



Notre Dame Graduation Mass 2013 Homily

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St Mary's Cathedral, Perth
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As we gather in our Cathedral this evening to celebrate the annual graduation Mass for Notre Dame University, we do so in the weeks leading up to Christmas. You will have noticed our Advent wreath here in the sanctuary with the four candles which mark the passing of the four weeks of preparation for Christmas. Already the second candle has been lit!

Every year, as Advent comes around, I find myself returning to a book I read many years ago. The book, called very simply "The Coming of God", was written by an enclosed Benedictine nun who lived in a convent in England and who died just a few years ago. In the opening paragraphs of the book she speaks about waiting in expectation for the future to unfold, but she also insists that this waiting is not merely passive. We are involved, she would say, in shaping this future even now as we wait for it to emerge. We are not inactive bystanders looking at our life from a distance. We are deeply involved in, and I would say responsible for, shaping who we are to become in the future. The writer, Maria Boulding, sums it all up in these words: if we have had no glimpse of a vision we cannot conduct our lives with vision.

Tonight you graduate as students of Notre Dame University. My hope and my confident expectation is that during your time at Notre Dame you have indeed had a glimpse of a vision for your life, not just in terms of what you might do but also, and much more importantly, in terms of the person you will become.

There are a number of universities here in Perth and each one of them operates according to its own philosophy and sets its own goals. Many of those goals, and aspects of the various philosophical approaches, will be common to all universities but some will be unique to each institution. Tonight I want to share some thoughts with you about what it is that is unique to Notre Dame not only in terms of its course offerings, or its facilities, or its unique and beautiful setting in Fremantle. Rather I want to talk to you about Notre Dame's philosophy, its world view, its particular understanding of what it means to be human and to be a constructive and responsible member of society. In a word, I want to speak about its vision.

As you all know our University in Fremantle takes its inspiration in many ways from Notre Dame in Indiana. It certainly takes its name from that university. Names are important, especially when we are talking about institutions like universities, because they often capture something of the founding spirit of the institution and the intentions and the dreams, or visions, of the founders. Certainly this was the case when Fr Edward Sorin and his companions decided to found Notre Dame University in 1842. Fr Sorin it seemed intended Notre Dame, which of course means "Our Lady", to be a symbol of his devotion to Mary the Mother of Jesus. He also wanted Mary to be held up as a model for the students and staff and perhaps most importantly of all he wanted the university to have the benefit of Mary's prayers.



For Christians, and Notre Dame really has no reason to exist if it is not a Christian university in the Catholic tradition, Mary is an especially important person at Christmas time. After all, had she not said "yes" to God's call to her to be the mother of the saviour, the mother of Jesus, we would not have Christmas at all. That "yes" of Mary is perhaps the key to understanding her. It is also, I believe, a key to understanding what the idea of "vision" might mean in the context of your university and in the context of your graduation tonight. At the heart of Mary's "yes" was her conviction that her life was a gift from God and that if her life was to have any real meaning then it needed to be lived in openness to all that God was asking of her. Mary, we might say, had her eyes fixed very firmly not on her own desires, or her own advancement, or her own self-interest. Rather she had her eyes fixed on the one who could, if she listened carefully to his call, lead her to deep joy and profound satisfaction and peace. For that of course she needed great courage, and so will you.

The question that stands before all of you tonight, then, as you celebrate your graduation, is this: on what have you fixed your eyes? Where do you intend to invest your energies? What vision will inspire you, support you and sustain you? As you leave the Cathedral this evening I would ask you to take away with you this thought - the thought that inspired Mary. Your life is a precious gift entrusted to you to be cherished, to be embraced, to be lived with enthusiasm and integrity, and to be shared with others in such a way that your life:.. and theirs, is enriched rather than diminished. Like Mary, after whom your university is named, say "yes" to this wonderful gift from God and allow God to have that place in your lives which enables God to lead you forward into the future, the dream, the vision which he has for you.

Notre Dame's founder, Father Sorin, had to endure a disastrous fire in 1879 which destroyed virtually the entire University. As he looked at the smouldering remains this is what he said:

"I came here as a young man and dreamed of building a great university in honor of Our Lady. But I built it too small, and she had to burn it to the ground to make the point. So, tomorrow, as soon as the bricks cool, we will rebuild it, bigger and better than ever." Fr Sorin knew how to keep his vision alive even at difficult and painful times. May you also dream big dreams as he did and be ready, as Mary was, to say "yes" to all that God holds out to you as you continue your journey in life.