

Graduation Address at St. Agnes School, St. Paul

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Today we commemorate the feast of St. Justin, martyr, the great second century apologist of the Christian faith. After searching for the meaning of life—and, perhaps, the meaning of meaning—he encountered Christ. His embrace with the teachings of our Lord, Jesus Christ, transformed who Justin was. The principle of faith that Jesus Christ is *Logos*, the Word, and aids the human person to comprehend the intelligible reality that surrounds us, the intelligent person created by God, was magnetic for him. The grip was life-lasting. In short, Saint Justin became a witness to Christ crucified, died, buried, and raised from the dead. As martyr, he also died for his faith in Christ.

Why did Justin direct his life to the work of God? As one of God's conscious instruments, he sought and relied upon God's wisdom and ways. Justin was patient with his learning because he saw the merit of

understanding belief as well as believing in belief. To be a faithful witness necessitates understanding so that the witness of Christ can propose to others that which he or she believes to be the truth of God and the nature which God gave to Justin. He accepted the gift of intelligence and cultivated it throughout his life. But, for what purpose, might you ask? This question can be addressed by posing another question raised by the Second Vatican Council: *quid est homo* (what is man; what is the human person)?

Answers to these questions for Justin and for us now emerge. What is/who is the human person? Well, you and I are. We have essence or nature that is indispensable to what it is we are. We are not just something; rather, we are God's most beloved creation. And with some sense of answer to this question (*quid est homo*), we can turn to the first I previously posed: what is our purpose in life? There are many ways of responding, but each way has to do with the fact that we are not only creations of God, we are also relationships with God. As the Great Commandment reminds us: we love God and one another as ourselves.

Most assuredly, He responds with His own love without any condition.

But, do we do the same—always?

Today you end one phase of your service to God and your neighbor (who, by the way, include your justly proud families) and yourself. There is joy and a sense of having done well. But this is today. What about tomorrow? After today and the celebrations with loved ones finally come to an end, what will you do?

I am certain you have thought about this since most of you have concrete plans for the near future that involve higher education, military service, or employment. Perhaps some of you will be preparing for the priesthood or religious life. But the question remains: what will you do with your life, all of it? It is a question that will not go away—it will never go away! It can be ignored, BUT it ought not to be. It can be forgotten, but again, it shouldn't. It remains with us because it is a crucial element of our God-given human nature and existence. The essence of the question keeps in the forefront of human consciousness that we have a life to live. But what kind of life?

Should life be about self-fulfillment, happiness, and achievement?

Well yes. But there is a critical ingredient of human existence that directs, that orders the person's life so that the fulfillment, happiness, and achievement support a life that is not only about the self; rather it is about the self in relation with everyone whom God sends our way and with God Himself. The distinction between living well and living righteously emerges. The constituent of living righteously has various names, but I will rely on one: discipleship. On the day you were baptized, you put on Christ and became his disciple by responding affirmatively to his call: "Come follow me." More likely than not, your parents and family made this decision for you. But as you progressed through life, the decisions became more of yours. Each one of us encounters the many blessings and graces that constitute human life. Consequently, each one of us has a great say in which paths we chose and which we do not.

There may be temptation to do what "everyone else is doing" because it often appears to be the safe course since we are in the

company of others. And it may very well be if the suggestions of those upon whom we rely for counsel seem appealing indeed affect the choices we make, are those choices, in fact, sound one? Perhaps they are, but what if they are not? What if the elections others make and recommend to us are based on the passing fancy, the current fad, and the choices that the culture of egoism suggest or even demand? When we embrace the relativism and narcissism that characterizes our culture of today, have we chosen wisely? The answer becomes more clear when each of us takes stock of our individual discipleship—the free choice we make of following Christ or not. Let me pause to offer several illustrations of this:

The first comes from the life of the saintly founder of the religious order to which I have belonged for almost three decades, Ignatius of Loyola. In the *Spiritual Exercises*, Saint Ignatius has the person, who is following the principles he laid out so well, confront the election between the two standards: the banner of Christ and the banner of Lucifer (or, if you prefer, of worldly gain). Which is better? Which is

durable? Which is genuinely fulfilling? Which brings authentic greatness? Which brings ruin? The first election brings salvation and eternal bliss; the second, well, I think you know the answer. The life and wisdom of Ignatius was captured in a way by the great American poet Robert Frost who, in the poem “The Road Not Taken” reminds us of the divergence of a road in the yellow wood. Frost implies that he took the one less travelled—and that has made all the difference. Making a crucial difference was important to Saint Ignatius, too; however, it must also be for us as well.

The next illustration builds upon this. He was roughly a contemporary of Saint Ignatius: Saint Thomas More. More’s public life ended tragically with his execution for high treason in 1535. His life and death were characterized by following the standard of Christ. When social and political pressure argued that he take the easy course of doing what everyone else seemed to be doing—namely, to support King Henry VIII’s decision to get rid of his wife, Queen Catherine, in order to “marry” Anne Boleyn—Saint Thomas would not go along, for he chose

the banner of Christ and remained faithful to his Church, our Church and her teachings which the good disciple is asked to follow in his or her life. Thomas More responded to the call of the prophet Micah who rhetorically asked: what is it that God asks of you, O Man? The answer is fundamental to Christian discipleship: to love tenderly, to act justly, and to walk humbly with God—not just some of the time, but all of the time.

Thomas More lost his life of influence, power, and worldly advantage, but what did he gain? I am certain that it was and remains eternal bliss with God. As our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ reminds us: one must lose his life in order to gain it. That is the condition of following Christ, and Thomas More understood this truth about our human nature and chose the standard of Christ over the standard of worldly success. His sacrifice teaches us about how to live the righteous life.

The final illustration is someone closer to us in time: Edith Stein, who became Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross. Although born into a

devout Jewish, German family in the late nineteenth century, the brilliant young Edith Stein became an atheist by the time she was your age. She thrived in the intellectual life, but one day her inquiring mind brought her in touch with the writings of Saint Teresa of Avila and the wisdom of God. The old Preface for Martyrs in the Roman missal asserts: God chooses the weak and makes them strong. In the eyes of many, she was weak; but, in the eyes of God she was strong. In 1922, she became a Catholic. In 1933, as the National Socialists were entering power and commencing their reign of terror, she entered the Carmelite monastery. Because her superiors recognized the dangers that faced Teresa due to her Jewish heritage, she was transferred to a community in the Netherlands which her superiors thought would keep her safe from Nazi persecution. That seemingly prudent move turned out to be unsuccessful for she was arrested in 1942 and sent to Auschwitz where she died in the gas chamber. Saint Teresa Benedicta did not deny the God of her ancestors nor God incarnate Jesus Christ. Like Thomas

More, she, too, elected the banner of Christ. By losing this transitory life, she gained eternal life.

It would be an understatement to say that the legacies of Thomas More and Edith Stein continue to this day. The impact of the lives and choices these saints made on others who think about their own election is exceptional. And so, I return to an earlier question: what election will you make? Let me be so bold as to offer a few suggestions about this.

First of all, you have been well prepared to begin a life of discernment about the many elections that will confront you. The instructions of your parents and family and the education you received here at St. Agnes have made remarkable contributions to your intelligence and your ability to comprehend the intelligible reality that surrounds you. Your election is not in the singular; life is an ongoing election where you are confronted with the choice between virtue and vice, right and wrong, good and darkness. Choose wisely, for you are well prepared when you remember that God is always at your side.

But when doubt comes your way about the elections you will confront, take stock of the prayerful counsel that we all can obtain from Saint Peter who commented on discipleship in this way:

Do not be surprised that a trial by fire is occurring around you, as if something strange were happening to you. But rejoice to the extent that you share in the sufferings of Christ, so that when his glory is revealed, you may also rejoice exultantly. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit and glory of God rests upon you! (1 Peter 4:12-14)

We remember our predecessors in faith who, by the ways of the world, chose foolishly, but who, by the ways of God, chose wisely.

Might we do the same when each choice, every election we make is based on the wisdom of God rather than the foolishness of the world? The choice is yours and mine to make, my dear friends. But I am

confident that with God's help and your holy desire, you, too, will choose wisely; and then, you will love tenderly, act justly, and walk humbly with God.

The noble life of discipleship is before you. Now, which of the two roads that diverge before you in the yellow wood will you take? The choice, the election is yours to make. May the decisions you take and those you do not be filled with the sagacity you have obtained so far but that can always be intensified with the wisdom of God!

Godspeed!