

To Seek God in the Spirit of Truth

Commencement Address
Oblate School of Theology
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Congratulations! You've made it! You are graduates! What a great day the Lord has made today! I'm honored to be able to share in this celebration of your achievements.

“Commencement” means beginning. Today you make a new beginning. From your old life here at school you are about to make a passage, a “passover” into a new life in the world. This is a wonderful moment. It is a time for you to make a new dedication to our Lord. For your commencement is also a kind of “commissioning.” You are being sent out to serve our Lord in new ways.

I was thinking about this during my prayer at Mass this morning. The readings today are all about the joys and challenges of discipleship. About taking up our cross and following Christ. About faith and good works. About taking delight in God's commands.

I am sad that your original speaker, Cardinal Avery Dulles, could not be here with you today. I know you are too. I hope you will join me in continuing to pray for his health, which has not been good in recent months.

Cardinal Dulles is a great servant of our Lord and his Church. He has long been a kind of hero of mine. For his humility and moderation. And for his courageous and calm defense of the truth during some very difficult times in theology and in the Church.

And that is one of the things I want to talk to you about today—the courage to seek the truth and to defend the truth. ¡*La Verdad!*

Cardinal Dulles would not have come here today and talked about himself. He is too humble a man for that. But maybe we can talk about him for a minute. Because Cardinal Dulles' story is really a testament to the subject I want to discuss with you today.

He has been engaged in a lifelong search for the truth. For true enlightenment. To know what is true about the world. About the human person. About God. To know what is truly worth living for and what is truly worth dying for. And Cardinal Dulles has always wanted to help others know the truth and live it too.

What more worthy goal can there be for our lives, my brothers and sisters, than to know the truth and to let the truth set us free (John 8:32)? This should be the goal of every teacher and every student. It must be the desire of every disciple. This is where our love for our brothers and sisters should always lead us—to share the truth we have found. The pearl of great price. Jesus Christ.

A long time ago, Cardinal Dulles wrote a moving memoir of his conversion to Catholicism. It begins when he was in school like you. That was back in 1936 at Harvard University.

He was a very smart and sensitive young man, but a little bit wild. He drank too much and led a kind of chaotic lifestyle in his early days in school. But he loved Greek philosophy. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, especially. He admired the poets and artists who were really pushing the boundaries—Cézanne, Rimbaud, Wallace Stevens.

He had grown up very privileged and as a high-church Presbyterian. His dad, as you may know, was the famous John Foster Dulles, who was secretary of state under President Eisenhower.

But by the time he got to Harvard, Dulles had no faith. He was very much a modern man. He believed science had proven religion to be a superstition. As he saw it, the world was just a mass of matter and energy. Human life, he believed, had emerged by chance and evolved according to the process of natural selection. Happiness, as he saw it, was to be sought in the selfish pursuit of pleasures.

There was no room for God in his worldview at that time. In fact, he thought that God was a kind of excuse made up by the human mind to explain things it couldn't explain otherwise.

But Dulles remained a seeker after the truth. He kept studying philosophy and history. He learned from Aristotle about the powers of reason. Through reason we can discover natural laws in the world around us and in the world inside us, in the human soul. From Plato, he came to see that there were such things as Goodness and Beauty. And that true happiness could be found in seeking these things and in living a life of virtue.

One day, Dulles was in the library at Harvard, reading St. Augustine's book, *The City of God*. He got up to take a break and he took a walk outside. It was springtime and the trees were just starting to bud.

Dulles began to think about the trees. Why every year, at around this time, did the trees and flowers start to bud? He wrote in his memoir: "The thought came to me suddenly, with all the strength and novelty of a revelation, that these little buds in their innocence and meekness followed a rule, a law of which I as yet knew nothing."

Through his use of reason, Dulles could understand that these trees developed with a complex cellular structure. They grew according to a certain pattern of logic. They grew as if they had a purpose. And he knew that if there was an order, direction, and purpose to these things,

there must be some higher power of intelligence behind them. Some designer. A Creator.

This was the start. That night for the first time in years, he prayed. It was the “Our Father,” which he had learned when he was a child. He started reading the gospels every day. He discovered and came to fall in love with the great figure of Jesus Christ.

It’s a beautiful story. Maybe one day you can all read it. It’s all in a little book by Cardinal Dulles called “A Testimonial to Grace.”

Dear graduates, the world Cardinal Dulles found at Harvard is a world very much like the world you are “commencing” into today. The world where you will live and work and do your ministries.

The task you face, my sisters and brothers, is the task Cardinal Dulles faced—to remain open to the truth. To find God and to proclaim him in a world that says he’s not real or no longer relevant.

I was in Washington last month, in fact one month ago almost exactly. I had the great privilege to pray and meet with our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI. And he was talking about these things, too. About the challenges and obstacles to the faith in American culture. About the crucial need for men and women to remain open to the dialogue of truth.

Our culture has, in many ways, closed itself off from that dialogue. Unlike any other age before us, men and women today doubt whether the truth is real or whether we can really know it. Unlike any other age before us, men and women can live their whole lives as if God does not exist.

There has never been a society that has achieved so much knowledge and control over the natural world. Our science and technology are incredible. We’ve discovered the inner workings of the human cell. We have men and women living in outer space!

We know so much about the world today, about how things work and about how things are made. Yet in many ways our world has become like Athens when St. Paul visited it in the early days of Christianity. Remember what the Greeks had set up there? There was an altar “to the unknown God” (Acts 17).

Our world has learned so much, my friends. But maybe we’ve become too smart for God. We are so advanced, so sophisticated. Yet we don’t have any room in all our knowledge for God. It’s as if we can’t ever know him. We’ve made him “the unknown God.” And the “unknowable” God.

Here we are today at a great Catholic institution. A place of higher learning in the things of God and the ways of the Spirit. And you are all learned people. You have your diplomas now to prove it!

There is one thing I hope you will do with your learning. One thing I hope your teachers will continue to do with their students in the future. And that is to help the Church enable the world to know God again.

We hear so much today about the “new atheism.” About how scientific discoveries like evolution have finally proven that there is no God. That God is a “delusion” we cling to only out of fear or out of habit.

But is this really true? This was the question Cardinal Dulles had to reckon with at Harvard 70 years ago. It’s the question that educated and faithful people like you will have to answer your whole lives.

Every Christian in every age has to take up the challenge that St. Peter put to the first Christians: “Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you—yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pet. 3:15).

That word “defense” is *apologia* in Greek, as you know. It’s where we get our word “apologetics.” In our times, the great defense we have to make is that God is “knowable.” We have to help people understand that it is still possible to know God. That he is not the unknown or the unknowable God.

What’s happened in our culture is what Pope Benedict calls “the self-limitation of reason.” We’ve told ourselves that there are certain things we can’t ever really know. We’ve made the decision to *limit* our reason to only certain kinds of knowledge.

We’ve told ourselves that we can only know those things that we can experience ourselves or prove by experiments in a laboratory. Since we can’t “see” God with a telescope or detect the human soul with x-ray machines, we conclude that these things can’t really be true. Or, we conclude that we can’t really know for sure whether they are true or not.

Now, my friends, the question you have to help the world answer is this: Is this all there is to reality? Can everything about us and our world be reduced to only what we can see or touch or “prove” in a lab?

If it is, then what about love? Is love an illusion? Is it biology alone that causes a mother to sacrifice for her children? That leads a martyr to die for the faith? How does our scientific worldview account for the love we hold in our hearts? And what about the Eucharist? No scientist could find Jesus’ body and blood in the bread and wine. Are we just kidding ourselves when we say he is truly present?

The Pope is right. There is a crucial need for the Church to open up a new dialogue with our culture. That dialogue must be an important part of your ministries and your witness to the faith, no matter where our Lord leads you in your journey.

You are called to help the men and women of our day to seek God. To seek the truth. You are called to help them once more reach out for the transcendent. For the things that lie beyond the world of our senses.

My friends, what reason and science have discovered about the world does not contradict what we know by faith. It radically confirms it. If we understand the findings of faith and reason correctly. You have learned this here in school. It is time for you to bring this wisdom to our world.

This is something the Pope keeps reminding us of. All the conclusions and findings of science come down to one basic point. That the world is intelligible, “reasonable.” It behaves and operates according to patterns that have a precise order and logic. That are predictable.

Think about what science has discovered about the laws of gravity and physics. Think about the seasons and the movement of the tides. The sun rises and sets every day at the about the same times. Spring always follows Winter. Think about even the simple truths of math—2 plus 2 is always 4. The same patterns of truths are discovered in the operations of higher mathematics.

There is no necessary reason for the world to be this way. But it is. The world is not chaos and chance. It’s the exact opposite. From the tiniest cell to the orbit of the planets, science has discovered that there is an “inner logic,” an intelligent structure to all creation.

What is even more amazing is that what we’ve discovered through science and reason conforms perfectly to what we know by faith in the revelation of Jesus Christ. The first word of the gospel is this: “In the beginning was the Word. And all things were made through him. And in him was life” (cf. John 1:1–4).

All things were made *through the Word*. Again, we know our Greek. The Word is the *Logos*. The divine Reason. The intelligent and ordered

world we discover through human reason is created by an intelligent Creator. By divine Reason. By God.

But faith reveals to us one more thing—something crucial, my friends. Something that reason and science cannot discover on their own. Something we need to know if we are to know the whole truth about the world. If we are to be truly free and to truly live.

Faith reveals to us that divine Reason, the Word through whom all things are made and sustained, is also divine Love. Again, the Scriptures reveal that “God is love” (1 John 4:8) and that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (John 3:16).

This is why faith and reason can never be separated. Because without faith, we can only discover how the world works. But not why. Reason and science alone cannot tell us where we come from or how we ought to live. Or why we were created. Reason alone can give us only partial truths. But we are made to desire the fullness of truth, my friends.

Again we can learn something from Cardinal Dulles’ story. By reason he was able to discern from the beauty of nature that there must be a Creator. But only when he gave himself over to prayer and to seeking Christ in the Scriptures—only then was he able to know the living God.

Dear graduates! This is what I want to leave you with today. Be seekers after the truth! Be defenders of the truth!

Do not settle for the falsehoods and half-truths this culture offers you. Don’t let anyone tell you that there are no abiding truths, only opinions. That everything is relative. You know the truth is God and that God has shown his face to us. That he has shared his life with us, in Jesus Christ.

Do not let anyone tell you that the truths of your faith are just feelings, emotions, something you can’t prove. Something you do on Sunday and

put away for the rest of the week. You know that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6).

You must give account for the hope that is in you. With gentleness and reverence. It is especially crucial in our age that you defend the truth about the human person. Our scientific and materialistic culture says the human person is nothing more than the sum of his biological makeup.

But dear graduates, you know that we have been wonderfully made, as the Psalmist says! (Ps. 139) Each of us has been created for a reason. By the divine Reason. By divine Love. Our lives matter deeply to God.

I never tire of quoting these words from Benedict's first homily as Pope: "We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary." *¡Cada uno de nosotros es querido, cada uno es amado, cada uno es necesario!*

My sisters and brothers, dear graduates—my prayer for you is that you take this great truth to heart. That you bear witness to this truth in everything you do. In this season of Pentecost, I pray that the Spirit of truth will guide you into all the truth (John 16:13).

And may Our Lady of Guadalupe, Mother of Truth, bring you the joy and happiness you seek.