

“Believe in God First, and then You Will Attain the One Thing Necessary in Life”

Commencement Address to the Class of 2016

Thomas Aquinas College

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Giving a speech such as this to a very bright group of graduating college seniors, I suppose that I am expected to tell you to “believe in yourself, dream big dreams and pursue those dreams, because you have the power within you to achieve whatever you want in life.”

Has this not become the standard practice now — that commencement speeches urge graduates to utilize their potential, make a difference, and succeed? While this message has great worth in that it encourages each one to work to attain their full potential in life, the problem is that it starts off on the wrong foot. No one is perfect, we are all flawed human beings; original sin is not a myth, it’s for real, and it has very real consequences. The way to attain one’s full potential in life is not to start out believing in oneself, but believing *in God*. The point is not to do whatever we want — which is impossible, anyway, despite the rhetoric we hear all the time (I will never qualify for a World Series caliber Major League baseball team) — but to do what God calls you to do in life: to discern and fulfill your vocation, so that you may become the person that God created you to be.

This, then, gets back to a question I have just alluded to: What, really, constitutes success? The graduate school one gets into? The prestige of the occupation one takes up, the salary one makes, the home one lives in?

Think about the patron of your college: For St. Thomas Aquinas, success was simply a matter of discerning God’s will and then doing it. He came from a wealthy and influential family, and when it became clear to them that he intended to give his life to the Church, they worked to get him a prestigious and lucrative position. He chose instead to enter a new — and rather suspect — way of life as a Dominican friar. No wealth, no clout, no fame. His relatives were shocked and even locked him in his room to keep him from following this path. But he knew that this was what God was calling him to do, and even in the face of opposition from the people he loved the most, he did God’s will.

We need, then, always to keep our sight fixed on the highest and, ultimately, only important good, the *unum necessarium*: doing the will of God, and simply being with Him, so that you may become the person He created you to be.

I am reminded of the story of a conversation St. Philip Neri had with a bright young student. “What will you do when you complete your studies?” asked the merry second apostle of Rome. “Probably continue on and study the law,” replied the ambitious young man.

“And then?”

“Then I’ll go to work for one of the major legal firms in Rome and make a name for myself as a barrister.”

“And then?”

“Then I hope to become a judge.”

“And then?”

“Hopefully I will be promoted to lead one of the important law courts in Rome.”

“And then?”

“Then I will write a ground-breaking work on jurisprudence and gain more fame.”

“And then?”

The student was getting a little exasperated by this time, and said, “Well, I guess then I will retire to a nice estate in the country.”

“And then?”

“I suppose then I’ll eventually die.”

“And then?”

Keeping Priorities Straight

The college degree is a rite of passage. In my parents' generation, few people (especially women) went to college. Now most people in our country do, and while this is a good thing, it can lead to intellectual pride and snobbishness. (You need only note that some of the most horrendous initiatives against the dignity of human life are proposed by academics.) St. Thomas was one of the most brilliant minds of his age, and yet he was as willing to teach catechism to unlettered peasants and to preach popular missions as he was to engage in sophisticated scholastic debates. St. Ignatius insisted that the members of his Society teach catechism to simple people and children. Truly great minds are not snobs; only second-rate minds are. Your learning should draw you closer to others, not separate you from them.

This necessitates living with one's priorities in proper order. Notice how in Catholic art the Ten Commandments are typically depicted not visually balanced with five on each tablet (although one does see this depiction at times) but rather with the first three Commandments on the first tablet and the other seven on the second. This is because the first three have to do with our relationship to God, and so they are at the top. We must be in a right relationship with God if we are going to be just in our relationship to others, the relationships governed by Commandments four through ten. This is the correct spiritual balance in our life. But it won't work if we do not respect all of the Commandments together, as ingredients of the recipe for living out our vocation in life faithfully and well. This is why they are *Commandments*; if any one of them is missing, the recipe goes flat. And if the first three are ignored, it ends up a complete disaster. I am reminded of the astute observation made in a commencement address by Ted Koppel 30 years ago: "What Moses brought down from the mountain are Ten Commandments, not suggestions. Are, not were."

The Role of Reason in Apprehending Truth

This, though, is not to be taken as some sort of assertion of fideism, as if reason had no role to play in our development as human beings. Quite the contrary, as we can learn, once again, from your patron saint. As you all well know, St. Thomas came of age when there were new developments in wisdom. Only about 60 years before he began his studies, Latin translations of Aristotle's works appeared that were previously unavailable to scholars in the West. Scholars were eager to read these books, and rather quickly the

Latin translations found their way to the University of Paris. Because Aristotle was not Christian, his writings were received suspiciously by many faculty members. Thomas, however, approached the books as gold mixed with dross. That is, for him there were many excellent insights that could be used to support the revelation of Christ, while other Aristotelian claims had to be rejected.

Thus it is that Thomas forcefully argued that there is no truth that is foreign to the Church, and he demonstrated that “the new learning” represented by the revival of Aristotelian thought posed no threat to the Faith. His approach is very instructive to us. In his theological writings he presents the objections of his adversaries fairly and clearly. He takes them seriously and presumes that his interlocutors are sincere in their quest for truth. His equanimity was not born of a prejudiced mind unwilling to consider new evidence; rather, it came from the conviction that nothing that is true can do anything but lead us closer to God.

This, then, is how St. Thomas Aquinas became one of the greatest thinkers in the history of the Church, leaving his mark on Catholic thought down to our own time. By being curious to explore the insights of Aristotle, by being faithful to Scripture and Tradition, and by carefully applying human reason to decide which Aristotelian positions were true, he was able to use Aristotle as an important philosopher who, though not Christian, offered not only great human wisdom but also provided solid support for divine wisdom. Thus in his *Summa Theologiae* and other works, Thomas was able to present a wonderful synthesis of human and divine truth, a synthesis which reaches its apex in Jesus Christ.

Aquinas has stood the test of time because he was graced by God with great insight, because he was a man of prayer who was committed to the Church, and because he was unafraid to subject both Christian and non-Christian viewpoints to the critique of human wisdom. So, intelligence, prayer, commitment to the Church, and confidence in the power of human reason lead us to the truth.

Our Challenge Today: Both New and the Same

We live in an increasingly polarized and angry world. Nonetheless, like Thomas Aquinas, we are still called to profess the faith with conviction,

intellectual rigor, and above all, charity. For a more contemporary example of how to do this, we can jump forward seven centuries.

In a book written by a friend of mine about C.S. Lewis and Msgr. Ronald Knox, two great religious literary figures of the 20th century, the author characterizes their contributions in a broad framework of public commentary and criticism. He notes that, while popular writers in the 20th century were always saying that the Western world had moved from the age of faith to the age of science, Ronald Knox responded that discussion of public issues had in fact entered into the age of assertion. The author explains Knox's perspective in this way:

... points of view are proclaimed forcefully, even stridently, but there is little real discussion. People simply assume that their position is self-evidently right and seek like-minded company. When contending parties meet, it is uncommon for the conversation to turn on matters of principle or substantive argumentation — rather, each side seeks to shout the other side down, resorting to *ad hominem* attacks and acrimonious remarks.¹

Of course, this is not an argument at all. Indeed, it simply suggests that many ideas in society are linked by underlying principles or assumptions. What such asserters fail to point out is that they may be linked in error just as easily as they are linked in truth.

Lewis and Knox, on the other hand, always presented clear, logical arguments for their points of view. One could object to the arguments, but the critic had to identify precise points at which the argument did not succeed. Knox and Lewis started from principles on which most people agreed, and by clear steps showed how their positions followed logically from those principles. The authors also did not denigrate or shout down their adversaries, but instead assumed writers with contrary positions to their own were intelligent people. Knox and Lewis would note the reasonable points made by their adversaries, but then indicated parts of the argument that were faulty. So, there was respect, not mockery, and Knox and Lewis offered arguments — *arguments*, not simply forcefully presented claims.

Both C.S. Lewis and Msgr. Ronald Knox were equally prescient in seeing through the fallacy of relativism in relation to the truth. As my author-friend puts it, for Lewis and Knox:

Relativism means the death of healthy argument: if truth is not something upon which minds can meet, why discuss anything? It is also intellectually dishonest. When someone says, 'That may be true for you ...' what he really means is that it is not true at all (or he would affirm it) and that if you think that it is true there is no point in even discussing the matter with you. Knox and Lewis realized that if something is only true for some, then it is not true at all.²

My dear young people: The challenge you face today is even more difficult because the volume of this cognitive dissonance has been turned up seemingly to the point of deafening since the time that these two enduring 20th century authors bequeathed us their insights. It seems to me, though, that you graduates can make fundamental contributions to the Church, even in the realm of apologetics, by focusing on certain beliefs or moral norms that are central to the good development of society and each individual within it. By doing this properly you will make fundamental truths more plausible to your contemporaries and to the younger generations who will come after you, the fundamental truths that are summed up in the Ten Commandments. Again, they are *Commandments*, not suggestions — now, as in the past — because the truth of our human nature does not change. God made us for Himself, to be happy with Him forever, and these Commandments are the indispensable guideposts that unfailingly keep us on the path that gets us there.

Those who understand the revelation of God made in Jesus Christ and who are members of his Church are happy to receive the Ten Commandments and to obey them. They are indeed commands, but not burdens. They conform to laws that God has written into our DNA. Only if we conform to these commands can we hope to prosper as human beings.

Like St. Thomas, when explaining the Commandments to others we should be scrupulously fair in examining the objections that modern people have to one or more of the Commandments. In an age of few personal books and no personal computers, university professors were expected to remember everything they read. Of course, that meant they also had to understand what they read. Thomas Aquinas had both an outstanding memory and a powerful

intellect. This meant he understood and recalled both the strengths and weaknesses of the authors he read. We should be as fair and respectful as Thomas. Our basic argument will be that the Ten Commandments are norms for action that, if fulfilled, help us to conform to the nature God gave us and thereby flourish as human beings in community.

The One Thing Necessary

This, in the end, is the one necessary thing God wants for all of us. And this is something that, until a couple of generations ago, every Catholic grade school student knew, because it was the question and answer found at the beginning of the Baltimore Catechism. You are probably familiar with it yourselves. Perhaps you can even recite it with me from memory:

Q. Why did God make me?

A. God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this life, and be happy with Him forever in the next.

The answer is profound in its simplicity: It is easy to understand and, although appearing simple on the surface, sums up volumes of theology. Or to be more precise, of Christology. First, Christ is the one whose Resurrection is the promise of eternal life. Second, Christ's life on earth is the fullest possible revelation of God in human form. We know God through Jesus Christ; that is, Jesus Christ reveals the Father to us, and no future person can add to this knowledge. Third, by His suffering and death on the Cross, Jesus taught us sacrificial love, the only way to love God completely. And finally, by His teachings and miracles He showed us how we are to serve others. In sum, what at first appears as a statement derived from the first two chapters of Genesis, is in fact a deep Christological affirmation.

This is the wisdom of God, a wisdom equally apprehensible by the unlettered as by the most highly intelligent; indeed, perhaps more easily by the unlettered, since — as I mentioned at the start of this talk — for those who have attained a high level of education in life, the temptation to intellectual pride is always there, sometimes almost irresistible. Like your patron, though, you understand that the gift of intelligence — like all of God's gifts — is meant to be used for God's glory and our sanctification, and *not* the other way around! Otherwise, a precious gift is turned into a vice. Such is the

example of St. Thomas Aquinas, who, using his gifts to respond to God's call in his own life, went on to become one of the greatest and most influential minds in the thousand years between the fall of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance. Yet, as we know, he did not complete his greatest work, the *Summa Theologiae*. We are told that on the feast of St. Nicholas, a year before he died, he had a spiritual experience during Mass that convinced him that everything he had written was just so much straw. This was not a denigration of his life's work; it was the recognition that even our highest human achievements fall short of the glory of God.

All the wisdom of Aquinas, all that you have explored here at Thomas Aquinas College, finds expression in the simple question and answer that every Catholic child of seven used to know, a simple question and answer that can be rephrased into a commandment which marvelously sums up the *unum necessarium*. This commandment, I believe, is what the Angelic Doctor would say to you today: Know, love and serve God in this life, so that you may be happy with Him in the next.

Conclusion

I thank your professors, administrators, benefactors and, especially, parents, for providing you an education that makes it possible for you to embrace this call. Do so with all of your heart, mind, soul, and strength: Believe in God, and respond to the vocation He has given you so that you may become the person He has created you to be and so find happiness with Him now in this life, and forever in heaven.

NOTES

1. Milton Walsh, *Second Friends: C. S. Lewis and Ronald Knox in Conversation* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008) p. 326.
2. *Second Friends*, p. 327.