

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS OF THE MOST REVEREND CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ST. VINCENT DE PAUL REGIONAL SEMINARY
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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 Archbishop Wenski and Monsignor Toups for their invitation to address you during these commencement exercises. I greet the members of the Board of Trustees who are with us today, acknowledging the presence of Archbishop Wenski of Miami, Bishop Barbarito of Palm Beach, and Bishop Estevez of St. Augustine, who is serving this year as Chairman of the Board.

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.

In addition to the 16 seminarians receiving their degrees prior to their priestly ordination, 10 lay students and 16 candidates for the permanent diaconate will also be completing their formation and receiving degrees. This year's commencement also marks the first time that the Master of Arts in Philosophical Studies Degree will be offered to seven seminarians who have completed the seminary's Pre-Theology Program. Although the primary mission of St. Vincent's Regional Seminary remains the formation of priests, we see how here the vocational gifts of all the faithful are nurtured to work harmoniously for the good of the Church,

Regardless of our state in life, at this critical juncture in the life of the Church in this country, 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. The activity that should occupy our lives is to joyfully announce and witness to the fact that salvation is already present in the person of Christ in our midst.

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, as many ideologues have discovered, we may find ourselves entirely lost. No, we cannot have our vocations on our own terms; rather, we must live them 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, even a Church of sinners and fragile individuals. For He 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 philosophy and 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. Catholicism or Christianity ought not to be reduced to a religion; rather, it is a way of life, and He is *the* Way of Life. 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 occasional, 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 or charity. 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, whose pastoral charity knows no bounds.

Finally, 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 at Saint Vincent’s Seminary 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, and the power to be visionaries. It 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 Saint Vincent Seminary, 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. As you walk toward it, I entrust you to Saint Vincent de Paul and to the Virgin Mother of God, offering you the assurance of my prayers and my heartfelt congratulations!