FALL CONVOCATION
September 20, 1966

Dr. Donald A. Cowan
President
University of Dallas
The eleventh session of the University of Dallas is now underway. We mark its beginning first with the Mass of the Holy Spirit then follow with this formal academic convocation. These are the rites of fall; and if the rites of spring are Bachanalian, signifying release, those of fall are Athenian, signifying commitment. Like ceremonies are occurring all over the land, where the best minds of the younger generation gather in the temples of learning.

One of the advantages of the nine month school year is that it gives us a quite definite time of beginning. The campus, which had lain relatively quiet for some time, more busy with the growing of grass than the spawning of thought, is suddenly alive. The wandering scholars have returned and the enterprise is underway again.

If I am to strike a keynote for the year, I would choose two lines from Proverbs: "The teaching of the wise is a fountain where men may drink life far removed from all mortal peril....Good instruction breeds gracious thoughts." It is a tranquil note, perhaps too tranquil for a world in crisis; but this hectic period that you students are entering—of late reading and hard study and theme writing and occasional social outbursts—is, in essence, a tranquil one. You have been withdrawn from the world for a while—deferred, so to say—for the purpose of learning. You have the inestimable privilege of hearing the teaching of the wise. (And
I wonder if you are properly appreciative of the wisdom which you encounter here on this faculty; men and women of strikingly different casts of thought out of markedly different educational traditions have come together from widely separated locations (Hungary, Spain, England, Yugoslavia, Germany, Russia, Canada, the Philippines, all parts of this country, even from Texas. These are distinguished personages, remarkably cosmopolitan and wise. Their convergence here upon this windswept ridge appears most providential.) You have a faculty of great variety united in a shared vision of the good; "wise instruction" should indeed breed in you "gracious thoughts." You are to drink at the fountain of learning. But it is life you drink, not leisure.

I would not mislead you into believing that schools are set up solely for the benefit of students—that they are cooperative ventures of fond parents anxious to provide satisfying personal development for their offsprings. No; schools are social institutions, established to elevate society. It so happens that Western Civilization has been built on the supposition that a society prospers best as an association of free men. Therefore those studies which enable a man to be free—those liberating arts—are the studies best for society. But freedom cannot be static. Western man has conceived of society as dynamic, as always in a state of moderate disequilibrium, with innovation a necessary component of a healthy society which finds its stability in progress. Therefore we have needed the original mind and meant to design our education
to encourage it. Our schools, accordingly, do equip a person for a satisfying personal life, but the purpose of schools is the elevation of society.

To a large degree the elevation of society is economic. The program of studies at this institution, however idealistic it may be thought to be, has its justification in its economic value. The students who go through this program are better fitted to operate in the world ahead. This statement holds true whether or not the student goes on to graduate school. True, the program at this University fits a student for graduate work and, true, a large percentage of graduates do go into advanced study, but the sequence of courses presented here fits a student best for the years ahead no matter at what point he terminates his formal education. The situation was different twenty years ago. Our society then was an emergent one, just breaking through into the complex urban domination. Terminal training was necessary for a young man in order to get a foothold in the industrial structure. But society now makes an opening for the promising mind and the kind of rigorous liberal education we give here is the kind best suited for productivity in society.

The necessity for the widely educated, flexible mind arises in part from the rapidity with which changes occur—with the high level of innovation in our present economy. But perhaps more profoundly, the necessity arises from the mighty motion of history. Our academic session opens at a time of great cultural shift; statistically we have recently passed from a rural to an urban so-
ciety. This shift seems late in coming, actually, because the
decisive struggle between an agrarian-based economy and an in-
dustrial one had taken place a hundred years before, at Bull Run
and Gettysberg and Antietam and on across the South, when the
gallant men in grey and in blue, for the most part farmers on both
sides, locked in a combat mortal to farming—to the land as the way
of life. Such is the movement of history, and a hundred years is,
perhaps, small separation between event and event. We have moved
into town, and in the last few years, perhaps belatedly, we admit
we are here. In this very region, in this burgeoning state of
Texas, the rural counties surrounding the metropolitan ones have
lost population, have fewer people in them now than ten years ago.
A great many more people live in cities than out of cities.
Statistically we are urbanized. And the courts recently have, in
effect, stated that there is nothing intrinsically authoritative
in our connection to nature. Man, they say, is man and has an
equal vote in the legislative halls even though he holds deed to
no acreage, his foot never touches unpaved soil, nor has he seen
the earth turn under a plow, nor played mid-wife to a cow. De-
prived he may be of the great instructional demonstrations of the
life processes, but he yet bears within him the integrity of man.

Unfortunately no court decision can sustain man's integrity
against deterioration and loss if, as many critics believe, the
roots to earth are those which sustain life. Our separation from
nature is all about us. We condition the air and light the night.
When we wander through the North Park Mall, only the decorations
tell us whether it is winter or summer. We have controlled our
environment and automated existence.

We have entered what different authorities have called by
different names: the post-modern era, the post-technical age,
the post-civilized age, the post-Christian era, the electric age.
According to the German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, "We may
hail it as the dawn of the true age of man or fear it as the be-
ginning of the end. But this we can say at any rate: an epoch is
beginning in which man is emancipating himself to a degree incon-
ceivable hitherto/ from the restrictions and the protecting guardian-
ship of nature, from circumstances which have simply grown and not
been made." In this new era—which confounds your elders as thor-
oughly as it does yourselves—man is emancipating himself from the
restrictions of nature but also— and herein lies the danger—from
her protective guardianship. We upset the symbiotic balance with
mosquito sprays and alter economic cycles by arbitrary controls.
From here onward, the circumstances of man's life will not "have
simply grown", but more and more will be made, will be constructed,
will be created—by man himself, not by the impersonal forces of
nature.

This new age belongs to you in a way in which it has not be-
longed to student bodies before this one. You were born about the
end of World War II, into what we confidently expected to be the
wonderful post-war world. I cannot say how your parents felt about
you, but most of us were disappointed in the new world that was born
at the time you put in your appearance. Other than offering a few
new plastics, it presented much the same apparent possibilities as the old one. And yet those wild and fanciful visions held out before us by optimists and social prophets have, in fact, come true in your lifetime. In the past three or four years of your life the world has changed. Should I document that change? I suspect that no list of automatic devices, computers, direct dialing telephones, permanent pressed slacks, dacron double-knits, space ships, astrodomes, hair sprays, or artificial hearts would form any very powerful argument to you that the world is completely transformed in the past four years, although each of these items represents quite far-reaching psychological and economic shifts. As individual gadgets, any one of them can be dismissed; but these accomplishments have accumulated to a point of our having an appreciable surplus, an affluence which permits us to make choices; and despite the hurly-burly of conflicting demands, we have a chance at this point to gain some sense of leisure in which to look at the age around us with an appraising eye. And what we see in this electronic age is not wholly comforting.

We have entered into the secular city—the megalopolis, as Lewis Mumford describes it, the technopolis as Harvey Cox names it in his book *The Secular City*. The lines back home—to the farm—have been cut; there is no answer, and some of our neighbors tell us that God is dead. I propose that we take this message seriously—not as a theological statement, but as a cultural diagnosis (a sociological description, if you prefer). Naive it certainly seems to most of us, for whom the hiddenness of God has
never really presented a problem (the invisible things are known from the beginning by the things that are made," according to St. Paul.) The Western world has long known God by analogy (and by faith), but in our day what John Donne once called the "analogical mirrors" by which we know God -- his reflection in nature -- have disappeared from our vision of the universe. "No sacred images whatsoever are present upon our horizon," writes Thomas Altizer. This leaves a "disenchanted nature" before us, so that we are left asking the question (as Richard Wilbur puts it)

how shall we call
Our natures forth when that live tongue is all
Dispelled, that glass obscured or broken

In which we have said the rose of our love and the clean
Horse of our courage, in which beheld
The singing locust of the soul unshelled ... 

It is this loss of metaphor, of our kinship with nature that has suddenly become generally apparent. But whereas poets, scientists, and philosophers have been crying for a century or so that for modern man God is dead, the public has heard of the demise only recently. Popular theology, along with pop art and music has struck the consciousness of the nation. What this pop theology can do to advantage is to foster new awareness, to challenge the old formalisms, the encrusted relics of belief, no longer pertinent to a living faith--allowing the emergence of new forms. But this is a painful process. It means that a rigid construction of at least four centuries' standing must be shattered. The linear, Cartesian, fragmented, Puritanical, scientific, legalistic world view--dominant
in the West since the Renaissance—is falling apart. Western civilization is not falling apart. Christendom is not dying. Nor is God dead. But a longstanding intellectual structure has collapsed—or as Chardin puts it, is suddenly seen in a new dimension, as a design drawn on a piece of paper is changed when the paper is curved or bent. All our arts and sciences, our standards and patterns, our values and convictions are seen in a new relationship under these circumstances; and a faith little short of heroic is required from us if we are not to believe, too, that the old verities (the virtues familiar to us from our youth) are likewise altered or dead.

Can man survive in an urban society? There are those who maintain that a critical size exists for cities above which life is, at best, metastable. Only by ordinance can it operate at all. New York, so these critics say, is ungovernable.

The problem of safety is a case in point. Law is, in itself, no protection, and no police force can so occupy a city as to make it safe. Safety is basically the mutual protection of each other by responsible citizenry. In the small community this protection arises out of friendship or at least neighborliness. People know each other. In larger communities the idea of a neighbor extends to those known second or third hand, but at some size, anonymity sets in. The question of who is thy neighbor becomes pertinent and I suspect I can win points with you by not pursuing it. But it illustrates the fact that a city is not a community. During eighteen months I spent in New York, only twice did I accidentally
encounter persons I knew; and I dodged one of them.

The city is not a community. Vestiges of the old small town spirit show up from time to time — when the lights go out, when the subways won't run, the day the war ended — but for the most part, in a large city man is an isolated animal. The bits of drama you saw last night at the Student Perplex spoke to this point. In Dallas, true anonymity has not yet occurred, but at some size it very likely will. The Goals for Dallas effort now going on, in which we shall ask you to participate, may lift this city above the run of other places. We are optimistic about its possibilities and shall devote ourselves to making Dallas into a second Florence. We shall attempt, with all the new devices for intercommunication, to reestablish it as a community where citizens feel mutually responsible. Can it be done? What we know now is that we cannot be quiescent, since each of us affects history. We bear the terrible responsibility of the present.

That responsibility is doubly visited upon you who are students in a Christian university in a world that is no longer, on its surface, a Christian society. You bear within you that which is valuable out of the past. Much of it — let me be frank with you — is encrusted in structures which can be and are being discarded. Thomistic philosophy is under attack within the Church as well as without; and much of its automatic and comforting formalism will be stripped away. Its large truths, however, will endure. It will be your business to learn to separate essences and accidents in your lives. You know the terms; will you know the actualities? You
will go into the secular world bearing the mustard seeds of
the kingdom. From you must come a new growth. My generation had
hoped to give you a Christian society—a new synthesis wherein
every cultural aspect had been transformed into the likeness of
Christ. We give you instead the secular city.

But I shall not paint too black a picture of contemporary
urban life. It is a bright and shining city which you enter—not
alabaster surfaces, but a solid and meaningful structure, nonethe-
less, because it has been built by Christendom. We can take
proper heed of Rahner's warning that we must not identify the
West as the Christian society, unique and inevitable, but we
would be unhistoric not to recognize that the materials which have
gone into civilization as we know it are specifically Christian.
Obviously the ethics of the Western world and its politics are
Christian structures, however much we may proclaim them self-sus-
taining. Just as obviously our literature is Christian, shot
through with symbols and analogs so thoroughly intertwined as to
make our literary tradition meaningless without the great Christian
"story"; even the Greek and Hebrew literature is Christian "in
hope". Less obviously but just as certainly science is a product
of Christendom; if chemistry were not to be alchemy, if astronomy
were not to be astrology, if physics were not to be magic, men's
minds had to be suffused with a Christian appreciation of natural
objects in their own right and of the rationality of phenomena. It is
an historical fact that the city we pass on to you is Christian—in its foundations.
As a citizen for the time being of the academic community, you will be engaged in the process of becoming bearers of the values that must preserve and transform the city into something more than the secular city. You must lay up your treasures in that invisible world into which you life here on this campus will provide glimpses, where, for an appointed time, "wise instruction" will reveal to you a "fountain where you may drink life far removed from all mortal peril."