. On the contrary, when they are led by an easier road, they might lead themselves to the same goal without great labor and without any distrust of their own power.

Every person who takes his or her teaching seriously must take this suggestion to heart. Unfortunately, today the art of teaching has become the most frequent stumbling block in the way of young and vibrant students. At the outset itself, today the education system overloads the minds of student to the point that they either abandon their study or distrust themselves.

Let me take this opportunity to share some degree of my knowledge on teaching and learning by way of my reflection on today’s gospel. The gospel reading from John is the scene where Jesus meets Nathaniel. He was an earnest seeker of God. He not only sought to grow in understanding of God’s word, but he sought an intimate personal relationship with God as well. That is why he was willing to meet Jesus.

From the encounter between Jesus and Nathaniel, we can glean several ideas for our reflection on teaching and learning. I am going to explicate these ideas through three steps.

### **1. Nathaniel had a true and sincere desire to meet Jesus in order to follow him.**

Nathaniel’s desire to know the messiah was the starting point for his life journey in discipleship. His desire was driven by the purpose to commit himself totally to the messiah once he found him. This purpose was his innermost being for which he was created in a unique way. In a simple way this was a call to be and to become the person God intended him to be and to become. Nathaniel was and became the person God intended by becoming a disciple of Jesus. How is it applicable to our topic at hand?

First of all, all the students must have a desire for learning. To have such a desire in their life, they must be given at the initial stages of their learning a direction by their parents and later by

their teachers. It is the utmost responsibility of teachers to discover the talents and skills of their students and give direction to their studies.

I must admit here that I was a mediocre student in my school days. When I started my graduate studies, one of my professors saw in me the hidden potentiality for learning. He gave me a direction in my life and encouraged me to take that direction in learning. I must admit sincerely that without the direction and encouragement of my professor I would not have accomplished my studies to the best of my abilities.

From my experience of being a student for a long time I learned two things: first as students we have to discover our abilities or allow others to discover our abilities in order for us to produce efficacious results in our studies. Then, we have to become a disciple of our own discovery or that of others about us. And above all, to those who will direct us towards our future. In this process, the teachers become great supporters for their students by directing them towards their future in life.

## **2. Nathaniel came to recognize who he really was by Jesus' positive remark.**

Jesus called Nathaniel a true "Israelite in whom there is no guile." Nathaniel accepted Jesus as Messiah and Lord because Jesus spoke to the need of his innermost being - his desire to know Jesus. Jesus was indeed a great teacher. Jesus wins for himself an enthusiastic supporter by a positive response to such a put-down: "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" Thus, Jesus makes a virtue of Nathaniel's outspokenness and inspired him to become a true disciple.

This word "disciple" comes from the Latin "discipulus" (discere, to learn). What kind of a teacher a person should be if one is to learn from him or her? The following quote is taken from the Progress Magazine, December 23, 1992:

**"The mediocre teacher tells.  
The good teacher explains.  
The superior teacher demonstrates.  
The great teacher inspires."**

When I was in my secondary school, I had many unpleasant experiences. Most of the teachers gave more important to intelligent students and neglected the weaker students in the class. I was one of the weaker students then, yet was ready to learn if only they had shown some concern for me. When teachers do not show genuine concern for the weaker students, I think, that would be the most terrible discredit that teachers could bring to their career.

Teachers must be able to see some ability in each student and must be able to make the most of their ability. They must be able to see something greater in the students than the students can see in themselves. They must be able to bring out the best even from worst students than excluding the students who are weak and slow in learning from their attention. There are so many great people who seemed to have been slow in learning but turned out to be great personalities later in history. For example, Charles Darwin did so poorly in school that his father once told him, 'You will be a disgrace to yourself and all your family. G.K. Chesterton, the English writer, could not

read until he was eight. One of his teachers told him, 'If we could open your head we should not find any brain but only a lump of white fat.' Albert Einstein's parents feared their child was dull, and he performed so badly in all high school courses except mathematics that a teacher asked him to drop out.

A three-year survey in one city's schools found that the teachers were 75% negative about their students. The study indicated that it takes many positive statements from a teacher to offset the effects of one negative statement to a child (Institute of Family Relations in Homestead, December, 1986)

A magazine called *Today In The Word*, October, 1989 listed the following qualities for an ideal teacher: An ideal teacher is one who is genuinely concerned and interested in students as individuals; one who requires students to work; and one who is impartial in dealing with students; and one who is obviously enthusiastic about teaching. I think when these qualities are realized in a teacher, that teacher will be a great teacher who can inspire students.

### **3. Nathaniel realized his discipleship through his personal relationship with Jesus.**

Jesus invited Nathaniel into a relationship. The encounter with the person of Jesus Christ changed his life forever. Accepting an invitation to a relationship is not easy. Surely Nathaniel came to accept such an invitation to a personal friendship with Jesus because Jesus avoided an attitude of judgment and condemnation. That is why he was willing to meet Jesus, to see if perhaps this miracle worker from Galilee might be the long-awaited Messiah and Savior.

If there is no healthy and sound relationship between students and teachers, it is going to affect the teaching capability of teachers and the learning aptitude of students. One of my classmates reviled most of the professors because of the low quality of their teaching. As a result of his rancor he was unable to concentrate on subjects and did not do well in his exams though he was a very good student in the class.

From that experience of the friend of mine, I learned that as a student I must make distinction between my professors and the subjects they teach me. I began to like the professors though I was not always happy with their teaching. I made it a point to learn something from them. It worked well for me. Since I began to show interest in the professors, I could learn their subject without any difficulty and do well in my exams. We must remember one thing as students that we do not go to school or college to study a subject but we go to learn from our teachers.

Education is not just learning what you are taught or just teaching a subject. It is also character formation both for students and teachers. Through comprehension and assimilation of what we learn we must be able to form our characters as students. Mahatma Gandhi listed knowledge without character as one of the seven deadly sins. In this character formation, teachers play an important role. They have a responsibility to edify their students not only by their teaching but also by caring for each student especially in classrooms with proper thoughts and attitude. Teachers have to develop amiable relationship among themselves and with their students without being destructively critical. As a result of a healthy environment in schools and colleges, the quality of education will increase.

Discipleship means learning from a teacher as well as assimilating that teaching into one's own life. It requires a total commitment to follow a way of life through many hardship. There is no easy way to achieve a chosen goal in life. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned, I have learned through hardship. As students if we want to excel in studies we must be able and ready to sacrifice whatever may distract our attentiveness. Above all, we must be willing to help and share our very personal resources with others such as our time, knowledge, and notes. Contrary to our belief, the more we share our resources with other students, the more we will excel in our studies precisely because there is no spirit of competition. The spirit of competition will destroy one's ability to excel in studies. It is the utmost responsibility of teachers to see that their students are generous in caring for and sharing with other students who may be slow in learning. It is one of the imperative conditions of character formation.

My dear friends, I was indeed inspired to share my knowledge and experience on teaching and learning after I had attended the meeting of the Past Pupils' Association of St. Michael's College, North America. I have come to understand that our college is going through a crisis. As the past pupils of the college we are sincerely concerned about the things happening in our college. The pride and glory that our college inherited because of the standard of education and the sports must be reinstated. We all want to give a hand in this endeavor. I pray that God may help us all to work together to achieve this goal.



***Note From Editor***

*The above homily was delivered by Rev. Fr. Ahilraj S. J at the Holy Mass celebrated on our college day this year. Rev. Fr. Ahilraj is a Michelite currently living in Canada.*