

Commencement

It would be a privilege on any Spring day to be invited to deliver the commencement address at this historic and prestigious university. How especially significant the honor to do so for Mt. St. Mary's Bicentennial Class, and on Pentecost Sunday and Mother's Day. I am grateful to President Thomas Powell and to the Board of Trustees for this invitation and especially for the honorary doctorate awarded me.

Congratulations to this Bicentennial Class for your accomplishment. And to your families and friends, Welcome, and thank you for your sacrifices which make this day possible. I cannot help but quote Bob Hope who years ago saw fit to thank a neighboring university for his son's education: He can speak to me in five languages asking for money.

Fr. John Dubois founded Mt. St. Mary's College 200 years ago, in his words, to form men for democracy and for the priesthood. The Mount's success in priestly formation has been extravagantly successful with priests ordained from here numbering upwards of 1,900. Known as the cradle of the episcopate, more than 49 graduates have become bishops, with the number rising annually.

But that your founder insisted that graduates be formed for American democracy and that his efforts began in Maryland called for courage and foresight, for it was a moment when Catholics were suspect in America and American democracy was suspect in Rome.

Dubois' confidence in the American experiment was mirrored by his contemporary and ordinary, the first Archbishop of Baltimore, John Carroll, who in communicating to Rome said he wished to "sing canticles and praise to the Lord" for taking Catholics into the protection of this new Nation.

In insisting on the compatibility between Catholicism and democracy, how fully vindicated our early leaders were both by history and most recently by Pope Benedict XVI as he expressed his "great respect for our vast pluralistic society."

The fledgling concept of religious freedom all began here in Maryland and the short-lived Act of Toleration proclaimed by the Catholic, Baron Cecil Calvert in 1649. That act offered religious freedom to Christians of every persuasion. Just as Maryland is sacred ground for religious freedom, Emmitsburg in singular fashion is hallowed ground for Catholic education.

To hear Pope Benedict's encouraging talk to Catholic educators during his visit, one could image the Catholicity and the intellectual charity of Mt. St. Mary's in almost every sentence.

Our Holy Father twice referred to St. Elizabeth Ann Seton while in the United States, calling her a towering figure who with others and "with great tenacity and foresight laid the foundations of what is today an unshakable network of parochial schools contributing to the spiritual well-being of the Church and the nation."

All of you are heirs to the American Catholic educational tradition, a tradition of Faith. How blest the Church is and how fortunate you are that at a moment when so many higher Catholic institutions are embarrassed or ambiguous as to their Catholic identity, Mt. St. Mary's is clear and unequivocal: "We are proud to be a Catholic university and we have the courage to be Catholic in all we say and do." For this resolve, high praise is due to President Powell, his Board of Trustees and fine faculty.

The test of this university's Catholicity, the evidence of its success is ultimately validated in its graduates if it is to carry any credibility whatever. Benedict XVI's standard for an education that is truly Catholic would be found not only in orthodox teaching or student numbers, but in his words, in "the joy of entering into Christ's being for others." It's what the hundreds of crucifixes call out to you daily as you pass them by on this campus: only the one who gives his life for others, for Christ and His Gospel, will find it. How much of yourself are you willing to surrender to sacrifice for a higher good? And what is that good if not knowing and doing the will of God? If the bicentennial graduate of Mt. St. Mary's University is driven by the engine of self-seeking and self-interest, that graduate has failed this institution and its traditions.

Your challenging academic pursuits these years at the Mount have led to many

discoveries. Albert Einstein held that true education is what remains long after you have forgotten everything you have learned in the classroom. It was on one of Simon Garfunkel's subway walls that while in New York recently, I saw an advertisement for an on-line course in practical philosophy. The poster on the wall posed questions that you are on the way to answering as bicentennial graduates of this university so thoroughly Catholic. Who am I? What is my purpose? How can I realize my potential?

These are searching questions, rooted in every heart since Adam and Eve. But they are so rarely asked, much less answered by your contemporaries. Truth demands an answer. Faith answers, Jesus Christ. Benedict XVI again to the youth at Dunwoodie, New York:

...truth is not an imposition. Nor is it simply a set of rules. It is a discovery of the One who never fails us; the One whom we can always trust... ultimately truth is a person: Jesus Christ.

Bicentennial graduates: Have you discovered or perhaps re-discovered Jesus Christ here? And will you share that discovery with others as you depart with your Mountain memories? Do you believe that he is the only ultimate measure of the truly human being? Do you find in him, in his life, his preaching, his example the model of true leadership?

What does it mean to lead and to be a leader? It means to know where you are headed and how to get there. What leaders have you looked up to to reach this point in your life? A recent book's title suggests that when the truth is compromised, leadership will be absent. The title, "Ten Things Your Minister Wants to Tell You (But Can't Because He Needs the Job)." Or, in political accent: find out where the popular movement is marching, and get right out there in front.

In a society polarized in virtually every sector, where one person's hero is easily another's villain, only lives of truth in action—the heroism of 9/11 for instance—will find credibility among people of good will. The timid move in crowds. Leaders do not. Speak up for life, for the poor, for the outcast in our midst—or what has this education been for?

I suspect you have discovered a community here at the Mount that you will not easily find elsewhere. Note its hallmarks, shared values, pains, and joys. Respectful listening, trust one for the other and cheerful self-sacrifice. A joyful, contagious spirit permeates the temper of this campus—and, seemingly, always has. On this Pentecost, I would call it the Holy Spirit. That each of you has been enriched by this unique spirit is as much part of your education as have been your academics. Now take that spirit and spread it, transplant it into the arid soils where your next steps lead you.

We thank and congratulate the mothers present today, especially the mothers and grandmothers of our graduates. And in closing, how remiss I would be did I not thank her who has watched over this campus for two centuries. Silently, prayerfully from the grotto atop this holy mountain that is hers, our Blessed Virgin takes uncommon concern for the lives under her watch.

Find a prayerful moment to thank this Mother of all mothers for her protection and guidance, and for the good things that this holy place has done for the Bicentennial Class of 2008.