

# Commencement St. John Paul II Institute

## I. Introduction

A. Your Eminence, Cardinal Caffarra, brother priests and deacons, Worthy Supreme Knight and Mrs. Anderson, Fr. Antonio Lopez and leaders of the faculties of the St. John Paul II Institute, Catholic University of America, and the Dominican House of Studies, students of the Institute, family members and friends of our graduates, and most importantly of all, dear graduates:

B. What a joy for us to celebrate this important day in your lives and in the Church's life. At every commencement, of course, graduates are praised for their hard work but I know that that you really have worked hard. There may even have been a few days when, like St. Paul in our first reading, you said (and I quote), "...if only I can finish my course..." Just because your course of studies led you more deeply to truth, goodness, beauty, and coherence - doesn't mean it was easy! So please accept both my warmest congratulations and my deepest gratitude for having prepared yourselves so well for a life of service to the Church.

## II. Those You Gave Me Out of This World

A. And there's more good news! Today's Scripture readings illuminate what you have been about these past years and what it is you have prepared yourselves to do. Though not exclusively, the Gospel reading pertains to the content of your studies while the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles pertains to the mission you are prepared to undertake. Let me draw a few points from both readings that may apply to you on this happy day.

B. First, today's reading from the Gospel of John is really a beautiful prayer which Jesus offers on the verge of his passion and death, his "kairos", for his apostles and his disciples ...those whom the Father has given to Jesus. In fact, however, every succeeding generation of Christians is included in his prayer; indeed I would like to

think that the Risen Lord is offering that prayer for you, today. While not numbered among the apostles you are indeed among those whom the Father has given to Jesus to do his work, to fulfill his mission in the Church, in these times. To put it another way, as disciples you have been drawn by the Father to enter more deeply into the mystery of Christ's love for his Church. Studying the vocation of marriage and family in light of revelation and reason, I trust you came to believe more deeply in Jesus. And to believe in Jesus is to receive all knowledge and love from God the Father. So even as the members of the faculty look upon you with justifiable pride, I hope we all might be permitted to look upon you as those whom the Lord has chosen and called as his own out of this world to evangelize, catechize, and form many who are in the world about authentic human love and life and dignity.

C. It goes without saying that the Institute has formed you in the thought of St. John Paul II, a successor to Peter and a successor to the Apostles. St. John Paul II was a towering intellect but also an ardent disciple of the Lord, indeed a man of deep and mystical prayer. For that reason your formation at the Institute is deeply intellectual but also a formation in discipleship and an impetus to pray and to pray deeply... to engage in a critical theology that draws its oxygen from revelation and prayer. You learned to practice what Fr. Hans Urs von Balthasar and Pope Francis call "theology on one's knees" - to quote Pope Francis: "Those who study the mystery of God are brought to their knees because God reveals more to a humble heart, to those who are poor in spirit." In doing theology in this way, you accept the Lord's call to be those disciples through whom his works of truth, love, and compassion are accomplished.

### **III. The Law of the Gift and Mutuality**

A. And what does today's Gospel reveal to those who seek the Lord in humility? As we are enveloped in the Lord's intimate prayer for his closest followers, two mainstays of your studies at the Institute emerge from the Gospel, two biblical notions you have studied from almost every angle:

B. First is the glory of Trinitarian self-giving love. When Jesus asks the Father to glorify him (as you know so well), he is not asking to receive a medal, a decoration, or a title. Rather Jesus is asking that his humanity and ours will perfectly reflect the

truth, goodness, and beauty of the Father, i.e., the Father's self-giving love. Thus we are brought to the ultimate origin of the "law of the gift" – that graced sharing in the self-giving love of the Trinity in which we find joy, freedom and authentic human dignity not by turning in on ourselves, but rather by giving ourselves in love to God and to one another. How critical for any vocation in the Church but especially marriage and family. And what a sign of contradiction in a culture that looks for love and glory in all the wrong ways and in all the wrong places.

C. A second point from the Gospel follows closely upon the first, namely, the complete mutuality of the Father's love for the Son and the Son's love for the Father, a mutuality that is indeed the glory of God, viz., the Holy Spirit. "Everything of mine is yours," Jesus says, "and everything of yours is mine..." Here is the origin of that mutual love—that graced "all-in-all-ness"— which is to be reflected in the love of husbands and wives for each other, in the love of parents for their children and children for their parents if they would truly become "domestic churches" – places that reflect God's love. As St. John Paul II taught, "The future of every family unit depends upon this 'fairest love': the mutual love of husband and wife, of parents and children, a love embracing all generations. Love [mutual love] is the true source of the unity and strength of the family."

## **IV. Formed for Mission**

A. All of which brings us to the first reading from the Acts of the Apostles where we find St. Paul giving his farewell speech to the Ephesians in which he reflects on his mission and gives direction for our mission. Paul tells the Church at Ephesus that he did not shrink from proclaiming to its members the truth of the Gospel. He did not avoid teachings that were difficult or controversial but rather taught them what was for their benefit ... that is to say, what accords with our humanity and our dignity and what accords with God's plan for the redemption of the world. So too you are called to proclaim fully the truth about marriage and family for the benefit of the culture in which we live, a culture which has largely lost its way, and for the benefit of those who are seeking, at whatever level, to follow Christ and to be members of his Body, the Church. Indeed, as both Pope Benedict prophetically taught, "Just as the eclipse of God and the eclipse of the family are linked, so too the new evangelization is inseparable from the family."

B. And finally, let me note that Paul proclaimed the truth of the Gospel both in the homes of the Ephesians and also in the public square. In today's reading Paul makes clear that he visited the homes of the Ephesian converts where they gathered to worship and hand on the faith. In the fullest sense these homes became domestic churches: households entirely won over to Christ, where the Eucharist was celebrated and the friends of the Risen Lord rejoiced... In the same way I hope and pray you will dedicate your lives to helping families heal their wounds, open their hearts in love, and thus become domestic churches.

C. Yet, even as St. Paul shared the Gospel in the homes of the Ephesians, so too he proclaimed it in the public square as he had done in the Areopagus in Athens. In the same way, you will be called not only to minister to families in private but indeed to proclaim and defend the institution of marriage in the public square, especially in these days when it is under assault in so many ways, not the least of which is the arbitrary redefinition of marriage by our nation's highest court.

## **V. Conclusion**

A. So, now the challenge is to take the understanding that faith has yielded and to translate it into pastoral practice in a time when the vocation of marriage and family faces grave challenges. How many good families and good Catholics are starving for the truth and how many troubled families need the compassion that truth can bring. Bishops and parish priests need good coworkers and universities, schools, and diocesan offices need to be staffed by those who, like yourselves, are so well equipped for ministry.

B. So in these days when we await a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit, I pray that the Spirit of God will overshadow each of you and guide you to the specific way God wants you to contribute to the Church's mission of evangelization, even if that should bring you to Baltimore!

May God bless you and keep you in his love!