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NOTE: last paragraph

I am both pleased and honored, in this, the ebb tide of my first year among you at the University of Dallas, to have been chosen to address you formally on this solemn occasion. I am honored because I have known you only one year and if we have become friends together, it is because cor loquitur ad cordeem, "heart speaks to heart" in the eloquent phrase that Newman emblazoned on his coat of arms. I am pleased because the occasion is formal and it is so much easier to wish friends adios when the moment of parting is fenced all about with, and thus made bearable by, an etiquette willed upon us by a venerable academic tradition.

But if you share with me the ebbing of a year, you must know as I do that the receding tide promises a full flood. For this reason you graduating seniors of the University of Dallas pause, if only for a moment, with those of us who have taught you, to celebrate this rite of convocation in order that you might knit up your past four years in the service of the future. In doing so, in pausing in this way, that accompaniment of mortality which is a perpetual series of little deaths and is called change, is challenged, chained, and put in its place by an act of seasonable regard for loss and gain.

I will not urge upon you the testimony of countless generations of men and women whose corporate judgment converges and becomes one on the crucial business of happiness: you will not believe me when I tell you that the larger portion of whatever felicity you will find in this life--taking you all together in the large and by the handful--is now behind you. Were I to press this consideration upon you---exhausted as you are
by examinations; harassed—as I know you to be—by heartless pedants; abused—as you know yourselves to be by academic martinets who would turn the academy into a parade ground; beaten down and altogether rendered totally useless for weeks to come to God, Country, Mother, and I know not what other flag may rule your private worlds; were I, I repeat the thesis, to badger you with my conviction that you have just finished what old-fashioned novelists and women of dubious age in the divorce courts still call "the best years of my life" — you would not believe me! Nor would I blame you. It is only testimony and testimony cannot be demonstrated to be true or false. It can only be taken or rejected according to the disposition of the man who hears it. Nonetheless, I offer the testimony to you for what it is worth.

. The true song and dance, the charge and retreat, the licking of wounds, and pushing on begin for most of you now. You have received a kind of education here at the University of Dallas which is both traditional and startlingly innovation. Traditional, because it rejects the Averroist contention, possibly the only teaching that ever made Saint Thomas lose his temper if only for a moment, that truth is scattered; contradictory; incapable of being whipped into harmony; traditional because it affirms the Augustinian conviction that all good things can come into their own and enjoy the fruits of their own gardens only provided that they are bathed in the sun of Christian Revelation which so transfigures the mind knowing and the object known that in the catalyst of this fire both not only achieve their natural fulness but are baked in a Flame which is not of this world. Your education has been traditional because it has been Christian, Catholic, and given that the Church and only the Church has preserved intact the inheritance of classical antiquity you have spoiled the Egyptians and made that your own as well.
If you are not good Christians, you ought at least to be good pagans!
And—as Chesterton once said—beyond orthodoxy there are only two things:
heresy and paganism, and the best in the latter belongs to you. Your
education has given you the instruments you need to avoid the former.
There is nothing good in it at all! Your education has been traditional
as well in the sense that the deposit of wisdom which carved Christendom
into the glory that it has been—the "standing grace of this world" in
the splendid phrase of Hilaire Belloc—has made our Western civilization
to be what it is: the home of man, the hearth, the refuge for men who
seek light and warmth in a world given over to the darkness of igno-
rance and the damp cold of sin. If you sought this University it is be-
cause you saw in it something eminently human: and to me there comes
quite naturally the figure of the Inn where men of good will find com-
panionship and possibly a portion of wisdom; a place in being where you
paused early in this, your pilgrimage.

But your education has been stunningly traditional because it has
been startlingly new. Novelty and innovation, of course, belong to the
very concept of tradition. If we in the western world have sought the
new and have ever expressed our genius in a nervous search for what yet
is not but might be, it is because our tradition has taught us to do so.
This is not true of other civilizations, no matter how beautiful or how
splendid they might be: let us think only of ancient Egypt—it stands
up through the lost centuries like a startling salute to Death and its
mummies and sphinxes chill us with the ice of the grave. But as I once
said on another occasion, in the West, graves exist only that we might
climb out of them. We are the people of the Resurrection and we have
tried to give you here some sense of that perpetual Easter which is our
inheritance. Judge us in years to come by that standard. If we did not
fail you in this, then we shall not have failed you at all.

I say this because technical excellence and expertise, although found in abundance at the University of Dallas, can be found anywhere today. There was a time when commencement speakers had to urge their graduates to conquer the world materially and master it in an athletic way reminiscent of Theodore Roosevelt. I would not be abreast of the times were I to urge upon you that kind of consideration. Altogether without irony and setting aside any political predilections that I might have, there is no doubt but that our American society is affluent. Materially you will all do well—or most of you will, much better than those of us who have taught you. It takes absolute genius today to be a material or professional failure in the United States of America. I might also say, it needs a special grace. Should there be a man or woman sitting out there today before me who is worried about his future—in a technical and professional sense of the term—well, let me set those worries to rest: if you cannot carry your own load, society will carry it for you!

The age of rugged individualism, for both good and evil, I might add, died long ago. The personal security produced by the high pitch of excellence achieved by our technology—a security which makes, I might add, insurance a very good living for some tens of thousands of agents in our land—has so drained our culture of the sense of the contingent that it threatens to rob it of the sense of Providence. In a world so totally organized in a slick and comfortable fashion that what the Greeks called Fortune and the Christians call Providence is so exceptional that it has begun to fade from our corporate consciousness, as Romano Guardini pointed out some years ago, the human psyche is invaded by a new dread that forces itself to the surface of the spirit because
of the vacuum created by the absence of the dangers faced by older generations.

A liberal education today ought to be judged by whether it prepares men and women to face the possibility of a totally new dread, a new anxiety before the possibility that the world is really Faceless in itself, without meaning, that all meaning must come from ourselves. In this agony of the spirit through which the West is passing today in this its time of trial, its Golgotha, the education you have gained here at the University of Dallas ought to be a shield and an armour.

But you might very well challenge me: where is this crisis of the spirit? True enough, we are plagued by the bards and the beards; by the picket lines at Berkeley; by the so-called "New Left"; by the "God is Dead" movement; by the draft-card burners; by the professional protesters; but, after all, are not these phenomena merely peripheral to a society that is burgeoning. Are they not incidental to a world which is ready to crack the last mysteries of electricity in the moment in which it heals the scars of the older industrial revolution? Are they not insignificant in the light of what you have assured us is a smooth-running and comfortable world, an opulent world?

In answer to this hypothetical objection, I would recall a fundamental principle of pathology. External excrescences are never diseases: they rather point to their presence and thus to an active corrosion going on deep down in the body. The body politic today in the entire western world is sick with doubt—doubt about its own ultimate justification for existence and, given that the West has always claimed and continues to do so, that she alone has been privileged to wrest from the darkness some portion of light because the Light of the Star shone down upon her some 2,000 years ago, it follows that the body politic
today in that same western world is now in doubt, not only about its own role in being, but about Being Itself, about the possibility of ascribing any meaning whatsoever to the mystery of existence. From this doubt about our own banners and standards, the Labarum of our own order which was crowned early in our history by the Cross and by the assurance that Victory is to be found under Its Sign, there has grown up a massive inferiority complex. We apologize to the barbarians for being the bearers of civilization -- which is as absurd as a physician in the heart of the Congo apologizing for bringing medicine to a sick native child.

Now our culture is wounded with this doubt and the inferiority complex ensuing therefrom partially because it has not had the kind of education we have tried to give you graduating seniors here. If any of you feel doubts about the ultimate Truth of the civilized inheritance we have been privileged to transmit to you, blame it not on the inheritance but on our own weaknesses as men and as teachers. We too are wounded, all of us are, by the victory attested again by the "God is Dead" folk. Do not dismiss them lightly. For those men—and they are legion—who suffer a crisis in Faith, the absurd must swarm up out of the underworld of the consciousness to both wound us with its evil and bewilder us with its meaninglessness, for absurdity is truly a vacant stare upon the broken countenance of human existence. Absurdities are everywhere. The "God Is Dead" people did not need to tell us about them. Each man can make his own list. This is mine: the cynicism of the rich; the cheapness of what passes for love; the loss of innocence in children; the scattering of the family; the cowardice of clergymen; the blindness of the learned; the death of infants and the carrying of coffins. Surveying this desolation of withered expectations, only the most civilized and disciplined of sceptics and the firmest of Christians can react with-
out panicking deep within their hearts.

This is a quiet panic that stalks through the backwoods of the western spirit. When it erupts stridently into the marketplace, this is a good thing because any danger is better confronted when it is out in the open. But retreating—as it customarily does—deep down into the heart of our civilization, this panic—this gnawing fear that the Face of Being is really the Vacant Stare of the Barbarian—covers itself over and tries to lose itself in a frenzy of activity that would cause the West to storm the moon before it had courage to face the vacancy of its own heart; that would make do for charity—that Burning Fire of the Holy Spirit—some pale and ineffectual good fellowship over tea and crumpets; that would justify a humane and civilized polity in terms of its immediate pragmatic value; that would go about its business with a third of the world groaning under slavery and that would make it a mark of indecency to mention the fact in public; that would pretend that all was well in Christendom when nothing is well; when it would turn the worst of times into the best of times; when it would rob you of the challenge God has given you at this juncture in time.

Graduating seniors: I appeal here to a Thomistic distinction, that between essence and existence. We have given you here—we have tried to give you—the essence of the inheritance of civilized Christian man. But essences exist, as my old master Etienne Gilson once wrote, only in order that they might be annealed in the catalyst of existence. You know about wisdom; you know about virtue; you know about honor. Now go out and be wise, be virtuous, be honorable. Pick up the Sword and never forget that it has the shape of the Cross.