

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Mt. St. Mary's University
Emmitsburg, Maryland
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by George Weigel

Reverend Fathers; distinguished members of the Board of Trustees; President Powell and distinguished members of the faculty; parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, cousins, and friends of the graduates; all mothers present, on this Mothers Day; and last, but certainly not least, my fellow members of the Class of 2009 at Mt. St. Mary's University:

Thank you for honoring me with the invitation to address you today. Thank you, too, for honoring my work with the gift of an honorary degree. As President Powell mentioned, I received my undergraduate education in philosophy at the Liberal Arts College of St. Mary's Seminary and University in Baltimore. So, if I may borrow from President Kennedy on Harvard and Yale, I now have an abundance of riches: a St. Mary's education and a Mt. St. Mary's degree. So I thank you.

This commencement ceremony has an even deeper sense of solemnity this year because there are two members of the Class of 2009 who are not physically present with us today: Nicole Spencer and Elizabeth DiNunzio. As we remember them, we commend them to the Risen Lord and his merciful Father, and we pray that the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, will pour out his love of their families and on all here who cherished them.

It has been one of the privileges of my life to have spent more than two and a half decades chronicling the achievements, and explicating the thought, of a great man: the Servant of God Pope John Paul II. He was, certainly, a great man. Part of his greatness lay in the fact that he

had a very firm grip on his own fallibility. In September 1997, the Italian Bishops Conference hosted a national Eucharistic Congress in Bologna. John Paul II was helicoptered up there on a Sunday night to give the closing address. A staffer at the bishops conference had gotten the bright idea that Bob Dylan would be a good set-up act for the pope. So, perhaps a half-hour before the Holy Father appeared, Dylan came out on stage before hundreds of thousands of Italians, floppy hat, guitar, harmonica, and so forth, and did a few songs, ending with his signature composition, “Blowin’ in the Wind.” The Pope came out and, demonstrating his remarkable capacity to seize an opportunity, discarded his prepared text and immediately began talking about the Holy Spirit “blowin’ in the wind” of the modern world, and about Jesus Christ as the one road that all of us must walk down, for “Christ, who said ‘I am the way’ ...is the road of truth, the way of life.” It was a remarkable performance. Three days later, I was at lunch in the papal apartment, and before I could even get seated after grace, John Paul II fixed me with that look across the table and said, “Who eeze Bob DEE-lahn?”

We are now a month shy of the 30th anniversary of another moment when John Paul II rose to an occasion – this time, in a way that changed the course of history. For next month marks the 30th anniversary of what I have come to call the “Nine Days of John Paul II”: June 2nd through June 10th, 1979, the nine days of the late Pope’s first pilgrimage to his Polish homeland, during which he ignited a revolution of conscience – a moral revolution – that played a crucial role in the collapse of communist tyranny and in the liberation of the Slavic peoples of central and eastern Europe.

How did he do it? He did it in ways that should resonate with graduates of this university, which is itself the bearer of a distinguished history marked by the labors of saints and other great

witnesses to the power of Catholic conviction.

John Paul II did it through *Faith*: faith in the power of the truth to cut through the communist culture of the lie.

He did it through *Discovery*: by putting a life spent probing the truth about the dignity of the human person to work in liberating men and women from the shackles of hopelessness that bound them, he empowered his people to imagine a new, nobler, more human future for themselves, their children, and their country.

He did it through *Leadership*: the kind of priestly and episcopal leadership that for two millennia has taught the people of the Church that, as St. Paul put it to the Galatians, it is “for freedom that Christ has set [us] free” [Galatians 5.1].

And he did it through *Community*: for by re-planting the seeds of civil society in a Poland wracked by forty years of totalitarian oppression, John Paul II laid the foundations for a new type of resistance community – a community of solidarity that proved stronger than tanks, truncheons, fire hoses, and the other weapons of communist repression.

But, you may say, all of this was done by a great man – so what does that have to do with me? To which I would reply, all of this was done by a man who, when he was your age, never imagined that he would be pope, never imagined that he would become perhaps *the* pivotal figure of the second half of the twentieth century, never imagined that the world would recognize his greatness and the Church his heroic virtue.

He was, in a word, much like you.

And that suggests to me that each of you, my fellow members of the Class of 2009, can also do great things with your lives.

Some of you will do great things as the world measures greatness. Some of you will do great things as the Church measures greatness, joining the ranks of the great figures who have walked here on Mary's mountain: St. Elizabeth Ann Seton; Bishop John Dubois; Archbishop John Hughes; Bishops James Edward Walsh of the Class of 1910, a living martyr for ten years in a Chinese communist prison. Who knows, perhaps one of you will even top Jim Phelan's remarkable record as a basketball coach. But all of you can do great things in the one essential way that Karol Wojtyła, Pope John Paul II, did great things. You can do the greatest thing of which human beings are capable: you can conform yourself to the will of God for your life.

Many of you will enter the world of work after this graduation; others of you will continue your studies. No matter what you will be doing tomorrow, or next week, or next September, there is a lesson for you in the life of John Paul II: don't think of your life simply as a "career." Think of your life as a *vocation*.

God has something unique in mind for each of you. There is something singular that each of you brings to the making of history. Think of your lives in those terms, and you'll never fall prey to that most deadening of temptations: the temptation of boredom.

That is the kind of life – a life of high adventure in the greatest of adventures, the making of your soul – for which Mt. St. Mary's has prepared you. For that is the entire purpose of Catholic higher education, rightly understood: Catholic higher education exists to form vocationally serious men and women in whom faith and reason support a transforming conviction – the conviction that every human life is, by definition, extraordinary. That is the conviction on which this university was founded. That is the conviction on which this university can and must build its future.

In living out that conviction by preparing men and women whose intellectual competence deepened by their character, the Catholic colleges and universities of the United States perform an immense public service. For, in the final analysis, our freedom depends on the content of our character as a people. That is how Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., asked that his children be judged. That is how we should all wish to be judged. For character counts, both for the happiness of each of our lives and for the future of America.

Only a people of character will be able to understand that, as Lord Acton taught, freedom is not a matter of doing what we like, but of having the right to do what we ought.

Only a people of character will be able to build a civic community out of the materials of diversity.

Only a people of character will know how to deploy the explosion of knowledge in the life sciences so that the biotechnologies of the future serve the ends of genuine healing, rather than leading us into a brave new world of stunted humanity.

Only a people of character will be able to defend freedom in the world by defending the human rights of all, especially the first human right of religious freedom.

By preparing those kinds of citizens, Catholic colleges and universities today are defending the claim inscribed on the birth-certificate of American independence: that our freedom rests on self-evident moral truths about human beings, our origins, and our destiny.

These tasks are ever more urgent today, for we live in a culture that is deeply confused about what freedom means and deeply conflicted about how freedom is to be lived. In the most famous oration in American history, delivered ten miles from here at the cemetery in Gettysburg, President Lincoln, whose bicentenary we mark this year, called on the Americans of his day to

give “this nation, under God...a new birth of freedom.” That must be your task, too.

The freedoms we cherish in the United States have been put in jeopardy by many threats over the two hundred thirty-three years of our independence. Freedom was put in jeopardy by the institution of slavery, America’s original sin. Freedom was jeopardized by ethnic and religious prejudice. Freedom in this century was threatened by a great depression, by fascism, Nazism, and communism. Freedom in your own lifetimes has been threatened by the rise of jihadism, which claims that the murder of innocents is pleasing to God. Defending freedom in the past drew deeply on our nation’s virtue capital. Defending freedom today also requires that we be a people of virtue.

And what does virtue require of us?

Virtue requires us to acknowledge, and to defend, the first principle of justice according to which innocent human life has an inalienable dignity and value that must be recognized by law. Never flag, never fail, never weary in defense of the right to life. Never give up on the great civil rights issues of our time – the life issues.

Virtue requires us to recognize that the temptation of Prometheus remains with us, and that there are things that we can do, from a scientific point of view, that we must not do, from a moral and humanistic point of view.

Virtue requires us to defend and promote the cause of freedom, rather than retreating into a bunker of hemispheric isolation and an iPod world of self-absorption.

Virtue requires us to live as John Paul II challenged the young people of the world to live: by never, ever settling for anything less than the spiritual and moral greatness of which, with God’s grace, you are capable. Never, ever settle for less than that.

The virtues that are the foundation of this American experiment in ordered liberty are known from both faith and reason. In spending these past years on Mary's mountain, you have been immersed in both – in both faith and reason. As you walk off the mountain today, take both faith and reason with you. Nurture them in your mind, heart, and soul. Living your lives vocationally – living your lives as the gift to others that your own life is to you – you can give America a new birth of freedom.

And the confessors, the martyrs, and all the other saints who once walked here, on Mary's mountain in the Catoctins, will be cheering you on, all the way.

Godspeed on your journey.

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