

Commencement Address

of

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President of the University of Notre Dame

On the Occasion of

The Fourth Annual Commencement Exercises

of Le Moyne College

held in the

Onondaga War Memorial Building

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Twenty years ago this month, I wrote a graduation talk to be delivered to another graduating class in this fair city of Syracuse. It happened to be my own graduating class, the class of 1934 from Most Holy Rosary High School. Frankly, I do not have the slightest recollection of what I said on that occasion. I rather imagine that twenty years from now none of you will have any memory of what I say today. And yet, it is important that something be said, not just anything, not just the usual platitudes that are spoken at ten thousand commencements this month, not just something to fill in the gap between the conferring of degrees and your final departure from Le Moyne.

Why not just say the usual things and be gone? Because I think you are too important, the occasion is too important, and the very pressure of the times urge us to think more deeply about ourselves, and the world and God.

The usual graduation line is well known to all of you: Commencement means a beginning, today you are really beginning life, the world is bad today, things look dark, but will be better tomorrow because you enter the world today with starry eyes. If you will bear with me, I would like to reverse the lines, think through them again with you, and perhaps end with the thoughts that the world today needs something more than starry eyes.

First of all, your being here today is something much more than just a beginning. I doubt if any of you would choose to go back to that first day of class, here at Le Moyne, or in high school, or in grammar school and begin again. If we must speak of something commencing, go back beyond the beginning of your school days, beyond your birth, beyond the founding of the city of Syracuse, and there you will find a real beginning that should not be forgotten today. The year was 1650, and the man, but for your college, could have been forgotten today. His name was Father Simon Le Moyne. When he came here, he walked a path untrod by white man before. Death walked beside him, lurked all around him, for the inhabitants of

that day were called Onondagans, not Syracusans. The Onondagans belonged to the fiercest Indian Nation in North America, the Iroquois, who had by that time killed most of Father Le Moyne's best friends, his fellow Jesuit missionaries. Though he came on a mission of peace, walking here was like walking up to the burning stake, under the brandished tomahawk. Some day a white man would have come here, for war, for greed, or for peace. We can be proud to recall that the first who did come here, came zealously as a priest seeking souls, courageously as a man seeking peace for those who dwelt here in brutal savagry, abysmal ignorance and depraved humanity. He walked, as I have said, as a man marching into the jaws of death. He did not walk in fear for he said: "He who has God with him rests calmly everywhere." His eyes brightened at the beauty of this place and he dreamed of the years ahead when the inner beauty of those who lived here might match the natural beauty of these hills and lakes. In a word, he came to bring God here, to enshrine Him in the temple of these hills, to shelter Him in the peace of this valley, to glorify Him in the souls of the people who would live here. That was a long time ago, some three hundred years, a good century and a quarter before this nation was born.

Of course, Le Moyne did not see his dream come true, even though he did see it begin. What is important today is that he did have a dream, that he did get it started, that he had faith that it would come true some day. We do not even have a picture of the man, but more importantly, we can picture the kind of man he was by what he did. We share his faith today over a span of three hundred years, and you have linked your lives for four important years with his name, at a place that is in every sense a realization of his hopes. And if anyone should ever think that the Jesuit Fathers have come lately to this place, I would recall (and I say this as a competitor) that they are continuing the work begun here under super-human difficulties three hundred years ago by one of their confreres in the Society of Jesus. And if anyone should imply that they have picked a rather choice spot for their work, I would recall that DeLauzon, the Governor of Canada three hundred years ago, deeded then the whole present area of the city of Syracuse, and more: thirty square miles of land directly east of Onondaga Lake. Moreover, there is a document in the Archives of St. Mary's College at Montreal to substantiate the claim.

I do not mention these things for the interest of the local real estate agents, but rather to enforce a point made earlier, that we are enjoying today the fruits of a beginning made long ago, that we should be proud of a tradition old as these hills are held, and that there is a pleasant reality today, simply because a man named Le Moyne dared to dream and to have faith in the future he would never see. We may be glad today that his name at least is not forgotten, but will some-

how brighten the reality of his hopes for many years to come. Le Moyne is at last at home with his dreams and his brethren in Syracuse, in the green valley and on the verdant hills he loved.

At this point, I think we should become more specific about what goes on at Le Moyne today, for you are the product of what goes on here. In a word, we call it education. Like so many other words today, it is not enough to say it, for like saying automobile, you may mean either Austin or Cadillac. Education is rather old in the line of human institutions. Strangely enough, not even the educators today can agree on what it is. Le Moyne College as an institution is new, but its type of education is well known, like a tried and ancient vintage that has improved with age. Many educators today may not agree with the type of education given here. They will have to admit, however, that the Jesuit Fathers know where they stand, and have good reasons for doing what they are doing in the way of education.

The Catholic philosophy of education begins with the Catholic idea of man, for after all, it is man who is developed and perfected through education. If you know what a man is, and what he is for, you have taken a long step towards formulating a true philosophy of education. I suppose that most of you, like myself, can remember the simple and yet profound answers we learned on this subject at our mother's knee. Man is a creature composed of body and soul, made to the image and likeness of God. And God created man to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this life, and to be happy with Him forever in Heaven.

This is what we believe today; no longer as children, but as men and women who have learned many less important things since. In a very true sense, all else that we have learned has any and all of its importance only in reference to these simple truths about what we are and what we are living for. Our whole philosophy of education begins with these simple truths and, in a sense, ends with them. And if there are many other kinds of education today, it is because there are educators who do not believe these basic truths: who think that man is just a body, an animal with a highly developed nervous system, or who think that man lives only for this life, for its material pleasures and riches. There are also educators who do not believe in God, or at least do not think He is important enough to be reckoned with as a part of education. These other philosophies have fancy names. They are popular in colleges ten times as large as Le Moyne. Do they really educate? Only if man does not have a soul, a God, an eternal destiny.

We happen to think man does have a soul, a God, an eternal destiny. No other thought would have brought Father Le Moyno into this savage country three hundred years ago; no other thought would have brought the Jesuit Fathers back here to found a college during the past decade.

What does it mean then to be educated here? I may oversimplify the matter by saying that the educational endeavor here is to develop excellence in those two powers of the human soul that differentiate man from an animal; his intelligence that is geared to know truth, and his will that is made to choose freely what is good in life. Perfect the human mind and will, and you have a good person.

This is no simple task. If I might attempt to highlight its importance, I would say that many educators today simply avoid facing the problem and substitute training for education. Education, you see, teaches a person how to be someone: a good human person. Training, on the other hand, merely teaches one how to do something: as an engineer, scientist, doctor, lawyer, or business man. I am not implying that it is not important to learn how to do something useful in life. But it is possible to be trained to do something without being educated to live intelligently and purposefully to do that something with wisdom and character. Animals can be trained; they cannot in the true sense of the word be educated. One of the greatest problems in our day is the fact that we have so many highly trained individuals who are not really human. The world abounds today with people who have been trained in all the intricate techniques of some highly specialized human activity without having the basic liberal education necessary to know how and why and to what purpose these techniques are to be employed, if the world is to improve and they themselves are to be happy in this world. The trained uneducated person is like a child at the wheel of a powerful automobile not knowing if or when or why or where to go. Witness the dilemma of the technicians who developed the destructive power of atomic fission and now do not know whether or not it was right to have used it since it might well now be used on us. They also do not know whether it should be used again or banned. We have developed communicative techniques so that we can visit any place in the world in a few hours, or talk to anyone in the world right now. Yet we have not learned how to visit with half a world and all the talk is of war. We have made the physical details of householding easier by our techniques, but to what profit, when so many homes are disintegrating for the lack of education in the simple humanity and understanding and wisdom that make marriages successful. I would submit that the reason for most of this is that we have had too much training at the expense of too little education. If you will ponder these things, you will understand why there are no apologies to be made for the basic liberal education that character-

izes Le Moyne College.

Not that you students who are graduating here today have not been taught to do something. You have. But more importantly, you have been taught the more fundamental arts of human living. Whatever you do will be enriched by the fact that you have been educated to do everything intelligently, with a view to the wisdom of God's total purpose for this world and for you.

The liberal arts educate the mind of man as nothing else can. Glance at the really important problems that have vexed the mind of man since he first began to think. Is there a God and what is He like? Why am I here and where am I going? Is there such a thing as truth and can I know it and be sure of it? Are there some realities of life that are ultimately more important than others? Are some things important only for time and others for eternity? Why do men and women marry, and why do we have cities, states, and nations? Is man for the state, or are the states organized for man? What is the purpose of laws? What makes something right and something wrong? something true and something false? something beautiful and something ugly? How do we reconcile liberty and authority, freedom under law? How is man both matter and spirit, of time and of eternity, free and yet bound to do things?

All the training and all the technology in the world will not give you the answer to any of these liberal questions. Nor will multi-million volt cyclotrons, or infra-red spectrascopes, or electronic microscopes, or computers help you to an answer. Why not? Because these are questions that can only be solved by the mind of man working on its own high philosophical level, or on a theological level, pondering God's own revelation of some of the answers. It is the work of a liberal education to confront a student with these all-important questions, to help him sift through all of the conflicting solutions that are found in the rich heritage of Western Culture. Liberal education alone allows a young mind to view all of these questions against the background of philosophy and theology, literature and language, history and the social sciences, mathematics and the physical science.

One of the educational catastrophies of our day is that it is possible for a young mind to go through four years of a so-called college education without being confronted with these basic human questions, without being exercised in finding the really significant answers without which all technological training amounts to power without direction, activity without meaning, living without a quest for happiness and human perfection.

A liberal education for all of you has meant developing the power of your mind to think, and how to think constructively and critically about the most sig-

nificant issues in life, and to have answers that lead you to conviction and commitment. Liberal education has also taught you how to communicate your convictions and the reasons that convince you to hold them. I trust it has taught you to think for yourselves and not to be a prey to every radio commentator or newspaper columnist who would like to do your thinking for you. If you have really developed excellence in your mind, you know that there are realities in life that are so important that you will live for what is true and good, and, if need be, die for these human values rather than live without them.

No commitment less than this is worthy of the education that you have had. A life reflecting less than all that is true and good in God's plan for the world and for you is unworthy of all the human sacrifices that have been made to make your education possible here, from Father Le Moyne's time to Father Schlaerth's.

So much for the past and present. Men like Father Le Moyne have planted the seed in hope. Men like Father Schlaerth and his companions have labored to speed the fruition of these hopes. But you have reaped the harvest, and now it is yours to give. Only the future can tell the story of that giving.

We cannot predict the exact dimensions of your giving, the precise results of the education you have received. We might indicate the spirit of your giving. Certainly, it should grow out of a sense of social responsibility, born out of what you have learned here. We can also indicate some of the areas that particularly need your service today.

The first of these areas that will probably face you soon is that of marriage and family life. Long ago, St. Augustine epitomized the blessings of Christian marriage under three headings: Conjugal fidelity, children, and the sacrament. It will take the best of your powers of judgment and prayer to pick out a life partner worthy of lifelong love and fidelity. Promising these things is only the beginning. There is a whole life to be lived, not the individual, receiving life you have lived thus far, but a life in which love is manifested by the giving of yourself that another person may be made happier and holier by this giving. Such a life of mutual love and fidelity becomes next to impossible for immature, irresponsible people who are not agreed on the grandeur of God's plan for love and marriage. But your education has led you to maturity and responsibility.

The second blessing of marriage is an outgrowth of the first, for children are the incarnation of married love. Think of all the things you might accomplish in the natural order of human endeavor and try to find a greater masterpiece than that in which a man and a woman and God collaborate to bring into a being another human person in God's image and likeness. If married life is in any sense eternal,

it lasts forever in the child which is the product of this love, eternal as no other human masterpiece is eternal, eternal in value and eternal in promise.

The third blessing of Christian marriage is the sacrament which binds man and wife together in Christ, and makes every aspect of their life together a continual source of grace. God's plan for Christian marriage is too ambitious for human love alone, so God gives you a sacramental lifelong pledge of grace to help you just as a priest is helped through life by the sacrament of Holy Orders.

This, then, is the beginning of social responsibility for most of you, to establish a Christian marriage with all of these blessings, but this is only the beginning. You are going to live in many other contests that call for the best of educated social responsibility. Take the parish for instance. Many pastors claim that Catholic college graduates are not providing the leadership that their education would seem to promise. Responsibility here is a correlary of education: to whom much has been given, much will be required. At least, that is how Our Lord phrased it.

Then, there is your business or professional life. Here you are faced with the opportunity of Christian wisdom and integrity. As we have indicated above, you have not merely been educated to make a living, in a selfish individualistic way, but to recognize that others may be bettered by your life and livelihood. A great French Cardinal once spoke of the apostolate of one's presence. If you are a person worthy of all you have learned here, your presence will be felt everywhere you go, in everything you do. You may call it a sense of integrity: knowing what God expects of you in life and having the courage of living by principle rather than by expediency. You will also have a respect for competency in your business or professional life, not trying to substitute for it the modern push and pull technique for advancement. You will understand that at the heart of every business and profession are people, human beings like yourself who are worth more than all of the dollars and cents in the world, people who need understanding and tolerance and help and inspiration.

And lastly, let us not forget the important every-day context of community and political life. There are many areas that need intelligent leadership and devoted service in every community: continued improvement of education for our young people, betterment of the many facilities that serve the common good, our hospitals, orphanages, cultural activities, recreational activities and the like. This can entail the sacrifice of many otherwise free evenings, a great deal of thought and effort. Obviously, you cannot do it all yourself, but you have missed the broader vision and the sense of social responsibility if you do not consecrate some of these works for the good of your community. If you do your part, others

[4]

will follow, and you will soon find that the greatest happiness in life is in helping others, as you yourselves have been helped thus far.

In the area of political activity, always remember that the people are the important factor in the political structure of America. Freedom to vote and to engage in political activity for the common good ceases to mean anything at all if we do not keep politically informed and vote intelligently. Some of you should take an active part in politics. We have spent too long merely decrying Communism and corruption in political life. Nothing was ever accomplished by negatives. Of course, we do condemn Communism and corruption, but bemoaning them from now to doomsday will not minimize them one whit. Ours is the opportunity to use the blessings of freedom under God to build a country in which Communism will fall of its own dead weight, and corruption will scurry under the rocks.

All of this is a bright program for the future. But each item requires dedication, personal sacrifice, and an appreciation of the opportunity you are being handed today to serve God and your fellow man. I repeat once more, it will call for the utmost in intelligence, integrity, and service. If your education has taken root in your life, you are prepared to meet what the future demands of graduates today.

Rather than end in the indefinite future, I would like to take one last look to the past, to provide you with the inspiration needed to face the future. Father Le Moynes death at Cape Madeleine brought the following eulogy from the great Indian Chief, Caragentie, who first met him on the shores of Onondaga Lake.

"Ondessonk," he exclaimed, "dost thou bear me from the land of souls to which thou hast passed so quickly? It was thou who didst so often lay thy head on the scaffolds of the Mohawks; thou who hast gone so bravely into their fires to rescue so many of the French; thou who didst bear peace and tranquility wherever thou didst pass and hast made believers wherever thou didst dwell. We have seen thee on our council mats decide peace and war; our cabins became too small when thou didst enter, and our villages were too contracted when thou wast there, so great was the crowd drawn by thy words. Thou hast so often taught us that the life of misery is followed by one of eternal bliss, now that thou enjoyest it what reason have we for grief: But we deplore thee, because in losing thee we have lost our father and protector. Nevertheless, we will be consoled, because thou continuest to be so in heaven, and because thou hast found in that abode of bliss the infinite joy, of which thou hast so often spoken to me."

This the commencement that all of us, graduates and guests alike, are seeking. May Le Moynes, the man and the College, be a potent help to all of you along the way.