

Commencement Address for Boston College Graduation
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Archbishop of Chicago
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The world needs the hope of those who know the givenness of life

My first words today are to my fellow graduates. After all, it is your day; you have earned it. So, heartfelt congratulations to you and my best wishes for every blessing in the days ahead. You make us all proud and you are, for all of us today, evidence of the givenness of life, the eternal truth that God's grace is never exhausted.

It is an honor to be with all of you, parents, family and friends of the graduates. I am pleased to be with Cardinal O'Malley, whom I have admired since our days together in Washington, DC, where I saw first-hand his genuine concern for the poor and immigrants. And I am so grateful to you, Father Leahy, your board of Trustees, and the professors and staff of this outstanding university. You pay me a singular compliment, not only by inviting me to speak to the graduates, but by numbering me today among those awarded honorary degrees, a truly distinguished group. I am deeply honored to stand here with them and grateful to Boston College.

It is so very easy for me to feel at home here with you today. First, because I have the memory of two earlier visits to Boston College, invited both times to participate in your remarkable *Church in the 21st Century* initiative. The now permanent center, *C21*, well-positions Boston College to engage, facilitate and inform the Catholic community through conversations on critical issues of the day. Please, Father Leahy and every one at BC, continue this and all your other good works, so valuable to our Church and society.

A second reason for feeling at home here on this particular occasion is that like your families, my rather large clan also is celebrating a very special university graduation this month. The youngest of my 17 nephews and nieces, Emily, walked to the stage last week at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln to receive her degree in journalism.

In fact, I want to organize my remarks around two stories about Emily, both of which occurred in the fall of 1998. These were the days when Emily, along with most of you, went off to or, maybe were dragged to, kindergarten.

Another event took place that fall for our family, admittedly much less momentous: At the end of September, I was ordained a bishop to serve the Diocese of Rapid City, South Dakota.

Here's the first Emily story: Some months after attending my ordination in South Dakota, Emily and her family were at Sunday Mass in their home parish in Virginia. The music director was teaching the congregation a new song, when Emily immediately turned to my sister and said, "Mom, that's South Dakota music." With a puzzled look on her face, my sister asked Emily what she meant. "Don't you remember?," Emily pressed with some frustration. "We learned that song at uncle Blase's ordination in South Dakota."

Neither Emily's parents, nor her older brother recognized the song. But, when they returned home, my sister looked at the program for the ordination ceremonies and sure enough there it was. The new song the parish was learning that morning at Mass had been sung several months before in South Dakota. Emily was quite pleased with herself and experienced for the first time in her young life the delight that comes to all of us in saying "I told you so."

Of course, we are not surprised by Emily's astute sensibility. Children have a keen perception, a receptivity that is especially attuned to originality, to beauty, to the rhythmic and the poetic, to a wholesome and regular cadence that really delights the mind, always ready to be etched in memory. This sensibility, so remarkably evident and spontaneous in children, is driven by an innate appreciation of the givenness of life. Children instinctively grasp that life is ever graced. They sense that more is always coming, and the more, because it is beyond their making, is inexhaustible, leaving them unafraid of their God-given thirsts. Like the poet Hopkins they are convinced that there always "lives the dearest freshness deep down things."

My young friends, fellow graduates, your capacity to appreciate the givenness, the grace of life, which marked your childhood years, has never left you. Be reminded of that today, because the world needs the hope of those who know the givenness of life. In fact, I invite you to see this entire graduation ceremony as a collective embrace by your family and friends and this Boston College community, designed to spark in you a renewed sense of the givenness of life. These are the folks who have been grace for you, in their steady and supportive presence, by the example of fidelity to their own relationships to one another, in their commitments to work and family on your behalf and in the many second chances they gave you. They have cultivated in you through all of this an appreciation for the givenness of life. Trust in it; enjoy it; and let it become a reference point both for your personal and public lives.

Keeping fresh a sense that grace is ever breaking into our existence is the pathway to living a truly free, authentic and rewarding life. Trusting that God is always rushing in with more will sustain you in moments of doubt about your future. It will give you a generous and brave heart to speak for those who have no voice because they are too small, too poor, too old, too marginalized, too forgotten. It will prompt in you the strength to be patient as you respond to your God-given longing for intimacy by pursuing loving relationships that are both lasting and life-giving. It will make you wisely suspicious of the voices urging you to sell yourselves short by pursuing a frenetic life pace dotted by false intimacies that leave you empty or by the fever of acquiring more stuff, to the point that we become possessed by the things we try to possess.

Trust what you learned long ago, that there lives "the dearest freshness deep down things."

Now for the second Emily story: On that September evening after I was ordained a bishop, Emily sought me out and asked me for 15 of the prayer cards prepared for that occasion. The cards featured a photo of me, dressed in vestments and miter, with crosier in hand, standing at my bishop's chair in the cathedral. I didn't think much of it at the time, but some weeks later I asked my sister what that was all about. "Why did Emily ask precisely for 15 of those cards?" "Well," my sister explained somewhat shyly, "the next week after we returned home from your ordination, Emily was on in her kindergarten class for 'show and tell'. You were the 'show and tell'", she said. And, so I learned, Emily began her 'show and tell' performance by handing out my photo to her little kindergarten buddies and then, she asked them to guess what I was. Very

quickly, those fertile little five year old minds came to a consensus: I am a Ninja Warrior! “Well,” my sister told me, “it could have been worse; you could’ve been a Pokémon.”

The influences of cultural icons and symbols are strong on the imagination of people of all ages, and so we should not be surprised by this turn to action heroes when five year olds try to make sense of leaders dressed in unfamiliar if not strange attire.

But, this story does highlight the need to be vigilant about the amount of space we give in our imagination to cultural icons, especially those which have the power to undermine our sense of the givenness, the grace of life. There is a common thread among many of the dominant icons of our day, namely the concentration of power in the hands of a few. That is true for both the super action heroes who do good, as well as corrupt villains such as the Wolf of Wall Street or President Frank Underwood. Both rely on a distorted view of human life and human freedom, championing the self-made, self-reliant person, the autonomous individual who is free only in the sense of being unencumbered by the claims of others. Lurking beneath this distortion of the self-sufficient autonomous person is a deep fear of the insufficiency of life, that life is not graced, there is no givenness. So we humans are reduced to producers and consumers, and in our competition for finite resources in a world of insufficiency, the only option left is control of goods, of power and even of people in relationships.

All of this has enormous consequences for humanity both individually and globally. When the prevailing image of success is wrapped in messages that encourage succeeding generations to pursue one’s own interests, it leaves no room for others, no room for the poor, We then arrive at a point, as Pope Francis observes, where “God’s voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades.”

The ripple effect of this indifference is already in full view as the numbers of people who are not just poor but trapped in poverty grow to staggering proportions around the world. Global communications is becoming the game changer that should alarm us about how this will play out. Young people today and even more in the future, living on this flat earth with no hope yet tantalized by what they see in the world of opulence, will be challenged to deal with rising expectations in a non-violent way.

That is why I say to you again, the world needs the hope of those who know and are inspired by the givenness of life, the grace of life. Keeping fresh that sense of givenness will have an impact not only on you but on our world. It will help you become the leaders we need today, in the world of business, our politics and the economy.

Leaders who, as Pope Francis has urged, promote the common good and measure economic health by how the economy treats the poor, and leaders who advocate for inclusion and economic security for all.

Leaders willing to question a one-dimensional measure of economic growth, in which market forces left to themselves are considered the best arbiters of economic progress.

Leaders who enact public policy that pursues human solidarity and dignity for all, and who are unafraid to challenge models of governance that seek to maximize the freedom of markets and individual choice at the expense of all other moral considerations..

And leaders made strong to do all of this by cultivating an interior life ever attuned to the words of the poet, that there always “lives the dearest freshness deep down things.”

This is all the more reason for you to be grateful, in fact, for all of us to be grateful, for your education at Boston College led by the Society of Jesus. This great laboratory of learning and formation has challenged the distorted and limited understandings of human life which often dominate our cultural imagination. The human person proposed to you here is one who seeks and claims an integral development, morally, spiritually, intellectually and emotionally, which is joined intrinsically to the communities that sustain you. They have helped you cultivate your God-given sensibility of the grace of life and an understanding of the great command of Jesus: “Love one another as I have loved you.”

I brought you back to the moment of your first days of school in my two Emily stories, not as a nostalgic journey down memory lane, nor to stoke sentimentality at a sentimental time. But rather, to put you in touch with the full breath and wholeness of your life, and encourage you to see your life not as a series of unrelated episodes, but as a whole, one in which so many have carried and cared for you. My invitation is that as you see your whole life marked by grace and givenness, it will give you confidence as your journey continues, for the world needs the hope of those who know the givenness of life.

Secondly, I took you back 17 years to create an opening today for you to say thanks to the people who held your hand at the hand-off to your first teacher, all those who taught you to sing and taught you new songs. Be grateful; say thanks, it means a lot to these people, and especially your parents, to know that you remember.

And finally, my sharing of Emily stories comes from something I have learned over the years, flashbacks in time come in handy. There will be days when you have lost a sense of the grace of life, when you have become terrified of your thirsts to the point that you are choosing unsatisfying ways to quench them and when the spontaneity and freedom you enjoyed at an earlier time in life has been sapped by disappointment and cynicism. When and if that happens, I have one more homework assignment for you. Sit down with a five year old and teach him or her a new song. Delight in her perceptiveness and swift ability to pick it up; marvel at his readiness to receive a new grace, and then be ready yourself to find new hope. For in all of this it will dawn on you that this child will always remember you as the person who taught them a new song.

And finally, do me a favor. Since I ‘m relatively new to Chicago, and the people and especially the priests have not quite figured me out yet, let’s keep that business about being a Ninja Warrior between us.

Congratulations again and God bless you all.