



LECTURES & PAPERS

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Where “knowledge flourishes in virtue”

Honors Convocation – Immaculata University – November 10, 2002

Sr. Patricia Fadden, IHM (president) and Sr. Carroll Isselmann, IHM (vice-president) ... thank you for inviting me to address this august academic assembly.

If I have understood correctly, today’s convocation is actually two events in one: first, a celebration of those students who have achieved academic honors on the Dean’s List and in national societies, and, second, the investiture of freshmen in your Women’s College to welcome them into the university community. Shall I presume, then, that this dual ceremony means I get to speak twice as long?! With the assurance that I will not, and in view of the fact that everyone here probably wants to get on with the rest of the festivities, let me just offer you a series of three words and two images.

The first word is one of *congratulations*. I say this initially to all of you who have achieved academic honors and to those of you who will receive academic caps. Even more so, I speak this word to the entire community here, in recognition of your becoming Immaculata University. Some may think your transformation from a college to a university is merely a change in nomenclature or, perhaps, a strategic marketing ploy.

I beg to differ. In becoming a full-fledged university, you have entered into a new place in the world of Catholic higher education.

Any university is part of a worldwide community of scholars, whose educational task is instrumental to the development of culture. Through the work of its faculty,

and the support of its administration and staff, a university serves as the privileged place for exploring new ideas, for envisioning new modes of life, and for entrusting new hope to the next generation.

Every university is part of a centuries-old tradition of higher learning. With historical roots dating back to the Middle Ages, and a global reach extending now to every nation, the university is a bridge linking the legacy of the past and the potential of the future.

But this university, this *Catholic* university, is part of something even greater, something that goes to the very heart of who we all are and who we are to become. With the vitality of the 150-year educational tradition of the I.H.M. sisters (who educated me at a young age), Immaculata University now reshapes its dynamic role in the mission of spreading the good news of salvation and redemption. That is a message our world is ever in need of hearing. So, I say "congratulations" ... and best of luck!

With that wish comes my second word, but this time it is a word of *warning!* As you are, no doubt, aware, higher education today is caught up in the phenomenon of globalization, and there it can be a powerful force. As citizens in what has become a global village, we now speak an increasingly universal language (English). We share information across a world wide web. We are made aware of news in distant lands via digital and satellite technology. We work and we shop in a multi-national marketplace. We even bear the risk and responsibility of forging international coalitions to provide security for all nations.

Politics and economics, language and information ... these and other ideas are central concerns of a university. No wonder, then, that Nelson Mandela could boldly proclaim: "Education is the most powerful weapon [we] can use to change the world."

But the use of this weapon, in my opinion, requires a warning. Consider, if you will, the image of the web that characterizes the world wide connections of our information technology.

As a spider's craftsmanship, the web is, on the one hand, a thing of beauty. It is a complex structure of fragile threads whose intricate links allow the creepy

crawler to transcend the limits of space.

But beware - the spider's web is also his weapon. How easy it is, even for us, to get tangled up in this cluster of fibers. And for the unsuspecting insect, the web serves as a snare, choking off progress and chaining the little critter as a prelude to its death.

Hence, my warning. Higher education can, indeed, be used as a powerful force to change the world. But, if by education we mean only the transmission of knowledge and the learning of techniques, then this weapon can actually be dangerous.

As Philip Altbach rightly notes, when we see education as a commodity to be purchased, as a skill set to be acquired for the sake of commercial gain, we can make important connections, but we would make little contribution to the common good of people.¹

Higher education that is only technology-based or consumer-driven spins a fragile web. In the words of Pierre Manent, it risks making "profit, not religion ... the spirit of this spiritless world where one must work in order to live."²

This is where Immaculata University - and you who are its honored students and honorable faculty - can and must make a real difference. Like the web whose many fibers are linked at one core, so the multi-faceted challenges we face today are ultimately connected to one central problem - the problem of religion in the world.

That problem holds such a central place in our lives that it leads one literary scholar, a former Marxist at that, to observe that "the twenty-first century will be religious, or it will not be" (André Malraux). Why such a dire divining of our times, you ask? Because "only religious convictions ... [are] capable of lifting our eyes to a nobler horizon of human possibility."³

¹ PHILIP ALTBACH, "Knowledge and Education as International Commodities: The Collapse of the Common Good," *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education*, 22/2 (Summer 2002): 55-60.

² Quoted in MICHAEL CASEY, "How to Think About Globalization," *First Things: The Journal of Religion and Public Life*, 126 (October 2002): 47-56.

³ In GEORGE WEIGEL, "A New Dialogue with Islam?" *The Catholic Difference*, on the Ethics & Public Policy Center web site at <www.eppc.org/publications/xq/ASP/pubsID.1290/qz/pubs_viewdetail.htm>.

The meaning of freedom, the value of justice, the appreciation of human dignity - these are the more significant issues confronting our understanding of what is possible in the world of the present age. Together they constitute the foundation of any and every culture. And, as Pope John Paul II has claimed, repeatedly and courageously: "There is only one culture: that of man, by man, and for man" (*Ex corde Ecclesiae*, 3), and "At the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God" (*Centesimus annus*, 24).⁴

Today, of course, a wide variety of attitudes respond to this mystery. In fact, as the noted sociologist Peter Berger argues, "What characterizes our era is not that there is too little religion, but rather that there is too much of it."⁵

In our pluralistic society and global village, religion remains a major concern. But faith seems to have become a matter of preference, religious belief being the result of individual taste and personal prerogative rather than the legacy of an inherited and inspired tradition transmitted by intermediary bodies such as the family and the university.

Faith today, to use George Weigel's term, has become "anorexic." It suffers from the deconstructionist delusion that differences don't make a real difference. Its primary symptom is the post-modern premise that "since no one really knows the truth of anything, everyone's opinions about the truth of things should be 'tolerated'."⁶

And in this state of affairs lies a challenge for each of you gathered here today, which brings me, at long last, to my third word. The *challenge* is that you understand "honor" for what it really is and what it can be. It would be easy to see honor in terms of success, as the development and display of academic talents that distinguish you from other students.

But honor, especially at a Catholic university, is not simply an intellectual skill;

⁴ Cf. THOMAS DAILEY, "Toward a Culture of Truth: Higher Education and the Thought of Pope John Paul II," *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, 3/2 (Spring 2000): 145-164.

⁵ PETER BERGER, "Globalization and Religion," *The Hedgehog Review: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Culture*, 4/2 (Summer 2002): 7-20.

⁶ WEIGEL, "A New Dialogue with Islam?" (see note 3 above).

it is an existential skill. Honor is not merely the choice of a good life; it is a life of good choices. Honor is not superior knowledge; it is surpassing virtue.

And thus would I propose that we revise what Mr. Mandela had to say. What I suggest to you this day is that education in virtue is the most powerful tool that, with the grace of God, you can use to change the world.

By way of conclusion, then, let me say another three words, words that you may already have heard at this institution: *scientia floret virtute* - "knowledge flourishes in virtue."

You may learn to master all kinds of organizational techniques in management and marketing. But when you live with the virtue of *integrity*, by being honest and truthful in all you do, then you will flourish.

You may learn to analyze various theories of human development in education and psychology. But when you practice the virtue of *civility*, in how you speak and act toward other humans, then you will have honor.

You may learn to grasp complex laws of nature in science. But when you show the virtue of *solidarity*, by standing up in defense of life and in the struggle for justice, then you will change the world.

"Knowledge flourishes in virtue" -- this is the motto of Immaculata University. It also provides us with a final image for this day - that of a flower in a garden.

Cultivating the growth of this flower takes work, but it is fruitful labor. For when the flower blossoms, everyone can see in its shape and its color a thing of true beauty. Thus does it become, however momentary, a sign of, and stimulus to, our happiness.

You who are being publicly recognized here this day have put in good work. Your academic abilities have blossomed. And your honor will bring beauty to our world when your "knowledge flourishes in virtue" throughout your lives.

For you who are being formally invested as students in this university, the garden awaits you. The seeds of your work have only just been planted. Keep ever in mind the flower of true knowledge and virtuous living that is the goal of your labors, and you, too, will cultivate honor.

And this brings me to my last three words: "I have finished!"