A great German poet once wrote that there are only forty-five possible plots for a work of fiction. If he is right, then I wonder how many possible themes there are for a speech at a commencement exercise. Certainly less than forty-five.

We admonish you, graduating seniors, to go out and conquer the world: but very few of you will. Most of you will settle for work, more or less rewarding, and for success, more or less modest. We ask you to remember what you learned in what are always called, in oratorical exercises of this nature, "the halls of academe." And most of you, within a very short time, will have forgotten (to take an example from my own profession) how to demonstrate the real distinction between essence and existence, and very few will ever again read a piece of first rate poetry for pure pleasure. We urge you to live by the Christian principles quickening education here at the University of Dallas. And most of you will heed this call, up to a point, but few anywhere, anytime, will become martyrs and heroes for the Cross. In a sense this is to be expected, because few of us are geniuses and fewer still are saints. What is true of all humanity is true of graduating seniors. Taken in the large and by the handful we are mostly "C+" citizens of the Heavenly City and of the many earthy cities sprawling over the surface of our planet.

Cicero wrote a treatise on old age, and he wisely pointed out that the fruits of learning are best enjoyed in the quiet of old age when most of us will have run the course, fought the fight, and left to memory the hopes of youth. "Ah, youth is a marvelous thing," wrote George Bernard Shaw, "it is a shame to waste it on the young!" But by old age you will have been blessed or cursed with whatever family you will have known and reared. By then your world will have been shaped, formed, executed and brought to fruition or foundered on the rocks of failure.

As you ponder these things down the pike of time approaching the darkness, you will come to know (possibly in a flash, more likely in a slowly matured judgement) that your education here has taught you a profound truth largely lost in the world in which you will live: You are not alone! You stand, as Burke might have put it, in a long line of generations, and you have been nourished by them all. You will have cultivated the art of memory, as dear Mel Bradford would have put it. History has told you a long tale reaching back to the Germanic forests of northern and eastern Europe, when many of your ancestors were little more than hairy barbarians who fell upon the ruins of Greece and Rome, rebuilding them as they were nourished by the spirit of classical learning and law. This world was slowly transfigured in the Fire of Faith as it forged Christendom, a civilization and a culture that are, in the immortal words of Hilaire Belloc, "the standing grace of this world."

Because you are not alone, because you take your place in a glorious company within which you have the honour of membership, you may look back with fondness on the University of Dallas, a place where you were not alone and where life did not begin with the 5:30 news or the late-late movie.

It is to be hoped that we armed you well for the world you are entering, for that world is in many ways hostile to what you learned here. That world is politically agnostic about the things of God whereas we taught you that there are two sources of Revelation: Reason and Faith. That world is socially hedonistic, and we taught you that self-discipline and the building of virtue, both natural and supernatural, make the man (and the woman) and confer on them a success before which all else is paltry indeed. That world is fiercely egocentric, whereas we preached a life as broad as the history of salvation. That world exults in its own self-sufficiency, and we told you that you are cradled in the Creative Act of the Triune God. That world takes pride in the little egos of the individuals who people it, but we told you to get down on your knees and pray, because only then can you stand erect, and, once again, be not alone but in a glorious company.

T. S. Eliot, in his renowned essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," pointed out that only people with no personalities talk about their own. God endowed each of you, dear seniors, with gifts. All any university can do is open the package and take off the wrapping. Only then, to expand my metaphor, can the plant within flower, but it will only flower if it is watered. We, your teachers, have been the gardeners. But the plant does not grow inward solipsistically but outward, giving of its shade as well as of its aroma to the world round about. In my life I have known many an educated man and woman and, by and large, I have liked most of them. I have also known many an uneducated man and woman and by and large I have liked them too. But I have always noted that the mark of
the educated man is his disinterested service, first in youth to his own studies, later (with some in any event) in their capacity to lose themselves in the service of God, their families and professions, their country; sometimes, to all being itself. It is to be hoped that we, your teachers, have taken you out of your selves.

The education you have received here at the University of Dallas can be approached from two angles: first, with regard to the subject matter which you have mastered, and second with regard to that self-mastery which is one with the growth within you. Higher education is thus a two-pronged instrument: what you learned and the learning. The first part is objective in that your gaze has been riveted beyond yourselves to the world you assimilated intellectually. In so doing you submerged the little "I", the troublesome ego, because you came to care (the German word Sorge comes to mind) about your major subjects: mathematics, the physical sciences, the fine arts, literature, languages, philosophy and theology—all of them forged in the fire of history. Their mastery filled your months and years. You thus were wedded to a traditional body of knowledge, now made your own, which ushered you into that large and splendid company of which I have spoken. The ages were opened up to you and you no longer would have to walk alone. But the other prong of this venture has been the personal habitation of your own minds in the virtues which made you at home in the world you now inhabit. Thus you became (or at least began to become) the persons you are, but you did so in a disinterested and even selfless way.

All of this will steel you in life, but the full fruit of the tree will fill your laps only when you are past maturity and look back and weigh the fruit in your hands, hefting it, the solitude of the twilight broken by the voices of wisdom, the darkness illuminated by lights of learning lifting you beyond the loneliness so marking our age. The details will be gone, the footnotes forgotten, but the vision will be permanent.

You will not be cheapened and overwhelmed by the chatter around you, and our world is full of chatter, the "sound and fury" spoken of by Shakespeare. You will not be overawed by the latest advance in science and technology or the latest turn in political fortune. You will remember Aristotle's insistence that only the uneducated feel themselves diminished by the stars above, because, remember! we know them and they do not know us. Should you succeed in life (and I wish you all the best) you will take it in stride because humility will be your banner. You will know that you are in a Tradition bigger than any of us but begging to be fulfilled and deepened by each one of us. If you fail in life (and may God avoid that eventuality) always remember, as the old ballroom ballad has it, that many are "Born to Lose." If you took the wrong turn in Eliot's rose garden and went down a false path, you can at least take comfort in the truth that the Cross is the heart of history, and that in your pain you will have taken something from the back of Our Saviour. You will face failure with dignity and convert it into grace.

"The University of Dallas is dedicated to the pursuit of wisdom, of truth and of virtue as the proper and primary ends of education. The University seeks to educate its students so they may develop the intellectual and moral virtues, prepare themselves for life and work in a problematic and changing world, and become men and women able to act responsibly for their own good and for the good of their family, community, country and church."

--University of Dallas "Mission Statement"