

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

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by

Father Theodore M. Hesburgh

Mr. Chairman, Mr. President, Your Excellencies, Your Eminence, dear faculty members, friends and relatives of all the graduates, and especially congratulations to all those who are graduating today. May I say for all of us who have already graduated, the easy way, that we are delighted to be here at Saint Leo College for its 25th anniversary, its Silver Anniversary. I think I can speak for all of the graduates on this side of the platform in saying that we hope your next 25 years to your golden anniversary will be as golden as the past 25 years have been silver. We wish you the very best, we are proud to be part of this family, and we join you today with great joy.

I suppose the only time that what a speaker says is so quickly forgotten, the only time that is worse than a commencement address, is when you're getting married. That day you have no idea what went on or who said what. But I think right after wedding sermons, commencement addresses are probably those things which are most quickly forgotten because you have so many other things on your mind, as you do on the day you are getting married. I like to make it simple, in an effort to see if maybe you might remember something of what I am going to say to you today.

I know that you are having long thoughts about yourself; about the years past, about all the work and effort that went into getting the degree you are going to receive in a few moments, about your future especially and where that might lead you. I would like to add a few more long thoughts today upon the meaning of your lives. I suppose if there is one thing that all of you want, and I think this speaks to everyone in the class, is that your lives be meaningful. That somehow the world might be a little different because

you passed through it. You have been preparing for that in all of your education, and you will be working on it the rest of your lives. So let me give you three very simple pieces of advice that are almost impossible to forget. I call them the three C's.

The first one is going to be very quick because it is something I take for granted in all of you today. The first one is competence. If you want a meaningful life, whatever you do, you've got to do it competently. There simply is no substitute for competence; not good looks, not natural talent, not personality, not having a family or wealth or a good name. Nothing whatever, not even piety, can substitute for competence. So, my first point is very simple. I know you are competent now, because you are all graduates, or will be very soon, of Saint Leo College. But whether you will be competent ten years from now depends upon how you spend the next ten years. My advice here is very simple and very direct. Keep learning everyday, keep reading. Whatever you do, learn how to do it better. And do it with style and with class and you will be competent.

The second point takes a little more explanation, because my second C has to do with compassion. And believe me, compassion is not a quality that is totally widespread in today's world. Compassion means, if you go back to the original Latin, to suffer with. And what am I asking you to suffer with? I guess I'm asking you to suffer with everyone in this world who is less fortunate than you are. All of the things that you take for granted everyday; a roof over your head, clothes to put on, food to eat, clean water to drink, an education to get, the freedom to worship as you wish, the freedom to be a human being with dignity, and to make your own plans for the future. These are things that are denied, not only a few, but hundreds of millions of people on earth today.

Let me quickly review the facts for you of the world we are living in, which is certainly not the world of Florida or the world of Indiana. The world we are living in today, we represent 5 percent of its population. And we use 40 percent of its "goodies" if you will. We have 40 percent of the education, of the communication, of the housing, of all of the things like telephones and radios, and television. We have 40 percent of the world's health services. And let me put it the other way around. There are a billion people who are hungry right now, and they were hungry yesterday, and they will be hungry tomorrow. Half of those people, 500 million, are not only hungry, they are totally undernourished. And in that group, we can be absolutely sure that 40,000, mostly children, mostly in the underdeveloped parts of this world, will die today. That means a Hiroshima or Nagasaki every other day. Added up over a year, you are talking about 16 million people, mostly under the age of 5. The life you've had, they never even got a chance to start. And you know what would have cured the greatest number of them? A simple pill, which is now distributed by UNICEF, which cost about 5¢. All it is made of are very common things: eight parts of sugar to one part of salt. That is all it is. They have fancy names like glucose, and sodium chloride, but that is all it is. And for want of a 5¢ pill, you have 40,000 children will die today, in this world. That's in a world that will spend one million dollars every minute of this day for armaments, while youngsters are dying for the want of a 5¢ pill. That shows you something about how the world is out of joint.

There are over a billion people in the world today who can't even read or write. If you gave them a package of seed they couldn't even read what to do with it or how to plant it, or what it was. They go to the market, they can't make change. I spent all of last week in Japan. And I tell you, when you walk around a city where all of the signs

are in Japanese, you begin to understand what it is like to be illiterate. You don't know where you are, you don't know how to get where you want to get, you can't read anything. That is a life-long story of one-fourth of all the human beings on earth. We could cure that very easily if we put our minds to it. We have all the technical means to cure that, the way we have the simple technical medical means to cure the first situation I mentioned to you. There is enough food in the world, but we don't strain ourselves to get it out to the people who are hungry, or teach them how to produce their own better.

There are a billion illiterate people who could be taught literacy in the next 12 months, or less, through world-wide television. But we never took the time to use the satellites for that purpose. It is more important to have telephone calls going from here to Southern France.

Let me give you another figure about half of the world's population and almost everyone in the third world, which is a big part of the world's population, about 40 or 50 countrys depending on how you classify them. People have to get along on \$100 a year. Now that's \$100 for housing, for food, for health, for clothing. You can walk in a restaurant anywhere in our country and spend \$100 very easily, or a grocery store. But there are people in these parts of the world who have to somehow make it on \$100 for the whole year. And of course, they don't make it very well. They are constantly hungry and cold, and ragged in their clothing, and uneducated. You can give a lot more figures, and I won't continue all of them, but let me just say that we live in a world where things are quite completely out of joint.

Some of the countries where things are out of joint, in fact many of them, are right in this hemisphere, are out there in the Caribbean. I have seen housing throughout

Latin America that is worse than the way we keep pigs on our farms in this country. People are living in cardboard shacks. Their roof is made of flattened beer cans, strung together but very leaky. Housing throughout this world is pretty miserable. And yet we just take it for granted.

Now, why am I telling you this? I'm telling you this because the world doesn't have to be this way. We don't have to have people living in cardboard shacks when it's cold or raining. We don't have to have people who never learn how to read or write, whatever their language. We don't have to have people who never see a doctor from the day they are born to the day they die and who never have medicine available at any price. First, because they don't have the money and secondly, because no one took the time to get them the medicine they need or the services they need. We don't have to have this kind of world. And I leave out the parts, the most terrible affliction of all, I think, which is the total lack of freedom. Not to be able to live your own life freely and with dignity. I tell you these things because it is not enough to think that the world is like your life, or your country. The world is quite different. And it is miserably different in most countries outside of this one. That is why I say it is important, if you are going to have a meaningful life, to have deep within you ^{a sense of}

Compassion - to suffer with those less fortunate than you. Competence and Compassion alone won't do what needs doing. That's why I suggest to you for meaning in your life the notion of Commitment. The priest and Levite walked by the wounded man on the way to Jerusa. They didn't want to become involved. The Good Samaritan was moved to Compassion but he was also committed. He did something about it. Let me tell you of three people in this century who were committed and had meaningful lives.

The first was a European, a man named
a man, his name was Albert Schweitzer. When he was your age, or a little bit older, he had three possible careers. He could have been, first of all, a great medical doctor because he was. Secondly, he could have been a concert organist because he played beautifully at the organ. And thirdly, he could have been a professional theologian because he had written some marvelous books in theology. And in a sense he gave up all three. He took off for a place that you never heard of, or no one ever heard of before Albert Schweitzer. A place called Lambaréné, which is a little village on a turgid, muddy river in what used to be called French Equatorial Africa. He spent the rest of his life building a hospital and serving the people there who had never seen a doctor before. He became an enormous example for many people.

Now, he did bring along a little organ, and he used to get out and play at night after the evening meal. But the playing got pretty rusty, and the organ got full of termites and that was the end of the organ music for a while. He used to write theology books, but he was so far from other theologians and the great libraries^{of} Europe that his theology books went downhill. But somehow, to the whole of Europe and America and other parts of the world, he became a symbol of someone who does something about a bad situation. And for that he was given the Nobel Prize for peace. And forever there will be a name honored in the annals^{of} of humanity. And that name is Albert Schweitzer, a Protestant minister, a doctor, and an organist.

The second person is someone I knew quite well because he was a graduate of Notre Dame. He was a very classy student at Notre Dame. He was very bright. He was also very brash, he came very close to getting thrown out several times. He went to Saint Louis Medical School, and there he also did get thrown out for a year. But another Notre Dame man on the faculty got him back in, we tend to hang together.

When he finished medical school he had to serve for three years in the Navy. They took him to a place called Haiphong and put him ashore. It was just at the time when the North and the South of Vietnam were breaking up, prior to the war. In the 18 months he spent on the shore with a few navy corpsmen he had 80,000 people who had been afflicted and tortured in the North come through his medical hands as a young doctor just commissioned, if you will, and a young naval officer. Eighty-thousand people he treated in 18 months. Some of them had holes in their ears where they had driven in nails. Some had holes in their hands, many of them had tropical diseases. He worked day and night. He also set up orphanages because they were all refugees and displaced. At the end of 18 months he had learned Vietnamese. He was a very charming fellow, the kids in Haiphong would follow him around in the streets at night like a pied piper.

He came back and he ^{was} mustered out of the navy. He could have gone to Park Avenue and made a zillion dollars as a society doctor, but he didn't do it. He got in touch with those navy corpsmen and he said, "How about going back." The whole group of them signed up and they went back. He then worked his way through Vietnam, leaving hospitals at each spot where he went. Then he went to Cambodia, which had very few doctors, and he finished his medical career at age 33 at a place called Muong Sing, up in Laos, up North right next to China in the mountains. There he was the only medical doctor for 2 million people in that area.

He worked in that area until one day he noticed a spot on his breast. He came back to New York and had a check up at Sloan-Kettering and they told him he had melanoma, which is a classy name for cancer. He underwent an operation, but then went right back to work, and he worked until he couldn't stand anymore. They had to

carry him onto an airplane in Bangkok. He was hurting so much he couldn't even sit in the chair, they had to lay him on the floor of the airplane. He came from Bangkok to New York with just a pair of slacks and a T-shirt. They put him in the Sloan ^{Memorial} Hospital where I visited him the day before he died. It was his 34th birthday. There are 12 hospitals and hundreds of people all over the world today working in poor abandoned places because of Tom Dooley, which was his name.

Tom Dooley was an unusual fellow. Again, like Albert Schweitzer, he was a marvelous pianist, he was a great horseback rider, a great linguist. He spoke beautiful French, beautiful Vietnamese, Cambodian and Laotian. He could have been almost anything he wanted to be but he only wanted to do one thing: to get out where there was no medical attention given to poor people and to take care of them, which he did. Not just in the hundreds, but in the tens of thousands. And as I stood along side of his bed he was trying desperately to sit up and die with dignity, at least sitting up and not lying flat. The thought struck me that he was no older than the Lord when He died at 33. And that somehow he had given his life as the Lord had for the poor and the suffering, and somehow his name would be long remembered.

There is a letter he wrote me from Hong Kong when he first found out he had cancer. I had it put into stainless steel and put in at the grotto, which is our praying place at Notre Dame. Every time I go down to say a prayer myself, and I see some young person there reading that letter from Hong Kong telling about his yearnings, telling about his facing death, telling about his wanting to get back and pray again at that grotto, I know that somehow he is still inspiring young people today. And I am happy to give him to you as a second example of commitment.

The last example is a woman. Although I could have given you many more

women because they happen to be a lot more committed at times than men are, I think. But, in any event, this woman is alive today and I will quickly give you her story. This woman, of course, is Mother Teresa who is ^{from Yugoslavia} a poor peasant girl with little more than a high school education, who was sent by her order to teach English in a school in Calcutta, in India. There she had to walk to school everyday from the convent where she lived to where the school for upper class Indian girls was being held. Everyday as she walked to class she had to step over bodies, because any of you have ever been to Calcutta know that hundreds of people die on the street everyday. They come around with a truck in the morning and load them like cordwood, and take them outside the city for burning.

Well, she did that for about 12 years of her life. Everyday, stepping over bodies going to teach these nice Indian girls. One day she said, "I can't do this anymore. I'm not bright, I'm not terribly well educated, I don't have much to offer, but I simply can't do nothing in the face of this misery. People shouldn't have to die this way, in the street, with people stepping over them." And so, she got dispensed from her vows from the community to which she had vowed herself. She took, literally, four rupahs, which is less than a dollar, and she had the clothes she had on, which was a sari (a beautiful, Indian dress that goes over the head as well as over the body). She walked out of that convent, through this strange land to the poorest part of town. There she knocked on the wall of a hut and said to the family inside, "I am poor and this is all the money I have. Can I stay under the roof with you?" And they said, "Come in." One thing about the poor, they are good to each other. They invited her in and, starting from that position, which is minus zero, this woman went all over town to try and find a place where to which she could bring people who were dying in the street

The only place she could find in that big city was the back part of a Hindu temple for Qali, which happens to be an evil god in the Hindu religion. They had a long room at the back of the Temple of Qali, and some good Hindu monk said, "You can use it."

She got a few of the girls that had been at her school to help her. They picked up these people bodily and took them to the Temple of Qali. She got an old Muslim who would make mush for her everyday. These people had no teeth left and she had mush. When they brought them in she would bathe them in warm water, and she would bathe their wounds like the good Samaritan did. And then she would put a clean cloth around them so they would get rid of the filthy rags, and she would put them on a kind of low mattress. They were lying in rows, down each side of that hall that had a kind of ^{three tier} ~~a-stepped-up~~ arrangement. I remember walking in and seeing 150 of these dying people up and down that room and this old Muslim on a platform in the middle, stirring the mush, and as these people died she would take them in her arms, and she would console them. But at least they died with some food in their stomach, and they died with a clean body, at least, not filthy in the streets, and with a clean cloth around them. She said, "It's no big deal. You know, I'm not changing the world much. But at least a few hundred people a day die in peace and die with some human warmth."

Well, that was the beginning. I was there shortly after that happened. All I could do when I looked up and down those rows was cry. Not just cry for those people, but cry for myself because I don't have that depth of charity that this woman had. Now she has thousands of young women from all races on earth helping those people at the two extremes of life. Older people who are dying without care, and that nobody is interested in or wants, and younger people, abandoned ^{babies} children that she takes

into her orphanages.

I thought it was interesting that the pagan country in which she has spent ^{most of} her life, of India, a Hindu land, gave her their highest award. She can go anywhere in the world she wants ^{to, freely} on India Airlines. She also won the Nobel Prize for peace. I think when people start talking about human beings who make you proud to be a human they will also mention Sister Teresa of Calcutta.

Now I know full well, that neither you nor I can be Schweitzers' or Dooleys' or Teresas', but I think you don't have to look very far, maybe in your own family, certainly in your own neighborhood, certainly in your business or the organization in which you will be working. You don't have to look very far to find people who need you, who need something you have to give with competence. Even if it's just holding a hand, or ^{consulting} consulting someone who is sick or injured or hopeless or dying. You don't have to go to the ends of the earth. You don't have to go to Lambarené or Calcutta or Muong Sing to find someone to help. I hope some of you do go to those distant places and maybe some of you will. But the fact is, wherever you are, whatever you are doing, you will always find someone to help, someone in need.

Let me conclude by saying that Albert Schweitzer was talking to a group like you one day in Europe, a graduating class. And he said, "I don't know where you are going in life," anymore than I know where all of you are going, "I don't know what you will be doing with your lives, but unless you set aside some corner of your life to help those who are less fortunate than yourself in a very troubled world, you will not really have meaningful lives and you will not really be happy." I believe that, because you know the Lord told us practically the same thing when he said on the last day we're going to have to stand before him. On that day the

only thing we will have left in our hands to show him about ourselves are those things of ourself that we have given away, our treasures, our talents, ourselves. He told us that very clearly because he told us on the day of judgement he wasn't going to ask us how much money we stole or how many lies we told or how many times we committed adultery or something like this. He's just going to ~~ask us~~ ^{ask us}

"When was I hungry, and you helped me. When was I thirsty, and you gave me something to drink. When was I a stranger, and you took me in. When was I imprisoned, and you visited me." And we are going to say, "Lord, when do we do any of this?" And then He says those wonderful words of St. Matthew ^{gospel} "Whenever you did it for one of my least brethren, you did it for me." That, I think, gives another C that you can take home along with the other three, a fourth C if you will. If your life is a life of competence, a life of compassion, a life of commitment, it will also be a life of consecration.

God bless and keep you all.