

Installation of Father Hy Nguyen
09-09-19

My dear Seminary community and friends,

I want first to thank you all for your presence today as we take this opportunity to formally install and acknowledge Father Hy as the new Rector for the Assumption Seminary. I thank you, Father Hy, in a very particular way because you have said yes to this calling and you have embraced this responsibility for the formation of priests for our Church. This appointment is both a tribute to you, a recognition of your many gifts for leadership and formation, but also it is a responsibility laid upon your shoulders. But don't worry too much, Fr. Hy! You do not have to carry this alone. Together with the faculty, Bishop Mike, myself, and the people of the Archdiocese we will carry it together! You also have the able assistance of MACC, the Oblate School of Theology, and the other institutions with which we cooperate so closely. You will find, Father Hy, that we approach this great work of formation as a family, and never alone.

It is a special blessing to celebrate this installation on the Memorial of St. Peter Claver! St. Peter, known to us as "a slave to the slaves," is an incredible model of priestly dedication, self-emptying service, and missionary availability for us today. Leaving his native Catalonia in Spain, learning his theology in Mallorca, and then arriving in Cartagena, he ministered for over 30 years to the slaves arriving by boat at that port. Catechizing them, baptizing them, and defending their rights as human beings, Peter Claver spent himself completely until he died 1654. We need to form priests with hearts like St. Peter Claver, who will empty themselves in love and service for the People of God — even the most lowly of God's people. I ask you, Father Hy, to keep this day and St. Peter Claver in mind as you discharge your duties.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus commands the man with the withered hand: "stretch out your hand!" This is a rather bold thing to say to someone who was suffering such a disability. It is doubly bold because Jesus commands him to do this on the Sabbath day and in front of the scribes and Pharisees at the Synagogue. The scribes and the Pharisees may or may not have been good men — we don't honestly know — but they represented maintaining the status quo. They represented the convention of the day. They neither wanted Jesus to speak nor to act, because he was changing things! This was not only an affront to their authority as leaders in the community, but also a disruption of the normal order.

Peter Claver must have experienced something similar. Slave traders wanted their injustices to be tolerated as normal, and the Spanish authorities in Cartagena wanted to be respected. But Peter Claver's heart was with the gospel, just as Jesus' heart was with the Father. Sometimes faith calls us to disrupt the normal situation because it is simply wrong! It was wrong for the man with the withered hand to have to continue enduring his suffering out of deference to the "normal." It was wrong for the situation of slavery to be accepted as "normal" in the time of St. Peter Claver. And it is wrong now for the Church's voice of faith to be relegated to the sidelines of society, and for this society to tolerate great injustices and indignities against the value of the human person.

Father Hy, just as young Peter Claver prepared at the seminary in Mallorca for his mission, so now Assumption Seminary must prepare these seminarians of today for their great mission! We do, indeed, live in missionary times. So, Father Hy, please prepare these men to accept the gospel as their norm, service to the People of God as their means, and a spirit of self-emptying love as their way of life. Amen.