

The Mystery of God

- Baccalaureate Mass
- June 15, 2019
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Welcome to St. James Cathedral and to this Mass on the weekend of your graduation from Seattle University. I don't know where you are with your faith, with your search for the sacred, and perhaps you don't know either. But you are here in a sacred place of faith. Something drew you here: maybe your parents, your wanting a solemn ceremony at this juncture of your life, maybe your friends, maybe just an instinct or an inspiration. In any case you are here. This weekend is the Solemnity of the Most Holy Trinity. Our Catholic celebration of the mystery and the manifestation of God. You are here on a good occasion.

Sometimes college students wonder what is the relevance of religion, what difference it makes for their lives. Religion is not relevant, perhaps, for life lived on a certain level of a just getting along, day-by-day, taken for granted level of living. But on the deeper level of birth, life, vocation, justice, love, family, humanity, community, truth, death and beyond, religion is of ultimate relevance. Today may be a day for you to be present at that level.

In my remarks to you, having heard and read our scriptural readings, I want to use three poems by Denise Levertov. Levertov, born in London and married to an American soldier after the Second World War, became a leading American poet. She came to Seattle and lived here for the last seven years of her life. All of her life, and expressed in the depth of her poetry, she sought the sacred, the ultimate meaning of life, its mystery, what transcended ordinary life. Each morning in Seattle she walked around Seward Park and was captivated by the view there on some days of Mount Rainier. Mount Rainier became a symbol for her of God: there but not seen on most Seattle days as God is present but not seen, clouded as God is shrouded in mystery, massive beyond measure as is God, standing majestic in pink grandeur in the morning sun as God is beyond all beauty. Denise Levertov, pondering the mystery of God, made the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, contemplating Jesus in the gospels under the guidance of a Jesuit. The word of scriptures lit up the mystery she had sought and glimpsed. She became a Catholic, lived out her life here, and is buried in Lakeview Cemetery. This will help us understand her poems which I will use.

In our first reading we learn of the wisdom of God as Father, Mother, Creator of everything that is, all that is, Creator even of the Big Bang. The writer speaks of God before the earth, the seas, the springs, the mountains, the hills, the fields, the clods of earth, the skies, the foundation of the earth, creating with the help of wisdom beside God like a craftsman; a craftsman delighting in the making of all, playing over the surface of the earth, finding delight at last and above all in the

human race. What a wonderful portrayal of a joyful Father, Mother, Creator giving birth to all that is. How awesome! What a wonder to all of us is the mystery of existence itself, that our world and universe is, that we are, that anything is. Denise Levertov helps us stand before this mystery in her poem “Primary Wonder”.

Days pass when I forget the mystery.
 Problems insoluble and problems offering
 their own ignored solutions
 jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber
 along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing
 their colored clothes; cap and bells.

And then

once more the quiet mystery
 is present to me, the throng’s clamor
 recedes: the mystery
 that there is anything, anything at all,
 let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,
 rather than void: and that, O Lord,
 Creator, Hallowed One. You still,
 hour by hour sustain it.

Perhaps this opens up vistas for us in our faith, in our search for God the Creator of existence and of us.

Yet still God remains mystery, there but inaccessible, distant, shrouded, unseen presence like Mount Rainier. In our second reading St. Paul boldly claims, “we have gained access by faith... (to) God through Jesus Christ.” He is saying that a word has been spoken and Jesus of Nazareth is himself that Word, the revelation of God, the manifestation of the mystery of God, the one who makes God known. A veil is removed from the mystery of the Creator, as the sun burns away the clouds and the mist hiding the mountain. It is faith in Jesus, the Word of God, which makes God known to us. In him we see God. Denise Levertov in the way only a great poet and woman of faith can do, expresses the wonder of this revelation of God to us through Jesus, the Word, in the poem “On the Mystery of the Incarnation”.

It’s when we face for a moment
 the worst our kind can do, and shudder to know
 the taint in our own selves, that awe
 cracks the mind’s shell and enters the heart:
 not to a flower, not to a dolphin,
 to no innocent form

but to this creature vainly sure
 it and no other is god-like, God
 (out of compassion for our ugly
 failure to evolve) entrusts,
 as guest, as brother,
 the Word.

Without the Word, who is the Son, we would not know the Father, the Creator, except indistinctly, not as a person who loves us, but only as force behind what is. In Jesus and in his word the face of God clears and comes into view.

Levertov has helped us so far know better the Father and the Son, the Creator and the Revealer. The first two persons of the Mystery of God who is a trinity of persons. What's next? We come at last to the gospel. Jesus says to us: "I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. But when he comes, the Spirit of Truth, he will guide you to all truth." For students graduating from a university, which is all about the pursuit of truth, the promise of a "Spirit of truth" who "will guide you to all truth" is indeed attractive. The final and full gift of God is the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, to accompany and guide us to the truth, all truth that counts, the truth about life, about God, about us, about time and eternity. We might wish we could just write down this "all truth" and fold it up and put it in our pockets, or file it away as the term paper to end all term papers. Rather truth is not pocketed or downloaded, rather is a Spirit who guides us and abides in us and leads us to ever follow truth. It is so much harder and yet at the same time so much easier to yield ourselves to the Spirit of God, to lose control to the Spirit of God, than to try to control or button down our lives. How blessed to have the following—and for this occasion the final—little poem of Denise Levertov, "The Avowal".

As swimmers dare
 to lie face to the sky
 and water bears them,
 as hawks rest upon air
 and air sustains them,
 so would I learn to attain
 freefall, and float
 into Creator Spirit's deep embrace,
 knowing no effort earns
 that all-surrounding grace.

Let me repeat that poem for it is what all of us want, what we must do, to give ourselves to the Mystery of God in our lives, the Holy Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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I go back to where I started. Thank you for coming here to St. James Cathedral on your Commencement Weekend for whatever reason you have come and wherever and however you are in your faith. You are here. This is the best place you could be on this weekend for it places this milestone of graduation as a marker on the whole journey of your life within the Mystery of God revealed in faith as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as Creator, Word and Guide for the whole of life, the depth of life, and the truth of life, life itself, and your life.