

Graduating with Grace

- Baccalaureate Mass
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This week is a big transition for you, maybe the biggest weekend of change in your life till now. All of you, for at least 16 years, most likely longer, have come to the end of one school year, gone into a summer, knowing that come fall you'd be back in school. So much has this been the pattern of your whole life, even from the time of your earliest memories, that you cannot remember any other rhythm of the year. Your body clocks are set in this annual cycle with a year that really starts in September, not January. For most of you as you finish this 16th or more year of school and go into this summer, there is no return to school and more time in school in September. You may not have realized how that "assured September" gave a certain comfort, a predictable pattern which steadied you and made you feel that things are the way they should be and always have been. But not now and not beyond this weekend—even if some of you are putting off this ending of the pattern by some further studies.

I wonder how you feel, really feel, when you allow the time of the celebration of your accomplishment in your attaining a university degree to be also a time to look not only back in gratitude to your families and classmates and teachers, but also to look forward to what lies ahead, or more likely to what does not lie ahead for you. This Baccalaureate Mass, with this Cathedral, the music, the silence and the sacrament, is a safe place to bring your feelings today, together with those around you with similar feelings of their own, and to take cognizance of them, allowing this temple and the God of this temple to address what you feel and how you are.

I wonder if you feel today—as I feel almost every day—that you are not sure you are enough for what lies ahead, that you may not have it in you, may not be adequate for what faces you that you know of and even less enough for what you do not know about what faces you. Are we ever enough?

The word of God, the God of this sacred place where we gather, is surprising:

- The jar of flour that you are shall not go empty.
- The jug of oil that you are will not run dry.
- The five loaves and two fish that all of you are together will be multiplied, will fill you up, and there will be twelve wicker baskets left over filled with fragments for others.
- When you are weak you are strong, for God's grace alone is enough for you, and God's power is made manifest in your weakness, in your not being enough.

Thank you, God, for this word which speaks to our feeling of not being enough. But God you have to be crazy; how can this be; how does this work?! This calculation was not what I was taught in math class or economics or psychology at Seattle U. God, you need to explain yourself!

Just this past month someone out of the blue asked me a question which showed me God's explanation to our question. I was at a formal dinner, sitting next to a woman who had worked at Microsoft, who now has two children in college, and whose husband had just given a lecture in Pigott Auditorium to a standing-room-only audience. In the middle of our casual conversation over dinner she turned to me and asked, "Father, what is grace?" I have no idea where the question came from, what she was experiencing or going through, why she asked it, but there it was, "Father, what is grace?" It is one of those moments when you are suddenly on the spot, confronted as it were with a final exam you are totally unprepared for. I felt a bit caught off guard and definitely inadequate, not enough, especially because of that first word, "Father, what is grace?", since as a priest I should know the answer to such a simple question. Well, my jar did not go empty, my jug did not run dry. I had more than five loaves and two fish for her and God's power was shown in the weakness I felt.

I found myself saying to her—even though I don't know quite where it came from in me:

- Grace is that little courage you unexpectedly have when you feel overwhelmed;
- Grace is bearing a suffering or illness with a patience and gentleness you simply do not know the source of;
- Grace is being surprised in a situation of hurt feelings, rupture, alienation and finding yourself forgiving another for no good reason;
- Grace is forgiving yourself of a guilt which haunts you;
- Grace is a crazy kindness when annoyed, frustrated, or just having had it that day;
- Grace is finding grief blossoming into gratitude for the life of a beloved departed person;
- Grace is a spring of joy inside you when you really felt all was dark and you were depressed;
- Grace is a thankfulness for life even when you think you've been cheated by life;
- Grace is a compassion and care for others when you do not feel loved yourself.

That, my dear questioning tablemate, is what grace is! And that graduating students from Seattle University is what God's answer to your question is of whether you are enough. Grace is God's gift to you as you feel your jar is empty, your jug dry, your loaves and fish not enough, and your weakness leaving you without any personal power. If you accept God, you accept grace. Grace is how God is "experienced" in life.

If on this weekend as you rightly celebrate the accomplishments of these college years, all that you've attained, all that fills you up and empowers you... if, I say, at the same time, as you look to a summer without school at the end of it—or even if you have for a couple of years with graduate school—you feel not enough, inadequate, empty, or fearing you'll run dry, the only answer, the only thing that satisfies or assures, is God's grace in your life, God's power in your weakness. With God's grace you are jars and jugs that will never run out, and you are a multiplication of the loaves and fishes of your very life which will both satisfy you and will provide more than enough for others whom you love and serve.

Think of your degree as a jar (or a keg!) that never runs dry because of grace, look on your major as a major weakness for the grace of God's power, look on your college years as a basket of bread and fish multiplied by Christ's grace to satisfy you and to feed thousands who hunger. Let God's final grade on your Seattle University curriculum be an A+++, the grade of grace, for God is the easiest grader of all. He graduates you with the highest praise *summa cum laude*.

So I join with Archbishop Brunett, with your parents and families, with your teachers and mentors of Seattle U., and with your classmates in giving God gratitude for your graduation. I also join with all of them and with you yourselves in praying for and being confident in the gift of God's grace beyond graduation. Let's together allow this beautiful Mass—an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace—to be all about gratitude at graduation and grace at and beyond graduation.