

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady University
Baton Rouge, Louisiana
22 May 2017

George Weigel

President Holland, members of the board of trustees, family and friends of the graduates – and most of all, members of the Class of 2017:

Thank you for inviting me to come to Baton Rouge today. I love this part of America, and it is always a pleasure to come here (even if it usually costs me extra time on the treadmill when I return home). And thank you for inviting me to share this wonderful occasion with you. My warmest congratulations go to the Class of 2017.

Speakers at commencements are notorious for offering advice – usually unsolicited, often off-the-mark, and typically unremembered. Perhaps the finest example of a public speaker whose advice was to-the-point – if not always followed – was Conrad Hilton, founder of the vast hotel chain that bears his name. Mr. Hilton was being interviewed on national television many years ago and was asked what one thing he would most like the viewers to remember, given his vast experience of humanity. Conrad Hilton looked the camera in the eye and without missing a beat told his fellow-Americans, “Please – put the shower curtain *inside* the tub.”

Sage advice, that. But let me offer our graduates today another piece of wisdom, from a very different source: Pope Pius XI. As the shadows of fascist, Nazi, and communist totalitarianism lengthened across Europe in the late 1930s and a terrible war threatened, Pius XI commended this thought to the Catholic Church:

“Let us thank God,” he said, “that he makes us live among the present problems. It is no longer permitted to anyone to be mediocre.”

Members of the Class of 2017 of Franciscan Missionaries of Our Lady University: those words could well have been addressed to each of you, across the decades that separate us from Pius XI. For their summons to excellence captures the essence of the education – the Franciscan and Catholic education – you have received here. And they embody the challenge you face as you take what you have learned here out into the world, especially into the world of healing.

Here, you have been taught that the patients you will serve are men and women with an inherent dignity and value that demands your respect and calls forth your compassion.

Here, you have been taught that “health care” is far more than an “industry” or a “sector” of the American economy – rather, health care is a vocation, a calling, a way to live your life as a gift to others, as each of your lives was a gift to you.

Here, in this remarkable part of America, you have seen the national aspiration to liberty and justice for all embodied in a unique culture that could teach the rest of America something about civility, harmony, and solidarity – even as, perhaps, this unique culture could learn a few things from other parts of the country about cholesterol!

Here, Class of 2017, you have not only been educated, important as that is; you have been *formed*. You have been formed in a Franciscan spirit of reverence for life, and you have been formed in a spirit of Franciscan responsibility for creation

and for creation's most noble creature, the human person – the man or woman made in the image and likeness of God and destined for beatitude and glory.

Here, you have been taught and formed in the convictions that we are not just congealed stardust, and that humanity is not just a happy accident of cosmic biochemical processes. Remember that. For those convictions are essential to your future work as healers, a work that should touch hearts and souls as well as bodies. The advance of medical science in the lifetimes of everyone present here today has been breathtaking. Yet those amazing advances in the science of healing have not always been complemented by parallel advances in wisdom about the ways in which the new technological capabilities we possess should be deployed. The health care profession needs a soul as well as a mind. You can be that soul. This university can be that soul by offering its students the wisdom of theology, philosophy and the liberal arts as well as scientific knowledge and professional skills

To carry this school's diploma is to carry a great responsibility. The future of Franciscan health care, which has played such an important role in our national life, is being entrusted to you. In the decades ahead, *you* will be the face of this Franciscan ministry to society. In the decades ahead, *you* will bring the spirit of St. Francis and St. Clare to an American health care system that is in danger of dehumanization, even as its technical wonders multiply exponentially. In the decades ahead, you must, in the Franciscan spirit, help form the conscience, as well as the soul, of the profession of healing in the United States.

The life of faith and professional life cannot be siloed, as if they were two aspects of our lives that never intersect. A genuinely Catholic and Franciscan faith

will shape every facet of your lives – your souls, your minds, your families, your professional work. America is too full of siloes today. The education you have received here, the hard work you have done here, the sacrifices you and your families have made so that you could be here and learn here and be formed here – all of these have prepared you to be men and women who break out of the siloes that divide us, men and women who demonstrate to others that the greatest satisfaction in life comes from making our lives into a gift for others.

Thank you for letting me share this day with you. Always put that shower curtain inside the tub! But above all, please remember the words of Pope Pius XI – “It is no longer permitted to anyone to be mediocre.”

Godspeed on your journey.

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