

## Awaken a Human Imagination

### Academic Oration Delivered in the Graduation Ceremony (28 November 2018)

**I**t is a great honour to be here with you on this occasion. Your story, dear graduands, is unfolding in front of our very eyes. Your time, reading, reflecting, and years of studying hard, has now revealed the best of your abilities. Well done! On behalf of all academic and administrative staff, I congratulate you on your achievement!

#### **All About Life and a Yearning for Knowledge**

“Life is a journey, along different roads and different paths which leave their mark on us” (Pope Francis). You have come for your reward after months of patience, courage and determination. Undergoing this self-transforming journey is priceless. Success comes with sacrifice, and excellence comes with endurance. A university degree proves that a specific area of knowledge has been mastered. It is all about knowledge and wisdom, and yet it is all about life and one’s search for meaning. You have now matured in wisdom, steadfastness and vision for life.

Earning a degree entails reading ahead, seeing beyond and questioning assumptions. But making a difference to your own life and to the lives of other people will also require you to constantly cultivate a sense of humility, and the conviction that even if you have learnt a great deal there is always more to discover. This recalls the ABC of academia, or perhaps, the ABC of life: Always Be Critical. “Always” means do not miss any opportunity to learn new things. Seek, read, discover, question and learn so that when you need to make your

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voice heard, you will be prepared. “Be” means live your life to the full in spite of all adversities. Put passion into your work and you will never have a tiresome day in your life. It is not just about doing, but about being yourself. “Critical” means never take anything for granted. Take the plunge. Be different. Examine everything yourself and leave no stone unturned. Learn rhetoric, read the classics, have an open heart and a clear mind and prove yourself right with gentleness and humility (1 Peter 3:15).

### **Protagonists of Change, Not Guilty Bystanders**

It is at the end of a university course that one starts to capture the beauty of the profession or vocation sought through one’s studies. You stand on the shoulders of giants and you can become like them through unrelenting dedication and diligence to perfect your expertise. Write your own narrative and do it in your own way. Remember that, as Paul Ricoeur says, life stories are meant to be “written,” just as much as to be “read.”

Our Alma Mater has provided space for research, reflection, collaboration and collective action. In gratitude, recognise your respective gifts and use them in a creative way for those around you. Go forth braving all issues, be they intellectual, ethical, religious, artistic, cultural, economic, political or social. According to Thomas Merton, you have a choice of either being “guilty bystanders” or a “significant voice” in the world. Challenges are there to be overcome. It is today that we have to create the world of the future. Recall the words of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who was your age, who said “And if God does not help me to go on, then I shall have to help God.”

The world is our common home, even if it continues to bear the marks of suffering, corruption, confusion and uncertainty. Take small, but effective steps to help our community, and beyond, to reach the sustainability targets, to respect future generations. Think about the contribution that you are privileged to make for a more humane and flourishing world. Your expertise in financial services, ocean governance, law, including business and comparative law, pastoral theology, youth work, family counselling, school leadership, chaplaincy work, island and small states, performing arts, - all enhance the quality of our life. You are all dealing with humanity, with human lives. Therefore, using Mother Theresa’s words, I urge you to “spread love everywhere you go. Let no one ever come to you without leaving happier.” Be protagonists of truth, freedom and authenticity.

## Widen Your Horizon and Have the Right Disposition

We need imagination since this is our threshold to new possibilities. Enlarge your mind (John Henry Newman). With imagination, something gets healed even when hope seems to be fading. Imagination leads to questions. How simple, yet beautiful and powerful words we find in the non-fiction book *Letters to Juliet*: “‘What’ and ‘If’ are two words as non-threatening as words can be. But put them together side-by-side and they have the power to haunt you for the rest of your life.”

What if? It helps us to trust and explore possibilities. We also ask “how,” because we seek meaning as we deal with sensibility, fragility and life-stories of redemption. On a day like this, your graduation date, the completion of your studies, there is far more than the eyes can see. Let this occasion awaken in you a deeper human and even a religious imagination. “*Redi in te ipsum*” said Augustine. “Do not look outside; return to yourself. In our interior, the truth resides” (*The True Religion* 39,72). May your quest be an existential one, engaging your mind and your heart. Explore the role of affectivity, engage in sincere dialogue and ask questions too. We are at once that human spirit that searches, desiring self-fulfilment, while trying to transcend all obstacles, yearning for beauty, meaning and love.

As you come to the different crossroads of life, remember to refer to the lessons you learnt, your grammar of justice, the commandments of love, to complement all the training you have received in your respective backgrounds. Do not get stuck in positivism or mere arguments. Change your wavelengths so as to enter relationships of trust, and seek to have the right disposition (Bernard Lonergan) – openness, readiness and the disposition to wonder. The latter is the key to persevere in your duty, vocation and love. “The readiness is all” said Shakespeare through Hamlet. I conclude with the words of John O’Donohue:

May you awaken to the mystery of being here and enter the quiet immensity  
of your own presence.

May you respond to the call of your gift and find the courage to follow its  
path.

May you take time to celebrate the quiet miracles that seek no attention.

May you be consoled in the secret symmetry of your soul.

May you experience each day as a sacred gift woven around the heart of  
wonder.

*(Benedictus: A Book of Blessings)*