

Archbishop Lori's Homily: Aquinas College Baccalaureate Mass

Aquinas College

Baccalaureate Mass

Cathedral of the Assumption

Nashville, Tennessee

May 12, 2018

Mother Ann Marie, Sister Mary Agnes, Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia, members of the Board and faculty, parents and family members, distinguished guests, and most of all the graduating class of 2018: Warmest Congratulations.

Dear graduates, all of us gathered here today are proud of you as you receive your well-deserved academic degrees. These degrees reflect your talent and hard work, as well as your aspirations for the future. May the Lord bless you as you go forth from Aquinas College into the wild and sometimes wonderful world that lies beyond.

And let me tell you why I believe I'm qualified to offer a few parting words as you begin the next phase of your lives, your careers, and your religious profession. I suppose my being the Archbishop of Baltimore has something to do with it, but maybe there's a better reason than that. The real reason I'm qualified to stand here before you this morning is, that like you, I too studied under the Nashville Dominicans.

My tutelage under the Dominican sisters, however, was a little different than yours. Back in the antediluvian days, when I was a newly ordained priest, I taught summer school at Notre Dame Catechetical Institute in Middleburg, Virginia. There I met many Nashville Dominicans who were studying at the Institute. Some of them had the misfortune of taking my classes but I was fortunate to come to know the sisters as well as their superiors. So here's what really took place during those summer school sessions: I pretended to teach theology to these young sisters but it was *they* who taught me about giving one's life for the Lord and for the Church. I sensed in

them a spirit of joy, of camaraderie, of prayerfulness, and dedication to the mission of spreading the Gospel by word and example.

And because I'm always in need of a refresher course in such fundamental lessons, the Lord in his mercy arranged for me to serve in an archdiocese where the Nashville Dominicans run a first-rate girls' high school, Mt. De Sales Academy. Visiting that school and spending time in prayer and friendship with the sisters all serve to remind me of what they taught me early on in my priesthood.

I'm going to guess that whatever you studied here at Aquinas, you learned similar lessons from these sisters and their colleagues. And for those graduates who are not Nashville Dominicans, I hope God will bless you with ongoing contact with these sisters, so that now & then you too can have a refresher course in the faith, virtues, & values which the sisters & your dedicated faculty at Aquinas College have imparted to you. For now, though, I'd like to focus on three lessons that all of us, your speaker & you the graduates, have absorbed from the sisters & their colleagues, namely, a strong sense of mission; a life-long love of learning; and confidence in God.

You don't become a Dominican sister or one of their colleagues just because you're interested in teaching. You join the Dominicans because you believe you are called by God to give yourself in a very special way to the mission of spreading the Gospel. The Dominicans are, after all, "the Order of Preachers" and so it is that they bear witness to the Lord by word and example; and in bearing witness to Truth they give God thanks and praise. Thus their motto: "*Laudare, Benedicere, Praedicare*"—to praise, to bless, to preach.

In a recent letter entitled *Rejoice and Be Glad*, Pope Francis teaches us to see our journey through life as a mission and he goes further. It's not merely that we have a mission in life; our whole life is a mission. Life is not an accident. Life is not meaningless. Life is not merely about ourselves. You exist because in some specific way God is calling you to proclaim the Gospel and to build up the Kingdom of God in this world. Or, as Blessed John Henry Newman put it: "God has created me to do him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which he has not committed to another. I have my mission . . . I am a link in a chain, a bond of

connection between persons.”

My hope and prayer for you is that you will discover not merely your passion in life but your God-given mission, the way in which God wants you to serve him and your fellow human beings. Happiness will be yours to the extent that you view all your choices and decisions, big and small, as part of the overall mission that is your lives. Do not be afraid to ask God what it is he wants you to do. Do not be afraid to ask God for the grace you will need to do what he asks.

A second lesson the Dominican Sisters teach us is a life-long love of learning. In general, the Dominican Order greatly values the intellectual life. It rejoices in our God-given abilities to probe Scripture and Tradition, and to study the world in all its wonder and complexity. The Dominican Order together with the whole Church also defends the capacity of human reason to arrive at Truth – not only empirical truth but also that deep and enduring Truth upon which we can base our lives as individuals and as a society. I first saw a love of learning in the sisters whom I tried to teach so many years ago and I have seen this trait again and again in the Dominican priests and sisters with whom I’ve been privileged to serve through the past four decades.

And don’t we see this trait even in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles, namely, an openness to truth on the part of a disciple named Apollos? Apollos was a Jewish convert, an expert in Scripture, a man of eloquence, and an ardent proponent of Christianity – but he didn’t have all his facts quite straight. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him speak at Ephesus, they realized that Apollos knew only of the baptism of John the Baptist; he did not know of the baptism of Jesus in Holy Spirit and fire, what we know to be the Sacrament of Baptism. So Priscilla and Aquila took him aside and instructed him further. Far from resenting this, Apollos took it in, absorbed it, and went on his way, furthering the mission of Jesus Christ in Achaia (what is today Southern Greece).

In the same way, St. Thomas Aquinas’ whole life is characterized by love of learning. Immensely learned though he was, Thomas remained humble, open to Truth. He remained chastened, humbled, interrogated, and sustained by what he learned of God’s majesty, mercy, and generosity.

So what a gift to ask for on this, your graduation day – a life-long love of learning, not only in your chosen field of endeavor but in many fields and branches of knowledge. Let us also ask for a willingness to learn even when it means we have to admit we were wrong (that's not easy!). Most of all, I hope that, throughout your lives, you will actively seek to grow in the knowledge of love of your faith. If, for all his genius and labor, St. Thomas Aquinas did not master the faith, let none of us imagine that we have nothing to learn about our faith. We have a lot to learn, so let's spend our lives growing in knowledge and love of Jesus and his teachings as they come to us in the Church.

A third and final lesson the Dominican sisters and their co-workers teach us is to have an unfailing, unbounded confidence in God. I often observe this in the Dominican sisters at Mt. De Sales High Academy as they gather for prayer and as they interact with their students. Like anyone else teaching young people, these sisters have problems and worries. Yet, they also have an underlying joy that speaks to their confidence in God. Believing that they have been entrusted with a mission from the Lord, they also believe that the Lord will give them whatever is needed to fulfill it.

Doesn't Jesus say the same thing to us in today's Gospel: "Amen, amen, whatever you ask the Father in my name he will give you." A little later in the same Gospel reading, Jesus assures his disciples not only of his love for them but also of his heavenly Father's love for them...& for us! This doesn't mean that our lives are free of struggle and suffering. Rather it means that the Lord is with us every step of the way and as we go through life's challenges God give us gifts and graces that exceed the things we want or the things we think we need. My hope and my prayer for you is that you will go forth from Aquinas College with a deep, unshakeable trust in the Lord, in his mercy and generosity, in his love and care for you – whatever the future may hold – whatever challenges you may face as you strive to practice your faith, to live your vocation, and fulfill your responsibilities with integrity and virtue.

Finally, in this beautiful month of May, I entrust you to Mary. It is from St. Dominic that we have received the Rosary, that special prayer in which we contemplate Jesus through the eyes of Mary. To Mary, the Mother of God and our spiritual Mother, I entrust you, the graduates of Aquinas College, here in the Cathedral of the

Incarnation, and I ask Mary to pray with you and for you all the days of your life.
May God bless you and keep you always in his love!