Guest Speaker Address

There’s something wonderful about history. I lived here in Edmonton for over twenty years, but really know little about the history of Newman Theological College, so I did a little research.

It was founded in 1969 by Archbishop Anthony Jordan; Scottish-born, an Oblate of Mary Immaculate, the last religious to be Ordinary of this Archdiocese; a Father of the Second Vatican Council, a visionary who gave us the Western Catholic Reporter (1965), the Council of Priests (1967), the Commission for Ecumenical and Interfaith Relations (1968), the Adult Learning Commission (1968), and, in 1969, Newman Theological College (1969).

In 1969, I was 12 years old, and very much enjoying St. James Grade School in Regina, Saskatchewan. Allow me if you will a brief stroll down memory lane.

1969 began with the inauguration of Richard M. Nixon as the 37th President of the United States, and the initial talks in Paris between US and North Vietnamese delegations, to give us, in Nixon’s words, peace with honour.

The Vietnam War is relevant to us, because, while the number has never been accurately assessed, an estimated 20-30,000 draft dodgers entered Canada between 1967 and 1973. In the year of Newman’s foundation, 1969, just under 12,000 American soldiers died in Vietnam; and that astonishing number was 4,000 fewer than that of the previous year, 1968. Those first years of Newman were deeply marked by the Vietnam War.

In 1969, other remarkable things happened; the first human gene was isolated, the first 747 took flight, and a woman, Golda Meir, was elected Prime Minister of Israel.

It was also the year that began “the troubles” (as they were called) in earnest in Northern Ireland with the arrival of British troops. The great Ulster Unionist Ian Paisley didn’t quite get into the spirit of the ecumenical movement. His words; “I am anti-Roman Catholic, but God being my judge, I love the poor dupes who are ground down under that system.” His distaste for popery was curiously offset by a sincere personal concern for the Catholics who were his constituents and for whom he went out of his way to assure that they had the same educational opportunities as their Protestant fellow citizens.

It was the year that contraception and abortion were legalized in Canada, the year that Neil Armstrong set foot on the moon, saying “one small step for man; one giant leap for mankind.” Inclusive language came a little later I guess. In New York, a police raid on a Mafia-controlled bar in Greenwich Village frequented by the gay demi-monde provoked a three-day riot and gave birth to the modern Gay Rights movement; yes Stonewall.
the Pacific coast, UCLA sent out a memo announcing a new computer communications system called, the “internet”.

A few cultural markers; if you know who or what these are, then you’re as old as I am, or older: Woodstock, Crosby Stills Nash and Young, Monty Python’s Flying Circus, Rowan and Martin’s Laugh-In, Alice’s Restaurant, Midnight Cowboy, Leavin’ on a Jet Plane, One Day We’ll be together. For you younger folks, it was the birth year of such luminaries as Matthew McConaughey and Jennifer Anniston. The New York Mets won the World Series, the Montreal Canadiens the Stanley Cup, and (sadly) Ottawa beat Saskatchewan 29-11 for the Grey Cup.

On the political front, Pierre Trudeau was nicely settled in to 24 Sussex Drive, having been swept to power on a wave of Trudeaumania a year before. You’ll get a special prize from Chancellor Feehan if you can tell me who was Premier of Alberta that year: Yes Harry Strom, who had the virtue on presiding over the demise of the Social Credits analogous to the recent fate of our friends the Progressive Conservatives until Jim Prentice.

On the ecclesiastical front, Catholics were still reeling from the reaffirmed condemnation of artificial birth control in *Humanae Vitae* a year previous. Paul VI held the largest consistery of his pontificate, naming thirty-three new cardinals, including such figures are Johannes Willebrands from the Netherlands, an absolute giant of ecumenism, John Deardon of Detroit and François Marty of Paris. A lone Canadian, the kind and scholarly George Flahiff, Archbishop of Winnipeg and former Superior General of my religious community also joined the Sacred College.

A little lower on the ecclesiastical ladder, in that same year, 45-year old Joseph N. MacNeil was consecrated Bishop of St. John New Brunswick, and an even younger Thomas Collins graduated with a BA from St. Jerome’s College. Finally on December 13, 1969, Archbishop Ramon José Castellano ordained to the priesthood the 33-year-old Argentinian Jesuit named Jorge Maria Bergoglio, better know to us today as Pope Francis.

But so much for history. The world has changed in the past 46 years. The poor are generally better off, the rich are much better off, the Soviet Union, the Iron Curtain, the Cold War are gone forever. Globalization has changed us; Western intervention in the Middle East has seriously destabilized our world. Canada has had long stretches of relatively stable governments; we’ll see shortly if that stability is coming to an end. Immigration has changed the look of Canada, and the colour of our Catholic parishes. Where I live in Montreal, in the shadow of St. Joseph’s Oratory, the surrounding churches are almost exclusively attended by immigrant communities. Increasingly, the diocese of Montreal, clergy and people together, is an immigrant Church. Immigration in Canada is coupled with secularization and the withdrawal of religion from the public
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square. Of course Quebec is ahead of English Canada in this regard, but not as much as one might think.

So where does this leave you today, graduates of a theological college in Edmonton, in 2015. I would suggest that there are three things that you can do, as Catholic educators, Catholic ministers ordained and lay, and Catholic faithful. I’ll tell you the three of them now, and say just a little about each: they are presence, witness, and advocacy. The terms are in a particular order, one that comes from our Catholic tradition; they suggest a range from what is contemplative to what is active.

So the first term; presence. Churches, temples, shrines embody a presence in a society like our own. It’s why their closure, being locked, or worse, being demolished, is so painful. But beyond an architectural presence, think of the great value of a human presence. Think of those who accompany the sick, the dying, those who suffer. When you are present to your brothers and sisters in need, you are the Church. There is also another kind of presence: Contemplative prayer, where you are present to God or as Gregory the Great defined contemplation almost 15 centuries about, you rest in God. Your presence in a suffering world, and your presence with a merciful and loving God speak volumes about the very nature of our faith.

The second term, witness, has a more active dimension to it. The communication becomes more intentional, whether with God, in active prayer, or with others. Faith in action, or “doers of the word” as St. James calls us to be. A witness is someone whose actions or words are revelatory.

Advocacy is the most explicit, the most unambiguous gesture; words and actions on behalf of another. For Christians, it means concrete support for the poor, the weak, the marginalized, those who cannot speak for themselves. The “other” in whom you advocate is Christ, and you are alter Christus, another Christ.

These three elements have been an important part of this year dedicated by Pope Francis to the consecrated life. His wonderful challenge to religious, wake up the world, is a good example of this movement from witness to advocacy. This papacy is all about action.

The Church that most of us live in is the Church is post-Vatican II, post-Blessed Paul VI, a Church obviously shaped by three Popes: John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and now Francis. I am fully prepared to be slain metaphorically or otherwise by my brother and sister theologians, but for the purposes of this talk, I would like to reduce each of the three pontificates to a single word. Let me tell you the three words in advance, then talk about them a little bit, and suggest how they are relevant to you as graduates of a Catholic theological institute. The three pontiffs are John Paul, Benedict and Francis; and the words are, in order, truth, beauty and joy.
I began religious life with a retreat to enter the novitiate with the Basilians on Friday August 5, 1978. The next day, Paul VI died, so this is also a bit of personal history.

Karol Woytyla’s election as John Paul II was of course historic; the first non-Italian in 400 years, a man from behind the Iron Curtain with a flair for the dramatic, formed by the Polish struggle first with the National Socialism and the Third Reich, subsequently with the Marxist-Leninist Soviet Union and the Communist state.

The pervading sentiment in the Church in 1978 was that we were adrift, notably with significant numbers of priests and religious continuing to withdraw from ministry. The forces of change that had promised such hope with the Second Vatican Council were spiraling outward. In the face of such instability, Pope John Paul II was determined to reinforce a core set of beliefs and values: hence my first word today: Truth.

It would be both unfair and simplistic to describe his pontificate as a search for truth in the sense that he wanted to give the correct answers as opposed to his opponents whose answers were incorrect. Rather, Pope John Paul’s intellectual vision, exemplified in the encyclical *Fides et ratio*, was to set forth the plain fact that there is a thing called truth, and that following an insight reaching back to Vatican I, that truth can be attained, apprehended, understood naturally. Simply put, Pope John Paul wanted to restore our faith in reason.

Think of just some of his writings: *Veritatis splendor* (the splendor of truth), *Fides et ratio* (faith and reason) *Catechesi tradendi* (passing on catechesis), the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the promulgation of the *Code of Canon Law*, his catecheses on the theology of the body, an extraordinary body of teaching that proclaims that there is such a thing as truth.

This is at least an important part of your educational ministry in the Church today, because we live in a culture that simply rejects out of hand the notion that there is such a thing as objective truth. We swim in a post-modern sea where nothing is static, nothing permanent, there is no common set of notions to which we can all refer. People may say that the answers provided by the Catholic Church are outdated, or incorrect, but I think what they really mean, is that there are no answers. Cardinal Ratzinger put it succinctly: “a dictatorship of relativism.” My reality, my gender, my race, my ethical worldview, my marriage, my development and most recently in Canada, the end of my earthly existence, are fully to be defined by me, and are fully at my disposal. My truth is absolute, autonomous, unimpeachable and infallible.

The second pontificate is that of Benedict XVI, for 20 years John Paul’s close coroporator and Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Probably the greatest intellect to occupy the papacy in centuries, we can see his hand in much of Pope John Paul’s work, for together they shared deep commitment to the truth. But Benedict brought another perspective to papal teaching, the search for beauty.
Now from Pope Benedict we do not have an encyclical on Divine aesthetics, but there is a theology of beauty that undergirds just about everything speculative that he composed. For a glimpse of his thinking, one needs only read a message he sent while still Cardinal Ratzinger to a meeting of Communion and Liberation in Rimini in 2002.

He is reflecting upon a verse from Psalm 42: "you are the fairest of the children of men, and graciousness is poured upon your lips." This is a bit deep, but bear with me. I’m going to read a sentence from the beginning and from the end of the letter:

So it is not merely the external beauty of the Redeemer's appearance that is glorified: rather, the beauty of Truth appears in him, the beauty of God himself who draws us to himself and, at the same time captures us with the wound of Love, the holy passion ("eros") that enables us to go forth together, with and in the Church his Bride, to meet the Love who calls us.

“Nothing can bring us into close contact with the beauty of Christ himself other than the world of beauty created by faith and light that shines out from the faces of the saints, through whom his own light becomes visible.”

Knowledge of Christ is linked to an experience of the beauty of Christ. For there is, “nothing more beautiful.” It means we can approach the truth in quite a different way; listening to an oratorio by Bach, quietly sitting in a gothic cathedral, meditating on a painting by Caravaggio, reading a poem by Gerald Manley Hopkins, contemplating the saints. The gift of divinely-inspired creativity lifts us up and allows us touch the divine. It is not incidental that Benedict played the piano daily. As Dostoyevski told us, the world will be saved by beauty.

What does this quest for the beautiful require of you as graduates? In a culture obsessed with the immediate, where people endlessly and pointlessly text and tweet, your task as Christian educators, and all of you are that, one way or the other, is to expose those you serve to something more beautiful, more enduring, more transcendent. Introduce young people to art and literature, to music and poetry, to painting and sculpture. The Catechism of the Catholic Church is a great book; however I very much doubt that in itself it will produce a whole lot of converts. But a really beautiful concert, a beautiful liturgy celebrated in monastery, a beautiful painting... who knows?

And now to Francis, Pope Francis I should say, although we all seem to be on a first-name basis with the current pontiff. His work is very much in continuity with his predecessors. As he said only a few weeks ago in the United States: “All that is good, all that is true, all that is beautiful leads us to God.” But my word for Francis comes from his first major work, an Apostolic Exhortation, Evangelii gaudium, the Joy of the Gospel. If John Paul showed us that our faith is true, and Benedict showed us that it is beautiful, Francis has shown us that it is, or should be, joyful. Truth and beauty are of course wonderful things, but they might suggest that an appropriate response to the gift of faith is contemplation. In contrast, the joy of the Gospel is about action, or in Christian
terms, mission. Francis seemingly has no time for Christians sitting around and thinking about stuff, and if he were here today, I suspect he would say that same thing. Let me quote a very short section from Evangelii Gaudium.

An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral! Let us recover and deepen our enthusiasm, that “delightful and comforting joy of evangelizing, even when it is in tears that we must sow... And may the world of our time, which is searching, sometimes with anguish, sometimes with hope, be enabled to receive the good news not from evangelizers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour, who have first received the joy of Christ”.[6]

In this section, Francis has two sources: “Evangelii nuntiandi” from Paul VI, and the 2006 Aparecida document of the Latin American bishops’ conference. I’ve said elsewhere that if you really want to understand Francis, these two documents are essential reading.

It’s not that the Gospel in the abstract is joyful; rather its proclamation brings joy, to our own hearts as proclaimers, as well as to the hearts of those who receive it. Evangelization is faith in action.

This is my word to you today; as Catholic Christians you believe in Jesus, the way the truth and the life; as those trained in ministry you understand the centrality of beauty in the Christian life, in ministry you are all evangelizers; called to proclaim with your lives the joy of the Gospel, to show forth that joy in all that you do.

Perhaps a final word to you graduates in conclusion. Pope Francis has proclaimed 2016 as the Year of Mercy. It’s an extraordinary rich Biblical concept that is revelatory of who God is for Jews and Christians alike; for the term permeates our Scriptures. For our Moslem brothers and sisters, El Rahim (the Merciful) is one of the most important titles for God. For Christians, the God of mercy is revealed in the all-merciful Saviour sent to redeem the world. And mercy reveals our deepest nature, tarnished by sin, but in Christ elevated and divinized through the gift of grace. Mercy reveals who and what we are. There can be no greater lesson in Christian anthropology: from truth to beauty to joy to mercy. Congratulations to you all, and blessings on your ministry.