

NEWMAN THEOLOGICAL COLLEGE
Convocation Ceremony
October 13, 2018

Presentation by Father Stephen Wojcichowsky

Your Grace Archbishop Smith, eminent Chair of the Board of Governors,
 Your Grace Archbishop Lavoie,
 Honourable Chancellor and Justice Feehan,
 Esteemed members of the platform party,
 Distinguished guests, faculty, staff and students,
 Ever-faithful families and friends, and, especially,
 You whom we have come to celebrate – dear graduands,

What a delight it is to behold the multiple expressions on your cheerful and radiant faces: some reflect sheer joy, others reveal eager anticipation of the future, still others breathe with deeply-felt gratitude, some of you exude a quiet satisfaction or beam with justifiable and holy pride, and perhaps all of you are present here with some small measure of regret at leaving the sacred and secure confines of Newman College, and yet I see predominantly on all your faces ... relief, sweet relief! You've made it! In a short time, you will be proclaimed *Magistri* and *Magistrae*.

You will be returning to your classrooms, your parishes, your diocesan and eparchial offices, or wherever you have been called to serve – with bolstered confidence, increased zeal and greater knowledge and, I suspect, with more questions than when you began your programs. After all, as the saying goes – “The more you know, the more you realize that you don't know.”

That unknowing might even include discerning what precisely you have been called to do. Some of you might even be in the process of determining what Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta describes as “the call within a call” – the vocation within your vocation.

Yet all of you, I feel quite certain, have passed the Newman test. You know, the Newman Test – haven't heard of it? Well, that's what I call the well-known exhortation of Blessed John Henry Newman to his brothers in the Birmingham Oratory. In his address, *The Present Position of Catholics in England*, our patron and namesake proclaims ...

I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but those [orig., men] who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold and what they do not, who know their creed so well that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history

*that they can defend it. I want an intelligent, well-instructed laity. I wish you to enlarge your knowledge, to cultivate your reason, to get an insight into the relation of truth to truth, to learn to view things as they are, to understand how faith and reason stand to each other. ... You ought to be able to bring out what you feel and what you mean, as well as to feel and mean it.*¹

As I read those words I could almost hear you mentally saying, “know my religion,” – check; “know just where I stand,” – check; “know what I hold,” – check; “intelligent, well-instructed laity,” – go ahead, check it off, after all, true humility is knowing your place and taking it.

But, please, in all your self-evaluation, give heed to the advice of an anonymous poem often attributed to Newman:

*I sought to hear the voice of God
And climbed the topmost steeple,
But God declared: “Go down again
– I dwell among the people.”*²

The goal of our studies is not merely to satisfy our own theological curiosity or even to alleviate the uncertainties of our faith. It is definitely not to win arguments. Rather it is to engage with the people in our lives – those whom we serve, and those who minister to us – in such a manner that they can say of our discipleship in the Lord “Were not our hearts burning within us?”

The purpose of all our study is to internalize and make our own the counsel of Bishop William Skylstad of Spokane who spoke to the US National Organization for Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy with these pressing words:

*The times are challenging, and the times are complex. Our need for continued growth and development is clear and it is urgent. We have been given opportunities to implement the process of evangelization – of ourselves in ministry and of the entire Church. Yes, Jesus tells us to go out into the whole world, to the ends of the earth. We have done that ... The challenge now is to go to the ends of the human heart ... Perhaps that is and will be the greatest challenge of all in fulfilling the Lord’s command.*³

¹ John Henry Newman, *The Present Position of Catholics in England (1851)*, ed. D. O’Connell (New York: America Press, 1942), 299-300.

² Anonymous, “The Voice of God,” accessed on October 7, 2018 at <https://www.wordonfire.org/resources/blog/philip-neri-john-henry-newman-and-the-idea-of-an-oratory/5794/>

³ Bishop William Skylstad. “Reclaiming Priestly Identity at a Time of Complexity and Urgency,” Address to the National Organization for Continuing Education of Roman Catholic Clergy, March 20, 2003, *Origins* 32: No. 40.

“To go to the ends of the human heart.” This is our calling, this is what we have struggled for through all the lectures and readings, term papers and exams – “To go to the ends of the human heart.”

How precisely do we do that? This is where the very first words of Newman’s exhortation come into force: “I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious.” And keep in mind that he is addressing both clergy and laity.

I recall having a conversation in the early years of my priesthood with a parishioner about a topic that I cannot even recollect. But I do remember his response to my exasperated exclamation, “But, Ivan, that’s straight out of Vatican II!” He said, “That’s the problem, Father, I don’t believe in Vatican II.” We never did resolve the point we were discussing, but we did discover that we had a mutual veneration for the Mother of God, a deep reverence for the Eucharist and a commitment to advocating for the sanctity of life – all life.

“To go to the ends of the human heart” means to look for the questions beneath the questions, to seek out the motivation for the questions which invariably lead to learning the context, the story of the person before us – a lesson I still keep learning, much to my disappointment at not having learned it by now.

“To go to the ends of the human heart” means to adopt the attitude of Saint Maximos the Confessor, a seventh century theologian of the Byzantine Church, revered by East and West alike who, according to the *Catholic Encyclopedia* “died for orthodoxy and obedience to Rome,” and whom Hans Urs von Balthasar depicts this way:

He never meddles, but he is always available; he seems to crystallize automatically around his higher center. In the cramped monastic communities in which he lives, clouds of envy and slander [orig., calumny] ride high ... He answers with love alone, a love that has essentially withdrawn itself from the sphere ... of passionate vulnerability, and has buried itself in the freedom of a universal, catholic benevolence that imitates God.⁴

“To go to the ends of the human heart” means to answer “with love alone, a love that ... has buried itself in the freedom of a universal, catholic benevolence that imitates God.”

Consider these words:

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy – The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Brian E. Daley (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 30.

As for me, the silence and the emptiness is so great, that I look and do not see, — Listen and do not hear — the tongue moves [in prayer] but does not speak ... Where is my faith? even deep down, there is nothing but emptiness & darkness. My God, how painful is this unknown pain. It pains without ceasing. I have no faith. I dare not utter the words and thoughts that crowd in my heart and make me suffer untold agony. So many unanswered questions live within me, I am afraid to uncover them.⁵

These dark thoughts of Mother Teresa (yes, they are hers) reflect what has been called by many spiritual authors and religious commentators the “Modern Disease” of Doubt, Skepticism, Loneliness and Hopelessness.

All of us have doubts, to be sure: Am I good enough? Will they like me? Is all the effort worth it? How did I go wrong? Whom can I trust? Do the people to whom I have given my heart really love me? Can I actually forgive those who hurt me? Is God truly merciful (even to the ungrateful and the wicked)?

Father Brian Kolodiejchuk, a priest of the Missionaries of Charity and self-described chauffeur and bodyguard for Mother Teresa, and who served as postulator for her canonization, published a book in 2009 entitled *Mother Teresa – Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta*. Here he describes her doubts in the starkest language:

The darkness she experienced and described in her letters, in which the strength and beauty of her soul shines forth, was a terrible and unrelenting torment ... Through embracing her interior darkness, Mother Teresa became a “saint of darkness.” Jesus’ call “Come – carry me into the holes of the poor – Come be my light,” urged her to give herself without any reserve to God in the poor of the slums and the streets.⁶

“To go to the ends of the human heart” means to answer “with love alone,” that extends God’s immeasurable and all-compassionate love as Christ himself did. This was Mother Teresa’s answer to the pain of doubt and darkness – to love the poorest of the poor with love. And it is the answer to our doubts – to love the poor in spirit, the broken-hearted, the confused, the actual poor, not on the streets of Calcutta necessarily, but in our own homes, in our places of ministry, in the world around us.

⁵ Accessed on September 12, 2018 at <https://thirtythousandpeople.wordpress.com/2007/08/26/mother-teresa-where-is-my-faith/>

⁶ Brian Kolodiejchuk, *Mother Teresa – Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta* (Toronto: Penguin Random House Canada, 2009), 335-336.

I had a conversation with someone the other day who had been grappling with any number of doubts about her job: the vision of the place where she worked, the integrity of the leadership, the impossibility of fulfilling all the “urgent” tasks placed upon her shoulders. She recounted a visit to a friend who was in the final stages of ALS (Lou Gehrig’s disease) and who couldn’t move and could barely speak even though her mind was as sharp and penetrating as it had ever been. “I gained a new perspective that day,” she told me. It was not that she gloried in the sufferings of her friend. She was edified by her friend’s courage and hopefulness. For her part, her friend also admitted that she had been uplifted, knowing that someone cared so much for her and was willing to hear out her struggles and be with her in her loneliness.

In that connection, Cardinal Newman's motto inspired by St. Francis de Sales is apt for today: “Heart speaks to heart.”

In Nazi Germany a Jewish fugitive fleeing for his life came to a small town. He told his story and asked if he could stay a few days until it was safe to travel again. The people of the town went to the house of the Christian pastor, seeking advice on what to do. The pastor suggested they hide him in the most secure place they could find, which happened to be the underground storage area in his own barn. Later that day a detachment of soldiers came looking for the fugitive. They told the people that if he was not given up by sunset, they would be held accountable and suffer greatly.

So the pastor immediately withdrew to his prayer room and closed the door. He asked God for guidance and then opened his Bible. He happened to come upon the verse in John’s Gospel that says, “It is better for one man to die, than for the whole people to perish.” He knew he had his answer. So he surrendered the fugitive to the soldiers. The town was spared. And the people gathered for a celebration. But the pastor could not rejoice with them. He stayed at home to grieve. Later that night an angel appeared and asked, “Where is the fugitive?” The pastor said, “I handed him over as the Holy Book instructed me.” The angel said, “Did you not know that he was the Messiah?” “How could I have known” he lamented. “If you would have looked into his eyes, instead of first running to the safety and security of your little room, you would have known.”

“To go to the ends of the human heart” means to go to those who are difficult to approach, to have the tough talk that makes us squirm. To encounter them means more than just the sacrifice of time and effort. It’s risky. It’s messy. It means to empty ourselves as Christ did, who, in the words of St. Paul “made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:7).

In the end, “To go to the ends of the human heart” means to practice this Christ-like virtue of humility. According to Tony Hendra, former editor of *The National Lampoon* – an unlikely credential, you say – it means to embrace humility in all its forms:

*Humility in the face of wealth and plenty, humility in the face of hatred and violence. Humility in the face of strength [and weakness], humility in the face of your own genius or lack of it, humility in the face of another’s humility, humility in the face of love and beauty, humility in the face of pain and death. ... Saints are driven [he says] to humbling themselves before all the splendor and horror of the world because they perceive there to be something divine in it, something pulsing and alive beneath the hard dead surface of material things, something inconceivably greater and purer than they.*⁷

The renowned Jesuit scholar and homilist, Father Walter Burghardt, during a Graduation Mass at Boston College, stated that the religious man or woman is a peculiar mixture of three persons: the poet, the lunatic and the lover. He concludes:

*Such is my strange prayer for you as you descend from “the Heights” [of academia]. I pray that the poet may always find a place in you; for the poet is a person of profound faith, seeing beneath the appearances of things, seeing with new eyes – in your case, with the eyes of Christ. I pray that there may be a fair measure of lunacy in you: the wild idea, the foolishness of the Cross, the mad exchange of all else for God; for herein lies your Christian hope. And I pray that, however radical the risk, however many the Judases who betray you, even on your cross you will always be Christ the lover, arms extended to your little world for its redemption – and yours.*⁸

I would like to thank the administration of Newman Theological College for this invitation to share some modest thoughts with you – most of them, as you have heard, not my own, but notions that I have incorporated into my own heart. As such, I would like to share one final item of borrowed inspiration. It’s from an anthology of letters written to famous literary and historical figures by our Pope of thirty-three days, John Paul I.

Here is a paraphrase from his letter to Jesus:

I have spoken, but I have never been so dissatisfied with my speaking. I feel as if I had left out the greater part of what could be said of You, that I have said badly what should have been said much better. There is one comfort, however:

⁷ Tony Hendra, *Father Joe – The Man Who Saved My Soul* (New York: Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2005), from the Prologue, n.p.

⁸ Walter J. Burghardt, *Grace on Crutches: Homilies for Fellow Travelers* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1986), 184.

*the important thing is not that one person should speak about Christ, but that many should love and imitate Christ. And fortunately – in spite of everything – this still happens.*⁹

And it does happen, and will continue to happen, dear graduands, because of YOU!

Thank you. God bless!

⁹ Albino Luciani, “To Jesus – I Write in Trepidation”, *Illustrissimi: The Letters of Pope John Paul I* (Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1978), 258.