

DOMINICAN UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT
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Develop Moral Principles and Act as They Dictate

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Today's ceremony is part of an academic tradition that stretches back thousands of years. It is a graduation because it marks an end, and a commencement because it marks a beginning. The fact that we are gathered in January allows us to reflect on Janus, the Roman god of gates, doorways and beginnings, who gave his name to this month. He is usually depicted looking simultaneously backward and forward. His image is a fine example for us today. Especially in this complex age, it is essential for us to understand our past, both as individuals and as nations. But understanding the past is pointless unless we use that knowledge to shape our future.

During this past year, it has been my great privilege to hold the Lund-Gill Chair here at Dominican University. This chair is named in honor of two women who played important roles in shaping this institution, Sister Candida Lund, its former president, and the beloved English professor Sister Cyrille Gill. As I join in welcoming you here today, I cannot fail to honor them. The Lund-Gill Chair is about enriching the educational experience available to Dominican students and the wider community. It reflects this university's relentless drive to help shape future leaders who have the broadest possible intellectual and moral backgrounds.

Under the visionary leadership of Donna Carroll, this institution has emerged as a more vibrant and exciting place than it has ever been. Being part of it during this past year has been at least as rich an experience for me as for anyone else on this campus.

As some of you may know, I have spent much of my adult life traveling in, writing about and trying to understand our vast and wondrous world. This experience has given me some insights that I want to share with you today. But before I do so, let me pay tribute to my all-time favorite Dominican priest, a man who deeply influenced me and my view of the world as I was beginning my career as a foreign correspondent.

At that time—before many of today's graduates were born—I was a budding foreign correspondent looking for books about the reality of life in Latin America. When I found one called *A Short Account of the Destruction of the Indies*, I quickly bought it and brought it home. I discovered that it was not about what had happened in the 20th century or even the 19th. This book is actually the testament of a man who deserves to be called the modern world's first human rights advocate: the Dominican priest Bartolome de las Casas. He arrived in the New World in 1502, more than a century before the Pilgrims, and witnessed the horrors of the Spanish conquest. His outrage, and the impassioned writing it produced, awakened the conscience of Europe. He dared to challenge the political, religious and ethical orthodoxy of his time, and by doing so, he changed the course of history.

Bartolome de las Casas teaches us the most important of lessons, because his work is an answer to the most fundamental question: why are we here? His work tells us the answer: we are here to live the moral life. Each of us should strive to live in a way that is not only personally fulfilling, but also ethical in a way that produces some value for the communities in which we live.

How do we do this?

First, we should take stands in life, not simply allow ourselves to be carried along by whatever currents are swirling around us. It is not especially difficult to develop ideals, or to use those ideals to tell us what are the right things to do. The difficult part is *living* those ideals—not just knowing what is right, but doing it.

Sometimes we have a tendency to isolate ourselves by dividing our qualities and perceptions and experiences into unrealistically clear categories. These are dichotomies we deal with every day: you and me, good and bad, victory and defeat, success and failure. They can be very misleading. Everything we see, do and feel is enriching, no matter how it may feel at the moment. Even excruciating failures teach lessons—often more profound ones than we can learn from success. This makes it important for us not simply to *have* experiences, but also to reflect on them, to extract lessons from them that we can apply as we pass through life.

On some ancient Greek temples, the maxim “know thyself” was chiseled in stone. Shakespeare also believed that self-knowledge should be one of life's great quests. He tells us: “To your own self be true, and it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.”

Self-knowledge is important because it prevents us from confusing appearance with reality. We cannot control outside circumstances, but we can decide whether to allow them to shape our lives. Your life does not depend on what happens to you; it depends on how you react to what happens to you. We choose our own course by deciding how to respond to the people and forces around us. That makes it important for us, like Bartolome de las Casas, to do our own work without worrying about what others may think. It is supremely important to be wise, seek truth and do good—but do not expect to be seen as doing so.

In life, many things will not turn out as you wish. Do not rebel against this reality. It's better to accept what happens to you. If you ignore the painful aspects of life, you run the risk of thinking that your own problems are bigger than they really are.

Self-knowledge also leads us to realize that when we find fault with other people, the fault may in fact lie within us. We cannot control other people or the forces that shape them, but we can control ourselves. When something goes wrong, don't blame others. Instead, ask yourself what you could have done to produce a better outcome. This is what Michele de Montaigne meant when he wrote a pithy observation so coarse that he rendered it in Latin: *Stercus cuique suum bene olet*. Those of you who studied Latin will understand the aromatic power of Montaigne's dictum. For the less fortunate, the loose translation is: even those of us who stink like to believe we smell beautiful.

When we know ourselves and are comfortable with ourselves, we develop the self-respect that allows us to walk through life with dignity. We accumulate the inner strength that allows us to pursue the course we choose, regardless of obstacles. We are serene in our thoughts, and no more willing to surrender our minds to others than we would be to surrender our bodies.

In the centuries that have passed since Bartolome de las Casas lived, humanity has achieved material and technological progress beyond anything he could have imagined. That has been the glory of the modern age. Its accompanying tragedy, however, is that we have not made moral progress to match our material progress. So the lessons De las Casas taught are still profoundly valuable. He chose to be the voice of people who had no voice. He spoke truth to power. He understood that contributing to the common good is the best way to live a meaningful life. Those are principles we should all embrace.

The experience of ages also teaches us that although the life of the mind is a glorious one, a full life cannot be built only on knowledge, reason and science. Life only has true meaning if we also embrace the spiritual aspects of our nature. Do not submit to the tyranny of the intellect! We are more than flesh and bones, and we should refuse to live in a purely material realm. The ecstasy of transcendence, which we sense most deeply through the emotion of love, is an essential part of the fulfilling life.

Each man and woman in today's graduating class, and many of the rest of us as well, need to ask ourselves two basic questions. First, what do I want to be and do? Second, how do I get there? By confronting these questions directly, we seize control of our fate. That makes it possible for us to shape not just our outer course, but also our inner life.

Each individual on this earth is uniquely valuable, and an irreplaceable piece in the mosaic of creation. By embracing our individuality, but at the same time our inescapable place as a part of humanity, we can shape lives that are balanced, centered, productive and moral.

A while ago I was giving a speech in Atlanta, and a woman approached me afterward to say that she had graduated from this university, which was then known as Rosary College. She told me a story about her time here that holds great meaning.

She was a student when Martin Luther King was campaigning for open housing in Chicago, and being subjected to brutal, vicious attacks from all sorts of powerful people. She and a handful of her friends were so upset about these attacks that they decided to make some signs defending Dr. King and his work. Carrying these signs, they marched silently from the campus through the streets of nearby neighborhoods. No one seemed to notice their gesture; they had not even thought of calling the local newspapers, so it was never mentioned in print. But many years later, this woman told me, she met an elderly African American man who had watched them pass from inside his house. He said he had assumed that he and other African Americans were alone in a hostile land, and that no one cared about their suffering. Seeing this small group of young women marching on behalf of his rights gave him new courage. He went on to a life of activism. His activism, and that of countless other like him, brought us to

the astonishing political moment we now face, with the inauguration this month of our first African American president.

It may not be true that those few young women from this campus changed the history of this country and the world. I am willing to say, though, that they played a true and vital role. Guided by the moral principles that they strengthened here, they refused to stand by while others were abused. They chose to make a moral gesture. Today, decades later, in a way that they could not possibly have anticipated, they have been given their cosmic reward.

Each of us, too, has a rich reward awaiting. It is probably not material, and we may not ever see or even be aware of it. But if we live as we know we should, if we develop moral principles and act as they dictate, we will contribute to the sum of goodness in our universe. That will make the world a better place. Everything you do toward that end will bring credit not only on you, but on this university, to which each of you has contributed and which, in turn, has helped to shape you.

Students at Dominican are told that they are engaged in “service learning.” It is a glorious concept, and one that should not end today. Go forth into your new lives ready to learn and serve. That will enrich you as it enriches the world.