

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS OF THE MOST REVEREND CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
CHRIST THE KING SEMINARY, EAST AURORA, NEW YORK
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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 the Reverend John Staak for his invitation to address you during these commencement exercises. 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 and benefactors.

Although I represent the Successor of Saint Peter as I travel throughout the country, today I come to you more like the Apostle Barnabas, whose name means "son of encouragement." I want to be direct in saying that I am proud of you and grateful for your sacrifice in choosing to serve the Church.

In these difficult and challenging times in the Church, times which call for both conversion and healing, our graduates – future priests, permanent deacons, and members of the lay faithful – are courageously offering themselves to the Lord and the Church as servant-leaders, willing to help realize Pope Francis' dream for a missionary Church, a Church which goes forth.

Different Gifts in the Church: Priesthood, Diaconate, and the Lay Vocation

Of course, the Holy Father's dream has its origin in the dream of the Lord Jesus, who sent his disciples out two by two, equipping them with his authority to proclaim the Kingdom of God. The disciples are missionaries, and so today, we often speak of missionary disciples. Those ordained to the priesthood or diaconate never stop being disciples. Rather, those ordained to the priesthood are disciples but who through their formation and through ordination will be configured to Christ the Head. They will represent Christ the Good Shepherd in the midst of the flock. To our future priests, I am grateful for both your courage and sacrifice. At this hour in the life of the Church, the Church needs you to be holy and faithful. The Holy Father wants you to be close to your people, to love them as Christ loved His Bride the Church. The Church needs men who are willing to use their authority wisely and in the service of communion, seen most clearly in the example of Jesus at the Last Supper when He washed His disciples' feet. The flock is looking for nourishment, not only through your teaching and preaching, but also through the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist, which comes to them through your hands. Configured to Christ the Priest, you will also be a Victim, offering your life to God and the flock, willingly, whole-heartedly, and joyfully. To live this great calling, you must humble, sincerely, and daily nurture your friendship with Christ to whom you will be configured. Some might ask, "Who would want to be a priest today?" You have answered, "Here I am. Take me." Once more I say, I admire your courage and the whole Church is grateful for your sacrifice.

Those to be ordained to the diaconate and our graduate who is already a deacon will have a share in the ministry of the bishop and will be ministers of the Word, Charity, and Liturgy. They will be humble servants and mediators of communion among the laity and clergy, serving as visible signs of the *diakonia*

of Christ the Servant. The Holy Father calls them “pioneers of the new civilization of love.” The Church is counting on you also to be creative missionaries of God’s love.

To our lay students earning their degrees, I offer you the words of St. Paul: “*Now there are a variety of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are a variety of activities, but the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.*” (1 Corinthians 12:4-7)

Christ first called you in baptism, but you have further discerned that he is calling you to deepen your knowledge of the faith through the study of theology and pastoral ministry, to be of service to your parishes, families, and those at the “spiritual and existential peripheries.” Like those in the permanent diaconate, you also will in your neighborhoods and homes mediate the closeness of God to the People of God, making the most of the specific charisms God has given you. We know all too well that you undertook your studies and training, not for a big salary but to be of service.

Priests, deacons, and laity can work together to build up the Body of Christ, each person possessing his or her specific vocation, without feeling threatened or being territorially about ministry. The Apostolic Church was of “one mind and heart.” (cf. Acts 4: 32) Christ calls His Church to be a Church of Mercy – a Church of the Reconciled and a Church that Reconciles. The same Church which Christ founded must be a Church open to the power of prayer and the power of the Holy Spirit, who brings about unity, while showering the Church with a diversity of gifts. The Church of Christ is a Synodal Church, a Church that walks together. To face the challenges of our day, we can learn from Church of the Apostolic Period.

A Church of the Reconciled and a Church that Reconciles

We begin with the Apostles. After Jesus’ Crucifixion, the Apostles found themselves in a state of fear. They were trapped behind closed doors; they did not go out. They doubted themselves. After all, one had betrayed Jesus. Another denied him. The rest fled like cowards. But what happened? Jesus appeared to them on the evening of the Resurrection. He offered them His gift of Peace and breathed the Holy Spirit on them, sending them forth and giving them authority. We should not underestimate the power of the Risen Lord to transform our situation from one of fear and shame to one of joy and apostolic boldness. Christ accompanies His Church, and the Holy Spirit animates her. The Risen Lord offered Mercy to the Apostles so that the Church could be a Church of the reconciled and a Church that reconciles.

Pope Francis teaches us that “Mercy cannot be a mere parenthesis in the life of the Church; it constitutes her very existence, through which the profound truths of the Gospel are made manifest and tangible. Everything is revealed in mercy; everything is resolved in the merciful love of the Father.” (Pope Francis, *Misericordia et Misera*, 20 November 2016, 1)

Christ is calling you, each according to a specific vocation, to live out the call to be ministers of mercy, reconciliation and peace, overcoming the sin and division that presently plague the Mystical Body.

The Church at Prayer: Openness to the Spirit and Journeying Together

The Apostolic Church is a Church that, gathered with the Mother of God, prays in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles prayed at Pentecost, at the time of the election of Matthias, and again after Peter and John had been brought before the Sanhedrin. Their prayer was so powerful that the whole

house shook! Do we pray like that today? They were open to the Spirit of God, who helped them to discern the way forward.

As the number of disciples grew in the early Church, a dispute arose between the Hellenists and Hebrews. The Apostles too, because of the demands of charity, were forced to put aside prayer and the ministry of the word. With growth, new pastoral problems emerged. How did they address them?

The Twelve called together the disciples. They made a proposal, choosing seven reputable men, to assist them. They listened to the community and to the Holy Spirit in this matter, and they discerned what to do. This discernment led to action, namely the laying on of hands by the Apostles on these seven, chosen men. They would act as the first deacons of the Church. This process is how the Church ought to function – in a synodal way.

Pope Francis speaks repeatedly of his desire for a synodal Church – a Church that walks together. There are clearly defined roles in the process, but the community prays, listens, discerns, subjects their proposal to authority, and final, action is taken. What is the result of this synodal activity by the early Church? *The word of God continued to spread, and the number of the disciples increased greatly.*

The outpouring of the Spirit on the Apostles, allowing them to discern, with the community, the way forward, was a loving and merciful act of God. God is no less merciful now than He was in the Apostolic period. Yes, in the Apostolic Church, the Apostles, the deacons, and the whole community worked together so that the Word could go forth and the mission entrusted to them by Christ could be fulfilled.

Conclusion

To our graduates, I say: That mission remains your mission. The Apostolic Church suffered persecution. It suffered from the worldliness as in the case of Ananias and Sapphira. It suffered from the pains that come naturally from gaining new members, but in each case, the Spirit of God remained with her; the Gospel continued to spread; and, the number of the disciples increased greatly.

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”. In the late 14th century, the English used the word to denote “entrance upon the privileges of a master or doctor in a university.” By 1850, Americans used the word to refer to a graduation ceremony.

While it may seem strange to have “commencement” exercises at the end of your education at Christ the King Seminary, it really is quite fitting. As you complete your studies here, you begin a new phase in your life and your vocations. Something new is on the horizon. Like Paul, we must now reach forward to what lies ahead.

Graduates, I entrust you to Christ the King of the Universe. May He rule your hearts and fill you with the joy of His Kingdom! Congratulations!