Omnia visibilia et invisibilia

All things visible and invisible

I am very honored and delighted to be invited to give this convocation address, especially, of course, since most of us enjoyed and endured the Rome experience together. One of the most rewarding elements of the Rome experience is the opportunity for faculty and students to get to know each other well. This is both a good and bad thing for some of what we get to know about each other is marvelous, and some of what we get to know about each other is not so marvelous. But let's just remember the marvelous -- I'll forget how often I was asked in the laundry late at night about some paper that was due, if you'll forget how crabby I was. That's asking a lot, but I am hoping that some spirit of generosity may wash over you in your last sentimental days at UD.

You may be asking yourselves why you are here this afternoon at this convocation-- why the University schedules one more time-consuming empty ritual event to mark your graduation. You may actually be thinking quite little of the meaning or significance of graduation -- your thoughts are likely consumed with getting those last papers done, preparing for exams, fretting about what comes next, grieving at leaving your friends. I guess we are here to help you do some of the reflecting that might get lost in the rush.
These weeks preceding graduation may well resemble the Rome experience in many respects. Certainly, both can be like roller coaster experiences -- the highs are very high and the lows are very low. You may be so immersed in the details, and the joys and agonies of the experience that it is difficult to make sense of any whole -- to appropriate and to evaluate what is happening.

Right now, you may feel what you often felt in your Rome semester travels. Remember yourself standing on some dismal, grey and bleak train platform -- remember how hungry, tired, confused and homesick you often felt -- how you were just waiting for it to be all over with. It could be that just hours ago you were in a state of quasi-ecstasy on some grand overlook, viewing some fantastic art in an art museum or church, walking the streets of a foreign city, or drinking and talking with some new found friends in a foreign country. But now that is a dim memory in light of the arduous return journey you are about to make.

Or think of yourself not at the end of a trip, but at the beginning; one is often stressed out from packing, worried about whether your plans make sense, whether where you are headed is where you should be going, whether you should have taken another route. You are eager to find out where your present plans take you and you are confident that some pretty spectacular adventures await you, but you don't quite know what they are.
The point is that graduation is both the end and the beginning of a journey. You don’t have to have read much literature, not even Homer and Virgil and Dante, to know that I am not the first to observe that life itself is a lot like a journey, or even, in fact, literally a journey. Saint Teresa of Avila expressed pointedly what some of us are inclined to think on our bad days -- she observed that life is a like a long night in a bad inn -- if she had been a UD Romer she might have said like a long night in a train compartment with a few Italians.

But graduation should not be like one of those miserable moments on a journey. Rather it should be one of the rest stops on life's journey -- it should be like a nice stop in a road side cafe -- where one can feast on some local delicacies and refresh oneself. It should be an opportunity to pause and collect one's memories and orient one's self to the future, a time to sort things out a bit -- maybe even a time to put a few of the photos in the album.

Try to find some time, now or in the weeks to come, to think about what has happened to you here -- what you have learnt and what you are taking away with you. Certainly, the answer to that question is highly personal but perhaps there are some generalizations that can be made that would be helpful to keep in mind.

One characteristic of UD students that has always struck the faculty as remarkable is their gratitude. Ud students often seem so grateful for what they are
receiving here and for what is happening to them. And as we watch you mature from awkward and uncertain and sometimes wild freshman into poised and articulate and somewhat less wild seniors our hearts are filled with joy and we are grateful, for it seems that something of what we are wanting to achieve is happening and it is a delight to watch it happen.

What is it that we hope to achieve and want to see happen? Well, first and foremost you might say we want you to come to learn to love your mind, to love analytical thought, and creative thought and intuitive thought, and measured, scientific thought and the thought that is deep in the memory and virtually any kind of thought of which the mind is capable. We want you to love the thoughts that you have and we want to have helped you learn how to shape them and expand them and play with them and test them and articulate them. We want you to learn to be receptive to the thoughts of others and to have learnt how very limited is the perspective of any one of us.

Is there any particular thing we want you to be thinking about? Well, yes, but it really isn't all that particular. We want you to be thinking about all that is; we believe that the human mind is peculiarly capable of grasping an awesome amount of what is. Should I say we want you to learn the Truth about what is, some, in spite of their UD education, will feel threatened by this claim. They will say that it is arrogant and narrow minded and dangerous to claim to know the Truth. And we of course will ask them if that is true and if thus it is arrogant and narrow minded and dangerous to assert that it
is true that there is no Truth.

The fact is, thank heavens, that some Truth is perfectly obvious; justice is better than injustice and beauty delights the soul and we all want to love and be loved. To be blind to these truths is to be very sadly blind indeed. Yet, the fact is, that as obvious and important and indispensable as these truths are, we barely understand them; we can hold them up to the light and examine them every which way and we will never exhaust what we have to learn about them. The fact also is, that many of the most important Truths are is very hard to grasp and terribly elusive and spectacularly mysterious; that fact is, to get even a slight glimpse of some Truths is simultaneously profoundly satisfying and achingly tantalizing.

So we want you to leave knowing at least some Truth and to have a deep desire to learn more. Those who don’t know much about college, think you must leave college knowing a lot. As you all know, and it is trite say -- probably one of the most important things you leaving knowing is that you don’t know much. These, again, are odd phrases; we say we know some things but we don’t know much about them; we say that we know that we don’t know. In passing, let me note that these phrases show it’s hard if not impossible to be a complete sceptic, since just like the person who says it is true that there is no Truth, it sounds kind of silly and definitely self-contradictory to say that you know that there is no such thing as knowledge. In spite of the path I have taken here I am not really interested in pointing out some of these inescapable self-refuting claims;
rather I want to ask you to think about what it means to know.

One interesting way of getting at the question is to look at the etymology of a few words for "knowing". The English word "know" comes from an old English word that means to be kin to -- to be related to something. A Thomist would rather like that meaning since it suggests that our minds are akin to what we are coming to know, that reason and reality are related. Think of other English words and images that we use; we speak of understanding -- that is standing under something, which suggests, I guess that we have some control over some information. The Greeks speak of episteme which means to stand on something, but I suspect the same concept is at work. We also speak about grasping something -- again, a notion that something is in our possession or under our control. But the word and image I want to suggest to you as being most fertile for your consideration is found in the expression "I see."

It's interesting that this word so truly captures our experience of having an important insight -- of coming to understand or to know something that we may have found complicated or perplexing. "I see." "I see what you are saying." "I see what you mean." "I see now what is going on here." "I was blind to what he was up to, but now I see."

What is remarkable about this image is that so little of our knowledge really is a matter of seeing -- for what we see is quite simply and literally just the surface of things.
Think about this -- we see only the surface of things. Our sense data is incredibly limited as a source of information and knowledge. It isn't even our sense data that tells us that the rough brown tall leafy thing in front of us -- that thing we call a tree -- is one thing, is a unity with an identity. It certainly doesn't tell us that the apples it grows are worthy of being the subject of a painting or that this is where Joe fell in love with Sue, or that the wood of this tree would make good baseball bats. What if all we know were what we sensed with our physical senses? What a curious and limited access we would have to the world!

But you see, we see more than we see. That is, when you sit here watching individuals coming into the room, you see more than colored shapes moving -- you see people with relationships -- you can see who is friendly with each other and who is more than friendly. You can see who is sad and who is happy and who is worried and who is avoiding whom. But how can you see these things -- they are not visible. They are not visible, they are invisible -- they literally cannot be seen -- they are not accessible to our senses.

So let me posit this for a description of what we want to have achieved at the University: we the faculty want to help students learn how to see all that is visible and invisible.

In literature class you are learning to see how the plot unfolds, how the characters
develop and what the various symbols and images mean; in science class you are
learning to see the deep structure in the cells of plants and animals and in the way that
particles move and interact; in politics you are learning to see how different polities
shape their citizenry; in history you learn to see how different decisions and actions have
an impact on what way that events unfold; in philosophy you learn to see the
assumptions that underlie any claim and the implications of those claims; in art you learn
to see how shadings and colors and composition convey a certain message. You also
see how these various disciplines interconnect and speak and talk to each other, though
they have no real voices. And you will see how carefully one has to listen to hear these
voices and you will sense that with care one can almost taste and feel and nearly touch
the reality of what has gone before -- one can get a sense of what is to come.

Yet although much can be recaptured of what has been and much can be
anticipated of what will come to be, you may recall the startling claim of Augustine in the
last three books of the Confessions that all there really is, is the present moment -- that
we have no evidence other than that of our memories that anything ever did exist or that
anything will continue to exist. I don’t want to unsettle you with this thought of the
incredible radical contingency of it all, but I do want to stress that what we see, hear,
taste, touch, and smell is simply fleeting -- any sense that there is a lastingness to things
-- even just a temporal lastingness -- is a matter of what we conclude from reflecting on
the data of our senses -- it is not brought to us directly by our senses.
When you leave the university we hope that you will see with a whole new set of eyes -- that you will see that the world of invisible realities is infinitely greater than the world of visible realities and that one is the gateway to the next.

This world accessible to our senses vibrates with the evidence of the existence of another world that somehow labors to break through the sensible world. You most likely have already come to see that the world behind this sensible and visible world is not a world of the abstract a priori concepts of Kant, but that it is a world peopled with powerful forces and some of those powerful forces have a very personal interest in us. I suspect all of you had a brush with these forces and even may have sensed this brush when you were on your European travels -- and for those of you who didn’t make it to Rome, you cannot escape having these experiences -- such forces live on this side of the Atlantic, too.

I am talking about all those amazing chance encounters where we meet someone who has just the information we need, or who reaches out to help us, a perfect stranger, in some spectacular way -- we sense the loving and very attentive divine there, as we may sense the grand and powerful divine at the top of Subiaco and the sacrificing and humanly connected divine in the crypt of St. Peter’s. But, again, we need not go so far to get a sense of the presence of the divine; it is here all around us, if we have eyes to see, if we have ears to hear. And this is what we want to have done, to have helped you to have eyes that see and ears that hear.