

## **Father Cassian Koenemann's "First Mass" at the Priory School;**

Readings for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Friday in Ordinary time, 2013: 1 Timothy 1:1-2,12-14; Luke 6:39-42

"Don't become a blind guide for yourself, and don't listen to blind guides"

It was a humbling experience to become a confessor. The night before I heard my first confessions, I lay in bed speculating about how to handle the worst-case scenarios. (You, meanwhile, were probably off speculating about some profound truths like: "What does the fox say?"<sup>1</sup>.) I certainly won't tell you how the first day of confessions went, but I can report that it was a humbling experience to have been asked to listen to the sins of others, to have been asked to give spiritual advice to people decades older than me, and to have given absolution of sins on behalf of God. This experience has made me reflect upon the words about blind guides in our gospel.

A priest is designed by God and is trained specifically to be a doctor of souls. A doctor of souls is different than a parent, a teacher, or a psychologist; he is someone who is meant to bring you, both sacramentally and through his teachings, to the life-giving happiness that God intends for you. A priest has undergone long training in the ways of God, practiced moral and spiritual theology extensively, and undergone at least some spiritual direction to hunt down some of his demons. He naturally brings his own experiences to his ministry, but he also is able to learn from the many different people who confide their own experiences to him. He is supposed to be entirely focused upon God and God's ways, and so he is supposed to be able to give lessons that are untainted by the world's ways of acting. He does not act on his own behalf or merely from his own knowledge or theories; rather, he serves revelation and the best understanding of God's will known by the Church's two millennia of theological reflection on it. While we all know who priests can be blind guides, most especially whenever they vitiate their ministry through the pride of heterodoxy, through selfish motives that blind them from God's will, and through the vanity of prizing respect more highly than serving God; nonetheless, God wants priests to stand fearlessly as authentic spiritual guides for others.

What about parents; are they authentic spiritual guides? Just like priests, some parents are excellent guides and some are more inhibited by their own vices. At Priory, we have arguably the best set of parents in the city, and each of you should follow their advice.

Some of your parents, though, struggle with putting too much emphasis on worldly success, to the point of failing to address certain topics as much as necessary. In his address "On Vainglory and the Right Way for Parents to Bring Up Their Children," Saint John Chrysostom, the saint of today, teaches that many young mens' and womens' vices are the result of the vainglory of their parents. I quote:

The girl who has been reared in her mother's quarters to be excited by female ornaments, when she leaves her father's house will be a sore vexation to her bridegroom and a greater burden to him than the tax collectors. I have told you already that vice is hard to drive away for this reason, that no one takes thought for his children, no one discourses to them about

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<sup>1</sup> "What does the fox say?" is the title of a very silly music video that went viral at Priory during the days before this homily.

virginity and sobriety or about contempt of wealth and fame, or of the precepts laid down in the Scriptures.

What will become of boys when from earliest youth they are without teachers? If grown men, after being nurtured from the womb and continuing their education to old age, still do not live righteously, what wrong will not children, accustomed from the threshold of life to empty words, commit? In our own day every man takes the greatest pains to train his boy in the arts and in literature and speech. But to exercise this child's soul in virtue, to that no man any longer pays heed. (Chrysostom n.d., 17-18)

These words do not completely apply to your parents, for they have put you into the care of a Catholic school that takes God and God's ways very seriously, but you and I both know that some of your parents struggle with vainglory, with subtly making their own and your worldly success the priority. These parents want their sons to be happy, of course, but they don't always reinforce the right priorities or know how best to teach them. I believe that they try to follow God's will for you and for them, which is why they can teach you properly while getting confused in action about priorities. None of your parents are blind guides; in fact, they can be excellent guides for you on every issue on which they take action or on every issue that you try to hide from them. It is only on the worldly issues on which some of you are in collusion with some of your parents' faults; it is on those issues on which the both of you may be astray, that you need specific help from us, monks. I repeat, your parents are excellent guides on any spiritual issue on which they act or you fear their action.

Saint John Chrysostom was right in saying that the vainglory of some parents can mislead their children into moral errors, especially with regard to sobriety, chastity, and a disproportionate attachment to wealth and honors, but it is nonetheless the children who choose to become their own blind guides in these hidden matters. Let us think this through: Is not part of your adolescent rebellion a rejection of the hypocrisy you see in some adults? Yes, but your rebellion can take gross expressions that are completely out of line. While some of you have twisted the vanity of adults into a theory that hidden faults are acceptable, so long as they do not jeopardize your worldly success, *you* are nonetheless the ones who choose to take that mistaken notion as license for behaviors that no God-loving and adolescent-loving adult would sanction. You are the ones who choose either to take up the objective standard of loving God and neighbor, OR to make your own standard in hidden affairs; no God-loving, adolescent-loving adult would teach you the latter, even if his own vanity could have been the subtle stumbling block that served as the reason for your mistakenly having fallen into it. So, you may choose to become your own blind guide, presumptively assuming that worldly success is the measure of the moral life, or you can learn how to love yourself and others with integrity and authenticity. That adults and your parents have their own issues is no excuse for you to choose to use drugs, to become drunk, to engage in sexual behavior, or to engage in other hidden sins that will eventually have painful and public consequences.

Finally, there is a type of rival confessional on this campus. The rival confessional is the lunch table, where students brag to each other about their misdeeds, attempting to get

others to do the same or worse. The blind guides, then, are those students who decide for themselves and/or advise others about what they think may be somehow permissible, even though adults have clearly taught them otherwise. Blinded by presumption, attached to vices, and even filled with self-deception, some of you dupe yourselves and others into giving yourselves license to do things that eventually you will deeply regret. To condone or to advocate for sinful behavior is to make yourselves the judges of God's ways, and in doing so you become in a sense rivals to the true messengers of God's love and light for you. God has sent you, on the whole, good doctors of souls, good parents, and good teachers, to lead you to life-giving, satisfying, joy-filled ways of living. Monks and parents are God's instruments for instructing you in the good life; follow their teaching, if not always their behavior. Don't become a blind guide for yourself, and don't listen to blind guides.