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## “TAKE IT TO THE STREETS”

Commencement Address

Graduate School of Theology @ Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary

*May 19, 2014*

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Thank you, Fr. Bongard, for your kind introduction.

Archbishop Chaput, Bishop Senior, brother clergy, faculty colleagues, esteemed guests ... I'm honored to have this opportunity to speak at the annual commencement of the Graduate School of Theology and to address all of you, but in particular the graduates of the Class of 2014.

Whenever I attend an event like this, I'm reminded of a classic Commencement story. A university president was traveling around the country visiting alumni. At one of the stops, an alumnus came up to him and told him that he would always remember what the president said to his graduating class at their commencement twenty years earlier, because those two words of advice motivated all the success he had later in life. Of course, the president had no idea what he had said. So the alumnus explained: “When I was walking along that long line to receive my degree, I came and stood in front of you. You shook my hand, gave me my degree, pulled me along, and said: ‘keep moving, keep moving’.” ☺

Because I have had the pleasure of sitting through numerous Commencement exercises, I will happily heed the advice to keep things moving. But today I would like to offer two different words to you who are being graduated, two words that are a bit more direct and a bit more daring. Perhaps you will also remember them in years to come. My two words of advice are simply these: GET OUT!

Now, I certainly do not mean to sound dismissive or flippant. On the contrary, I say those two words with the best of intentions and, of course, in all Christian charity. “Get out” – as in go out, go forth. These are words pertinent to any “commencement” – because as the name of the event implies, this is not the end of your work, only its beginning. So, get out ... and keep moving, too!

I realize that my two words to you do not sound especially wise or profound. They do not sound especially auspicious for an occasion such as this. And you may even think the meaning is so obvious as not to need explaining. But what I would like to suggest to you today is that those two words can serve as a clarion call for the culmination of your education because they are grounded on an image of what, in the end, theology is all about.



Think back for a moment to the time when you started pursuing your degree or certificate here. No doubt someone, or perhaps many people, asked you what you were going to do with such a degree. Now that you have completed your studies, that question has even more urgency. What are you going to do with a degree or certificate *in Theology*?

Never mind that along the way you have become wiser, by opening your minds and hearts to the masters and learning from the “Queen of all the Sciences.” Our culture, with its emphasis on efficiency and functionality, still wants to know what you’re going *to do* with a degree in Theology. In this instrumentalist perspective, the goal of education is to gain a credential that will lead to more meaningful work as a way to earn a better living. Knowledge, in this view, has value only as much as it leads to greater buying power.

Let me assure you, based on my own lengthy experience in higher education, you will *not* get rich with this degree ... not even from an institution with as grand and glorious a history as Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary! Still, there remains a valid point to

the cultural question: really, what *are* you going to do with this degree? The answer I propose to you today is just this: “get out” and “take it to the streets.”

That answer is predicated upon Pope Francis’ theology of the contemporary Church as a place whose doors should be open to the world around it. The Holy Father repeats this image in his apostolic exhortation on “The Joy of the Gospel,” and my brief remarks today are based on the first chapter of that document. (The entire text is well worth reading, or reading again, but I did promise I would keep this moving!)



What Pope Francis says at the end of that opening chapter is instructive for all of us. In his words: “I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security” (no. 49). So, to get dirty by going out and taking the Gospel message to the streets – that’s the pope’s image of a missionary Church, a Church that brings grace to the world. That’s the exhortation he gives to everyone who belongs to the Church, because all of us share this common vocation to holiness.

And that’s a particularly apt image for you who are being graduated today with a degree or a certificate in Theology. On what streets will you tread? How will you get dirty there? And what is it that you should be taking to the streets?

Where you go will, of course, vary with each one of you. But for all of you it will likely be very different from traveling on Wynnewood Road to and from scenic Overbrook! Still, as I see it, there are two streets on your theological roadmap that we share in common.



One is local – it’s the street on which your parish is found. As Pope Francis says in his exhortation, “The parish is not an outdated institution; ... The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship and

celebration. ... It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach.” As idyllic as all of that sounds, the Holy Father also realistically admits “that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented” (no. 28).

Well, that call comes to you today; it falls to you now to go back to your parishes to assist with this evangelical and missionary renewal of the local Church. With degree or certificate in hand, you have been prepared to participate more fully in the life of a parish and perhaps even take a leadership role there. So, get out! Take what you’ve



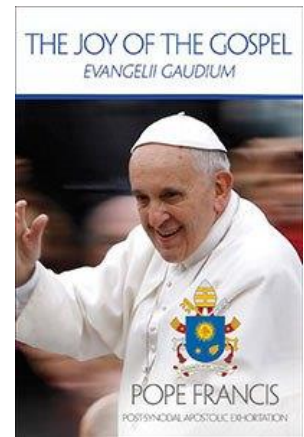
learned here and bring it to fruition in the lived theology that is to be experienced in the environment of parish life. Your newfound knowledge is not only for your own sake, nor merely for your own power; instead, what you have received in terms of theological knowledge is a gift for you to share now with the community of believers for the benefit of all.

The other street on which you will go is the way of the world – the highways and byways of everyday life, of work and play, of family and friends, of politics and economics and healthcare and every other realm of modern society. These are roads traveled by anyone and everyone. They are the pathways where encounters between the human and the divine can take place. The Holy Father urges us to walk those streets when he says: “In fidelity to the example of the Master, it is vitally important for the Church today to go forth and preach the Gospel to all: to all places, on all occasions, without hesitation, reluctance or fear. The joy of the Gospel is for all people: no one can be excluded” (no. 23).

On those secular streets you will, indeed, encounter a fascinating variety of people: believers and seekers, the curious and the confused, some interested in what you now know but many more who remain opposed to it. There you can count on getting bumped and bruised, because the paths are overcrowded with any number of

competing and contrasting worldviews. There you may also get hurt, by ignorance or indifference or even harsh criticism. So be it! As the Holy Father acknowledges, “we will never be able to make the Church’s teachings easily understood or readily appreciated by everyone. Faith always remains something of a cross” (no 42.)

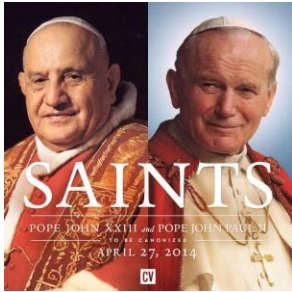
But faith is also made for the streets ... our streets, today’s streets! It’s out there – on the street and no longer in classrooms or libraries or institutes – that your degree or certificate will have real value. It’s out on the streets where people have need of the Gospel message in which you have become theologically well-versed. As Pope Francis points out, “If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life” (no. 49).



You who are honored here today have sought that goal through your studies. You’ve done so with the support of fellow believers. You have come to see, through the eyes of an enlightened faith, that Jesus Christ is “the way, the truth, and the life.” So get out ... and plant the seeds of a meaningful life among your brothers and sisters in the world. This, after all, is the motto of the seminary that is about to become your alma mater: “*exiit qui seminat*” – “the one who goes out sows.”

It won’t be easy, though. Planting seed on the macadam of modernity is a challenge, to say the least! But the Holy Father offers a way for you to do just that (no. 24). Grow in the Spirit of faith and hope and love, and you will attract others to what you know. Resolve to rejoice always in the mysteries of the Incarnation and Resurrection, and you will give witness to a joy that nothing in this world can ever negate or supplant. Show to others, over and over and over again, that infinite mercy of God the Father, and you will be able to embrace your own life and the lives of others – no matter how dirty you may get.

Today you will receive a degree or certificate in Theology from an institution that is in its third century of operation. But your education will be complete only when you do something with it – when you heed the words of Pope Francis who notes that “Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel” (no. 20.)



As you go forth from here, may this day be one of great joy for you, as I know it is for your families, this faculty, and all those who played a part in your theological education. *Congratulations to each of you!* And may our newest saints – John XXIII and John Paul II – accompany you wherever you go as you take the joy of the Gospel to the streets.

Now, let's get on with your commencement so that, indeed, you really can GET OUT!

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