

2017 Newman Theological College Valedictory Address (S. Fairfield)

Eminent Chancellor, Your Excellencies, members of the platform party, distinguished guests, graduands, relatives, and friends of Newman:

It is an honour to address you all on behalf of this year's graduating class from Newman Theological College. Fellow classmates, today we celebrate the completion of a long and difficult journey. Sometimes I wondered if we would finish before the Oilers made the playoffs, but they beat us by just a bit. We have climbed the academic mountain and now we stand proudly at the summit, looking ahead to new challenges. We reflect on how much we have grown as disciples of Christ, and we give thanks for all of God's blessings. Many of us work in schools, parishes and other institutions, and now we contemplate how we will use the knowledge and skills gained at Newman in the service of others.

One question for the graduands is: why did you study for this degree? Why here, and why now? This is a question I have often asked myself over the last few years, especially while reading a large book or writing a theology paper. ('Why?') Maybe you wanted to advance your career. Maybe you wanted to challenge yourself. Maybe you desired to have a closer relationship with God and a deeper faith life. Or maybe you were like George Mallory, who, when a New York Times reporter asked in 1923 why he climbed Mount Everest, replied: "Because it's there."

We have just reached the end of our climb; today, we are receiving our great reward. The journey was not always easy, and there were times when some of us felt like stopping or turning back. But we supported each other, kept moving forward one step at a time, and maybe somewhere along the way, you met God in a very special way. You may have found God in the readings. You may have found him by writing papers. You may have found him in the summer vacation between semesters. Or maybe you found him in the stillness of your heart after reflecting on Sacred Scripture or the Catechism.

One thing is for sure: Fellow classmates, none of us would have earned our Newman degree without lots of help from others. I ask that you join me in a prayer of thanksgiving for these helpers.

- First, we acknowledge all the hard work done by the professors and administrators at Newman. You are passionate about your subject matter, and you want to share your love of learning with us. It cannot be easy grading all those papers, especially when we're all working on a deadline. We would not be here today without you. From the bottom of our hearts, thank you.
- We thank the secretarial, custodial and maintenance staff at the college. Your work is often overlooked, but is vital to our success.
- We give thanks for the tireless work of our bishops, priests and religious in spreading the Gospel in our communities. You are inspirational leaders for us.
- We thank those who contributed to the success of this wonderful Convocation day with music, flowers, food, and ambience.
- We acknowledge those who have made it financially possible for us to attend Newman: school boards, parishes, and various other benefactors. I personally am very grateful to Superintendent Joan Carr and the Edmonton Catholic School district for supporting our teachers in this area. You have given us the gift of education and lifelong learning.

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- We thank those who make up the personal support network that has sustained each of us during our studies. Families, spouses, parents, friends... these are the people who made meals, took on extra chores, and watched children while we were busy studying. They kept us going, they helped us through our anxiety, and they deserve an extra-special 'thank you'.
- Finally, and most especially, we give thanks to the God who died on the cross for us, and who has walked with us every step of the way in this journey.

In thanking the people who supported us, we acknowledge how much we rely on others in our lives, and how much we rely on God. We, the class of 2017, are not standing here today at Convocation as the strongest or the holiest or the proudest. We stand as humble servants who know how much they need God, and how much they need the love and charity of others. We are the poor who rely on God as we go through a lifelong process of conversion. We live in solidarity with others because we know what it is to be weak and to need grace in our lives. As Pope John Paul II said, "We are not the sum of our weaknesses and failures. We are the sum of the Father's love for us and our real capacity to become the image of his Son."

As Newman grads, we must seek out those who are in need, in a spirit of compassion and discipleship. If we do an effective job of this, then Christ will say: 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.' (*Matthew 25:31-40*)

Blessed John Henry Newman, after whom this college is named, said: "I sought to hear the voice of God and climbed the topmost steeple, But God declared: 'Go down again - I dwell among the people.'" Today we graduate; but afterward, we must all come back down to earth. Will we truly dwell among God's people? How will we use our degrees to help others? In 'The Joy of the Gospel', Pope Francis says that "Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet." (*Evangelii Gaudium 14*)

My fellow classmates, we have supported one another over these years, and your witness and faith is inspirational. We all made a free choice to follow Christ by taking a degree at Newman, and we are encouraged to make that choice again as we continue with new endeavours. I would like to close with a quote from the late Father Michael 'Catfish' Mireau:

If we make the decision today to start on our journeys, we'll find that that journey is so incredibly worth it, that we'll never regret it. It'll lead us to true wisdom. It'll lead us to our true selves... and it'll lead us to God... who is love. (*Fr Catfish homily, 17th Sunday in ordinary time*)

God bless the class of 2017.