

Fairfield University Undergraduate Commencement, May 19, 2013

Commencement Address

By The Reverend Michael J. Garanzini, S.J., president of Loyola University Chicago and the General Secretary for Higher Education for the Society of Jesus

Fr. President, Mr. Chairman, faculty, parents, distinguished guests, graduates. On behalf of Mr. Bill McDonald and Sr. Maureen Clark, and myself, we want to express our sincere appreciation for this great honor from such a distinguished University as Fairfield. I know I speak for the three of us when I say we are truly humbled by your kind and gracious words and his honor.

And, what an honor it is to be part of your big day... This achievement comes from a lot of hard work and is no small accomplishment. You join a very tiny percentage of people in the world with a college degree. With that comes a responsibility...

You've probably heard that already, and probably have received lots of advice, unsolicited. This is an occasion for advice-giving, under the guise we are gathered to celebrate your achievement, and want one more opportunity to tell you how to live your life.

The citation about me, while mostly true, omitted one very important thing. There are two accomplishments that did not make that synopsis of what I've done. First, this year marks the 25th year I have lived in a Freshmen dorm. I think that deserves an honorary degree. And, second, it omitted the fact that I know a great deal about graduations. I've been to my share at different institutions including the ones I attended, but here I work now—Loyola in Chicago—I preside over 10 each year. We graduate by school and LUC has ten schools. Now, there are three speeches at each: the dean's, a student valedictorian's, and a guest or honorary degree recipient who is the official graduation speaker. Now, I've been president 12 years. Add that up. That is 3 speeches, times 10 ceremonies, for 12 years, or 120 graduations, and 360 speeches.

I like graduations. They mentioned my family therapy background. I like to watch parent-child interactions. I have some good stories. Last year, for instance, after the ceremonies I spot a family jockeying for a family photo: dad, mom, son and grandparents. Then I hear the mom say: "For Christ's sake, Henry, give him the camera. We just paid \$100,000 for a degree in fine

arts.” Don’t you just hear the warmth and pride in that remark? These kind of events bring out the best in families.

Or, this year, before the ceremony, we’re lining up and I hear a mom say to her daughter:

“Allison, I told you not to wear those extreme heals. You are going to fall and break your neck when you walk across that stage, and embarrass yourself... and me! I liked the “and me” addition. Again, family love and caring comes out in these special moments, like graduations.

So, I’ve learned a few things about graduation speeches, and have come to some conclusions about what works and what doesn’t: First, the shorter the better. Second, personal stories trump platitudes. And third, no one in the audience is there to hear you or cares really what you have to say. They are there to see one person near the front—that’s you graduates--walk across the stage for that 1.5 minute of glory and fame.

Those platitudes I mentioned, they fall into four categories:

1. “Be true to yourself, or the variation, trust in yourself.” Now, it’s hard to go wrong with this. After all, the opposite is absurd: don’t trust your inner instincts, they’ve gotten you in so much trouble in the past. Don’t you remember your freshman year? You can’t say that, but it’s true.
2. “Be open to new experience or its variation, be flexible and don’t box yourself in.” This advice can be problematic. This past year, a very successful entrepreneur, at one of our graduations told the graduates about her years since graduation. She began by telling us she had no clue as to what she wanted to do after college. So, following graduation she was home reading a novel about a couple that moves to Mexico and takes up life there in some dusty town. That motivated her to move to the same dusty towns somewhere inside Mexico. She had no job, and just hung out for the year until she got bored. At the end of a year, she decided to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, so she went to Africa. At the foot of this mountain she looks for some place to sleep and can only find an orphanage. She got involved with the orphanage, and viola, meaningful life blossoms.

Well, from my position on the stage... where about Fr. von Arx is... I could see panic in the eyes of parents all over. And, I can almost hear parents thinking: “For heaven’s sake,

don't give her any more bright ideas. We didn't send her here so she could read novels in a dusty town in Mexico until she finds herself? Why, if that happens I'll sue this place. "

3. Another platitude you hear at graduations is "Learn from failure. See failure as an opportunity to grow." Think about it. What else can you say about failure? Failure is your own fault? Failure is because you didn't try hard enough? All failure is due to evil in the world? Forget about it.
4. Finally, you hear all the time things like "Always be honest. Your integrity is all you really own in life." This is very true. Again, the opposite is impossible to say: Lie to yourself now and then, you know, like you do now. But, I am all for honesty and integrity. In a poll, it would come out near the top. Maybe we should say to you: Cultivate a healthy fear of New York Times and Wall Street Journal reporters, or you'll see your mistakes all over the papers, and so will your family!

My point? The premise behind these is that you are in an ivory tower and didn't learn much or experience the real world but are about to do so. However, tomorrow looks a lot different in ONE Special way. You see, once you start a job—and you will be finding a job--you will learn that they don't organize the job world around differing Tuesday/Thursday and Monday/Wednesday/Friday schedules. Yes, they do it differently. You have to get up early EVERY Day... at the same time... earlier than now, much earlier, and you work till the work is done. Very few jobs start after 10:30 AM. I know. It's gonna be a new thing for you to experience but, kids, that's the way it works.

I have no advice for you but, this thing about the world out there, you know a lot about it. So, what I have is a question. You were touched deeply by the Sandy Hook shootings, you saw devastated people. You've learned about the desperate and very sad gunman—not too much older than you—you've met people whose lives were profoundly altered. So, no advice, but rather, a question: Who will help the world heal? Who, if not you?

You volunteered in shelters and pantries. Not all those people are the victims of their mistakes. Some are but many never got a chance to pull themselves out of their plight. Some don't have the mental or psychological capacity. Some want to learn skills, to better themselves. They don't

have the resources. Who will create a just and fair system for helping those who need it? Who, if not you?

You've worked in places where people do not get the right nursing or medical care. You've worked in schools where there just are not enough hours or trained personnel to help out kids with a deficit. Your assistance made a difference. Who will be the teachers and nurses with a passion for bringing healing and self-esteem to those who have been robbed of it, if not you?

You've had internships and courses, met hard working professionals in whom you saw the struggle to stay on the straight and narrow, and how easy it is to bend, lose your way, to forget your priorities. Who will show the next generation that greed is not a sustainable and life-giving way to build a career? That losing one's focus in business can be tantamount to losing one's soul. If not you, then who?

Finally, You know the effects of Hurricane Sandy and experienced them first hand. I don't need to site statistics for you that we live on a plane that is stressed, where food and energy supplies are increasingly challenged, where we will need to make some major decisions about how we live on this globe so that we do not experience political, economic and social chaos some day soon. Who will create the conditions for solving these problems and who will begin the process of living more simply and in touch with our world and its issues? Who, if not you?

I want to leave you with a little story and a quote: It's a personal story. It's how I found my vocation.

I was in college in 1969. The Vietnam War was in full swing. I was involved in the anti-war movement, student government, a fraternity, lots of stuff. I was angry about the war and demonstrated. This happened in the months building up the famous Kent State killing of four students by the National Guard. At the 5 p.m. daily mass on campus one day, some Jesuit scholastic organized with his friends a protest in which they were going to burn draft cards. I wanted to see this, of course, so I went. A liberal Bishop from Brazil was visiting the campus and took the Mass that afternoon. Late on, I learned his name was Dom Helder Camara, from the Olinde-Raciff Diocese in Brazil. He was told about the fact the mass may be hijacked by the demonstrators. He was sympathetic to or cause so they chose his mass. After the gospel, he gave a brief homily. At the offertory, the demonstrators came forward and started to put their draft

cards on the paten with the gifts, and were going to light them on fire in front of the altar. Stuff like this happened in those day! The Bishop walked over the took the cards and placed them on the altar. He turned and said in a voice we could hardly hear, his eyes mostly down on the floor, but occasionally looking up at us. He something I have never forgotten.

“Only those of us who attain an inner peace, a global vision, and a universal heart will be valid instruments for the miracle of becoming as bold as the prophets, revolutionary as the gospel, and as true as the Christ we adore, without wounding love.”

As I said, I’ve never forgotten those words. I’ve thought about them my whole life. What is required of me who received this education, who have these parents, and the advantages that come from being born in this nation?

I’ve discovered that, at minimum, to attain inner peace I have to be in contact with my God. To develop a global vision, I have to look belong my small world, using my mind and allowing myself to experience the diversity that is around me. And, to have a universal heart I have to allow more and more of what is foreign to me, different from me and how I was brought up, or how I think the world ought to be, to enter into my heart, allowing it to touch me, move me, remake me.

So, I don’t have advice for you, just a couple of questions, and a prayer. May you become as bold as the prophets, in pointing to injustice which you will surely encounter. (Fairfield prepared you well for this.)

May you be as revolutionary as the Gospels, with their command to forgive, to put service as the highest value. (Fairfield nurtured this in you.)

And, may you be as true as the Christ—to yourself and your values—and do so without wounding love. (Fairfield expects this of you.) God bless you on this important day.