

**COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS OF THE MOST REVEREND CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
SACRED HEART SEMINARY AND SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
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My Dear Friends in Christ,

As the Apostolic Nuncio, the Holy Father's representative to the United States, I greet you in the name of Pope Francis. In a special way, I assure our graduates of His Holiness' heartfelt congratulations and prayers on this momentous occasion in your lives. I thank Father Raul Gomez-Ruiz for his invitation to address you during these commencement exercises. This is not my first trip to Sacred Heart, and I have always been warmly welcomed by the faculty, staff, and students. It is a pleasure to be here.

Our hearts are filled with gratitude to Almighty God for this day, but also for the many people who have supported our graduates, especially with their prayers, along their journey, including their family and friends, the Board of Trustees, the seminary faculty, formators, vocation directors, parishioners and benefactors.

I want to thank the faculty of this seminary and school of theology. Formation of the Church's ministers is some of the most difficult work in the Church today, and yet is also absolutely vital for the Church to be the Church that Christ calls her to be. Thank you for your many sacrifices that make this possible.

I greet not only seminarians and priests who are receiving their degrees today, but also those lay students who are earning Master degrees or certificates. Pope Francis speaks often about synodality or walking together. The clergy and the laity walk together and work together in building the Kingdom of God.

Regardless of our state in life, at this critical juncture in the life of the Church, increasingly marked by secularization, each person has a specific task in life, not determined by our career but by our faith: to give witness to the Risen Lord.

Our task is to witness to faith, but faith recognizes that Jesus is salvation present in history and in our lives. Just as Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "*Today salvation has come to this house,*" so also as missionary disciples, we must make this proclamation. Salvation is not just about the next life but is also about the here and now and is directly related to the lives of the men and women of our day.

Christ brings salvation. In the Book of Revelation, we hear, “*I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End.*” Saint Paul writes in Colossians that *in Him all things hold together*. Christ is the meaning and goal of history. In Him, everything finds its fulfillment.

Christ Himself gave a gift to our graduates – the gift of a privileged time to study and to deepen their faith, to nurture their intimate friendship with Him, to be educated to recognize His Presence. This is what they will be doing when they go forth from this seminary, educating themselves and others to His Presence. Pope Benedict XVI famously told young people, “God has not made you for mediocrity but for greatness.”

But people and things reach true greatness only in their relationship to Christ, who is the world’s one true hope. It is not that the people to whom our new graduates will minister, nor our graduates themselves, will not experience failure, disappointment, resistance and rejection; however, in relationship to the Risen Christ, they can overcome disappointment and despair, discovering joy even in this world. This is what I hope our new graduates offer the People of God and our world: the joy of knowing Jesus Christ. This, I believe, is also the dream Pope Francis has for the Church: to be a missionary Church, offering the joy of the Gospel to others.

Of course, I am sure our graduates have many hopes and dreams about what their future parishes and ministry might look like. Although important, those dreams will never reach true greatness if they are built only by the works of our hands. If those dreams do not come to fruition or are even crushed, we may find ourselves entirely lost.

We have recently completed a Year of Saint Joseph. Joseph understood that his dreams had to die for God’s greater plan. Although he was a simple carpenter, he wisely realized that he could not have his vocation on his own terms. We too must live our vocations on God’s terms, in relationship to Christ.

It is our collective task to make the Presence of Christ known, but this Presence is also found within the Church. For Christ founded her with authority, established a hierarchical order within her, endowed her with the Sacraments, and convoked her members. To proclaim to others that there is hope in Christ is also to say, “I am convinced that this same hope is present in His Church.”

The faith which we and our graduates profess is sustained and lived in community. Our graduates, as men and women of the Church, will give witness to

their faith in parishes, neighborhoods, and in families. In contrast to the individualism that dominates American culture, they will witness to the value of community, family, and the common good, offering to the young and to foreigners a profound sense of belonging to the Family of God.

But this faith which we profess in Christ and live in the Church is not a result of abstract ideas but is a result of an encounter. Pope Benedict XVI wrote (and Pope Francis cites this in *Evangelii Gaudium*):

“Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.”

In our encounter with Christ or with another in the Church, our hearts are transformed by the beauty of an authentic, concrete relationship with another. This beauty provokes us so much, that we want to give ourselves totally and completely to the relationship.

For the one wounded by the beauty of the love of Christ, Christ Himself becomes everything for that person. The encounter with Christ affects every dimension of the person and all his or her relationships. Thus, faith is not privatized or reduced to a few formal gestures. Faith offers the promise of new life and a changed humanity.

Yes, our graduates and all of us can help make the Church a place of a different or transformed humanity, governed by the supreme law of love. Charity does not seek its own interests but seeks the good of others. Recognizing others not as a threat but as a brother or sister with whom we walk and seeing the needy not as a burden but as those whom we would happily accompany in time of need is a sign of this changed humanity, a better humanity for knowing Christ.

This change in ourselves and in the Church cannot come about by our willing it, nor by some Pelagian efforts; rather, it comes from outside us – from a radical “Other.” This “Other” is none other than the Presence of the Risen Lord. He is at work in the hearts of believers.

Thus, the Christianity which our new graduates will propose is a way of life and a changed humanity, diametrically opposed to the type of moralism, which seeks to control behavior or reduces this life to the keeping of rules. One can follow the rules without being transformed by the knowledge and love of Christ.

Our graduates and the whole community must engage the world. Sometimes the Church does this directly, and other times, she educates her children to act personally and responsibly. The time spent here at Sacred Heart has been a time principally dedicated to education – to an integrated formation which respects the values and beliefs of the Catholic community – and to nurturing an awareness of belonging to the community of believers, in which communion with the Church is an indispensable guiding factor in pastoral activity.

Often members of the Church seek to change the conditions of our world through political and ideological means. Perhaps, a better approach would be to encounter Christ anew and to experience His love in prayer and in the community, allowing ourselves to be so transformed by the encounter that we face the problems of our world differently.

The Gospel has something to say about how we face threats to human life, poverty, challenges to the family, and even about how we confront death. The Gospel gives us vision. Scripture says in Proverbs that *without vision the people perish*. (Prov 29: 18) Christ came that you may have life and that you may see with hearts transformed by His love. He gives you the power to be His witnesses – witnesses to a *faith that conquers the world!* (cf. 1 John 5:1-12)

To our graduates, I offer my heartfelt congratulations. These are your commencement exercises. The word “commencement” appears in the English language in the late 13th century and is from the Old French *commencement*, meaning “beginning or start”. While it may seem strange to have “commencement” exercises at the end of your education at Sacred Heart, it really is quite fitting. As you complete your studies here, you begin a new phase in your life, your vocation, and in your humanity. Something new, something beautiful, awaits you on the horizon.

Shortly after his election as Pope nine years ago, Pope Francis began his Pontificate with Mass with all the Cardinals in the Sistine Chapel. There he began something new with three words or points, in classic Jesuitical style: Journeying, Building, and Professing.

In brief, he said that “our life is a journey, and when we stop moving things go wrong. We always need to journey in the presence of the Lord, in the light of the Lord, seeking to live with blamelessness ...” He continued: “Building. Building the Church. We speak of stones; stones are solid; but living stones, stones anointed by the Holy Spirit ...” He further stated: “Thirdly, professing. We can walk as much as we want, we can build many things, but if we do not profess Jesus Christ things go

wrong.” He concluded his address: “My prayer for all of us is that the Holy Spirit, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, our Mother, will grant us the grace: to walk; to build; to profess Jesus crucified.” (HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER POPE FRANCIS, SISTINE CHAPEL, 14 MARCH 2013)

You have been journeying together throughout your formation and education. Today, we speak of synodality. The Greek word *synodos* means “to be on the journey together” as in a caravan or religious pilgrimage (Lk 2:41-44). Synodality describes the journeying together in history of the People of God toward the New and Eternal Jerusalem. We are a “pilgrim Church,” journeying toward the heavenly Jerusalem.

Thus, your journeying together does not end with this commencement exercises, but rather, it continues in those dioceses, parishes, and communities you are called to serve. Keeping in touch with one another and learning from each other’s experiences can be exceptionally useful. Actually, some of my visits here have involved “collegial sharing” among new bishops. Why could you not carry on your journey together with this sort of sharing?

You must not only journey together, but you must also help build up the Church through an authentic reform that is not rooted in the fantasy world but in reality. With your education and formation, you must engage and embrace reality. Reality, from the Latin *realis* or *realitatem*, came to the English language again from the French *réalité*.

Josef Jungmann, the great Jesuit liturgist of the twentieth century, thought that education is an introduction to reality. Just as we spoke of a journey, so too we could say that reality is the destination; the destination is present not only in the moment the journey ends but along each step of the journey. Reality defines and structures our journey. It is also the ultimate destination, the achievement, or accomplishment, of the journey of education.

Today, the Church finds herself in a suffocating context in which ideology seeks to restrict faith to private life. When faith is not replaced by ideology and when it works in accordance with its nature in the conscience and hearts of men and women, it becomes a light that allows a person to judge reality in a distinct manner.

Sacred Heart Seminary and School of Theology has taught you not to yield to the trends or relativism or fundamentalism underway, both of which threaten freedom. The only things you should surrender to are love and truth. The reference points by which everything should be judged are love for truth and the truth to

courageously propose the primacy of love and of goodness. The criteria for judgment could not be clearer, and without them, education collapses.

What then is the goal of your education both now and in the future? The end of your education and formation is not simply to respond to the demands of the market; rather, it is to help future generations grow in humanity, building up our society. “To grow in humanity” means to grow in intelligence and goodness, in the capacity for being just and for solidarity, and, principally, in being open to and desiring to live and to receive Him, who is the definitive meaning of life and our final destination.

In addition, to walking and building, we must profess our faith in Christ. Pope Francis reminds us:

“Christians profess their faith in God’s tangible and powerful love which really does act in history and determines its final destiny: a love that can be encountered, a love fully revealed in Christ’s passion, death and resurrection.” (Pope Francis, Encyclical letter *Lumen Fidei*, 29 June 2013, 17)

He adds: “Faith becomes operative in the Christian on the basis of the gift received, the love which attracts our hearts to Christ and enables us to become part of the Church’s great pilgrimage through history until the end of the world.” (Ibid., 22)

As you go forth from Sacred Heart, reflect on the gifts that God has given you here as you journey together, as you build up the Church, and as you profess your faith, which enlightens others and shows them the way to salvation. As one chapter of your life closes and something new begins or commences, this is my prayer for you as well.

Congratulations. May God’s blessing be upon each of you.