I was asked to speak, to give voice to the love we have for Holy Cross, the thanks we owe her.

Fellow Crusaders, Members and Families of the Class of 1985, Brothers and Sisters in the Lord:

Thank you for inviting me to share this occasion of celebration and worship with you, now that 25 years have passed since you left Mount Saint James as students. I speak to you this afternoon as one of your former teachers and ministers, a fallible person who remembers your class as a clever group. I think it must have happened during your years here that I overslept one morning late in the semester and burst into my classroom three or four minutes after the starting hour. The students looked up in surprise and hastily began to cover up the forms they were working on. Then I remembered: it was the day of filling out the confidential course evaluations, and I was supposed to have waited in the hallway until they finished. Embarrassed, I apologized for accidentally compromising the process. If only I had left it at that! But as I backed out the door, I smiled and added: “As long as I’m here, let me remind you that the word ‘brilliant’ has two L’s.” Immediately, one of the students answered, “So does ‘dull.’”

Wedged as I am between these two possible reactions, I’ll seek refuge in words that are not my own, words spoken over thirty years ago by Will Jenks to his classmates at their 25th reunion. “I was asked to speak,” he said, “to give voice to the love we have for Holy Cross, the thanks we owe her.” At this Mass, that task falls to me. The story of Will Jenks, Class of ’54, is surely known to many of you: how he contracted polio in the summer following his freshman year, and became a quadriplegic. His therapy consisted in learning to hold a stick in his teeth to turn the pages of books and to operate an electric typewriter. He became his class secretary and inspired and served his classmates til the end of his life, always refusing to entertain self-pity. His classmate, Dr. Bill Kane, has written a moving account of his life. I like to think that Will Jenks returns every year in spirit, with particular force, to bless the class celebrating its 25th reunion.

In his name and in his spirit then, I invite all of us to remember and name the sources of love and thanks connected with this hill, to draw strength and encouragement from each other’s presence and from the eucharist we celebrate with particular notice on this Feast of Corpus Christi, the body of Christ. Today’s gospel contains a portion of the Lord’s farewell discourse set by the evangelist John during the Last Supper. This passage includes a verse that has been central to my life, and I hope you’ll bear with me as I tell you about it.

It was the late spring of 1973. I was finishing the first of my two years as a Jesuit novice, and I wasn’t gaining much clarity about whether my future lay with the Society of Jesus. I was absolutely on the fence: all the reasons for staying and leaving seemed to hold each other in perfect equipoise. I prayed about my decision; I discussed it with fellow novices; I took the matter to the master of novices: but still there was no progress. Then, one morning, I woke up very early, just as it was becoming light. Racing through my head were the words: John 15:16.
John 15:16. I didn’t know where this was coming from. It’s not as if I had been reading or praying from John’s gospel in the recent past. I rolled over in bed to try to get back to sleep, but the words kept repeating in my mind—John 15:16. John 15:16. Finally I got up, opened my Bible, and found the verse: “You have not chosen me, but I have chosen you....” With that, the voice in my head left me alone. I returned to bed and slept soundly until the alarm. This wasn’t ultimately the reason I decided to remain a Jesuit and apply for vows, but it did keep me going for a while—a nudge, if you will, straight from God.

Over the years, I’ve thought frequently about John 15:16 and the message it carries. Obviously, it’s a message for all of us who take seriously our position as sons and daughters of the Cross. “I have chosen you...” the Lord says to each of us. That’s an important thought to bear in mind, particularly at this moment for you, as you celebrate this middle passage of your lives, twenty-five years after the commencement of the rest of your lives at graduation. That would place you in age between 45 and 50, racing through this fifth decade of your lives with all the responsibilities of mature life, with all the justified satisfaction that comes when gifts are used well, and with all the wisdom that comes with experiences of success and of failure, of unexpected problems and unforeseen opportunities. Most of you are just about half way through your professional careers, at the mid-point between the beginnings and the retirement. It is a privileged time for looking back with gratitude and looking forward with confidence. “I have chosen you, at this point of your life,” the Lord might say. “I have chosen you with all the lessons life has taught you, to be the father or the mother of these children. I have chosen you to care for your parents now that they are ageing and in need. I have chosen you to work in your profession, less, now, as beginners and more as mentors. And I have chosen you to live as graduates of a college known both for what it asks and for what it gives—to live among your fellows with generous hearts and a willingness to believe more and trust more and expect more than those who are less deeply rooted in the values and the faith you appropriated as students on this hill. “

Today is Corpus Christi, the feast of the body of Christ. Its very presence is so central to our lives as Catholics that we can’t imagine our Church without the eucharist at the center. Today’s second reading is an account of the institution of the sacrament from St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. It is read twice a year—at Mass on Holy Thursday and again today for Corpus Christi. I still remember how struck I was in a scripture course in the seminary to learn that this passage is likely the oldest passage in the New Testament. It was the part they wrote down first, the part they prioritized to be preserved and not forgotten. The Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood, Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.’ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. From the first Christians, direct to us.
Thus the eucharist links us both with the Lord and with each other. The generosity of each person is literally shared in the eucharist. It’s not just a moment of “me and God,” but something that stretches infinitely beyond that. The eucharist links us with the Cross; it links us with each other; and it links us with those who have gone before us and those who come after us because Jesus is the lord of time and place. It is a bond with the deceased classmates we remember today, with those who rest in our cemetery, with the alumni whose names are engraved on the plaques upstairs and in the 9-11 Memorial Plaza. And on days when God seems to be far away, when life is unfair, when the problems look insurmountable, the eucharist is a pledge that God is still with us and that our friends are part of us. I like to remember, when I celebrate Mass here, that I’m united with all of you, wherever you may be. So can it be, so should it be, so must it be for us all.

“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you.” Jesus spoke those words to his disciples the night before he died. They’re not easy words to appropriate; in fact, they’re damned hard to face. In our culture, so much of our adult self-worth is connected with what we give and what we are able to do, that we can be reluctant to accept what we need from others and from God. Given his medical condition, Will Jenks knew the dynamic well, and described the difficulty eloquently at his 25th reunion, where he offered “wheelchair wisdom” to his classmates. “It is likely I am not the most seriously wounded among us, only the most conspicuously bandaged. Sooner or later,” he said, “every one of us will be made to feel flawed, inadequate, powerless.” He had learned the hard way to surrender the need to be in control of life by possessing youth, good health, money. In our culture, the loss of control can appear to diminish our value; we are taught to love and serve others, but we too often forget the paramount lesson of receiving love. “For us,” he concluded, “life can again become surprise and delight, if we let ourselves be loved. We are precarious, we are mortal, but we are loved.” He paused for a moment. “I am each of us at some near or far time, drawing life and strength and hope from this place, this bond, this faith, this love, this Holy Cross.”

Sisters and Brothers: If we would be truly generous with our time and talent in the middle of life, if we would live as Crusaders, as men and women for others, we will fall short unless we come to terms with the love we have received—in our families, on this hill, in our communities, and ultimately the limitless love that comes from God and conveyed so wonderfully through the eucharist. With so many sources of love and support, let us recommit ourselves to be worthy sons and daughters of the Cross, drawing life and strength and hope from this place, this bond, this faith, this love, this Holy Cross.

A. J. Kuzniewski, S.J.
5 June 2010