

## **Convocation address**

### **Madam President, Chair of the Board and Members of the Platform Party, Graduating Class of 2019, and Assembled Guests:**

First, I want to say how very delighted I am to receive this honour. Thank you so very much!!

I'm also delighted to be speaking to you the graduating class of 2019. Congratulations! Well done. What a wonderful day this is for all of you and your families and friends. There is much to celebrate! You are embarking on a new journey from a distinguished university, and it has shaped you academically, socially, and spiritually for life ahead in ways, at this point in time, you might not imagine.

Now, it's usual for the speaker at such events as this to offer some advice, perhaps about working hard or following your dream. I'm going to follow suit: offer advice! But this is advice with a difference!

I know that for your generation, you start working on your CVs almost at birth. Many of you have your summer jobs already down on paper and into your CVs. I know too that there's a fair amount of anxiety about the future. Will I be able to get a good job? Get ahead? What should I be working at now to do this and build my CV? But stop and listen for there is something far more important than your CV at stake.

David Brooks, the eminent political commentator of the NY Times and author of a book entitled, *The Road to Character*, (and more recently, *The Second Mountain*) writes about working on the virtues that one wouldn't see on a CV but rather hear in a eulogy. And I agree with him, for what I believe you actually need to think about in the years ahead of you is not your CV, but rather your obituary.

Now you may say "obituary"? What has that got to do with me? I'm so far from that to worry. But actually, it has everything to do with you now. For will your obituary be a recitation of jobs taken and the ladder climbed, or will it be about how much love you gave and received, how much you gave to your community, how you were the person others came to in time of need, how you began projects that would enhance the lives of those to follow you?

I've come to an age, at which I read the obituaries at the back of the G&M daily, not only because I now know people in these columns, but also because they move me. I enjoy reading that someone was cherished and now deeply missed. I enjoy reading about a man or woman who was adored by grandchildren because he or she made a difference in their lives. I confess that I sometimes even get even a little tearful thinking about how much good a person did in his or her life, and how many people known and unknown to that person will say: **that was a life well lived.**

I was blessed with having parents who modeled lives of service. I remember my father saying quite often to me, and especially when I was your age, that I should leave the world a better place than the one I came into. In other

words, for my parents, living for others, living lives of service was the highest pursuit.

So, it was natural for me to think about the gifts I had been given and how best to use them in service for others in my life ahead. This search for purpose and meaning propelled me first into teaching, a profession which I know many of you will be entering. I taught English, and took an interest in my students' lives and struggles. I still see some of my students today, some 5 decades later. Then this search for purpose and meaning propelled me into the priesthood where I was privileged to comfort the afflicted, the dying, and the broken hearted. But it was while I visited Jean Vanier, one of the great saints of our time, and one well known to you here at St. Thomas – it was at his home in Trosly France that he said this to me: there is a lot of suffering in prisons. You need to pay attention. And so, I found myself in a circle of men, of inmates at Collins Bay Institution in Kingston, Ontario, a hard and terrible place, dubbed by prisoners “a school for gladiators”. Although facilitating a discussion group came easily to me from my teaching days, this group scared the life out of me: tattoos, muscled bodies, shaved heads, and the looks on their faces were suspicious and cynical. But they wanted to see what a book club was like - and heck it was a gift of a new book each month for people who owned nothing - and it was something to do. And so, we started and after a few months, the faces softened and became open. They found being listened to, which we all need so much in our lives and is an act of love, made them feel better. They felt encouraged, respected. Being asked “what do you think?” made them feel like human beings. For when was the last time, if ever, that anyone cared what they thought? And they learned respectful listening and speaking and how to discuss a question and

acknowledge different points of view, as you have done here at St. Thomas University.

In this bleak penitentiary, for Canada's prison system is one of the most regressive in the western world, was where I have found God weeping over God's lost children. But the voices in that circle grew increasingly animated, excited; discussions were sprinkled with laughter. These men were so gracious and so grateful. Many became avid readers. They thanked me and us. What a marvel! And all of us who have volunteered – more than 130 now in all the 36 book clubs in penitentiaries across Canada – have discovered a wondrous secret thing, which I want to share with you. We discovered that in volunteering to serve others, we have all received far more than we have given.

This is what volunteers have said to me:

It has opened up a rich and completely rewarding experience. Whatever it gives to the men, it gives me so much more.

Or this:

It is a ministry to everyone – a proclamation of universal redeemability. A sign of peace.

Or this:

The fellows are so kind with their gratitude and praise, but what they don't realize is how much these monthly meetings enhance our lives as well, and how many life lessons we learn!

You see, the secret that I want to share with you today is that serving others is also a gift to oneself. It fills one with a bubbling up sort of joy. It gives US life.

You, who are graduating today, don't be too eager to embark on plans for a life time career. Or writing up that CV to get ahead. Take time to ask what is the meaning of my life? What purpose do my few short years here on planet earth have? How can I best use these years - and how can they be used in service to others? Ponder these questions. It's not to say that you can't get right to the very top of whatever you pursue, be it in education, social work, business, medicine. Go and be the very best in your field **BUT** the question is: how can I use this work, the gifts I've been given, to serve others? Will I be the businessperson who puts people ahead of profit; will I be the teacher who stays behind to give extra help, or the doctor who lingers by the bedside?

Yes, you are graduating today, but keep reading and thinking about what the great minds have written with these questions as your lens. It's probably the most valuable activity any of us can engage in - not just now but for all of life. For life is long and there will be many twists and turns ahead, many joys and equally as many challenges. It's all very exciting! But remember this - think often about your obituary.

And so, I leave you with a verse by Rabindranath Tagore, the great Indian humanitarian, and writer:

**I slept and dreamt that life was joy.**

**I awoke and saw that life was service.**

**I acted, and behold, service was joy.**