

BULLETIN OF
ST. JOHN'S COLLEGE
in
Annapolis, Maryland



1696 - 1949

Address Delivered at the 157th Commencement
of St. John's College on June 6th, 1949

By Mr. John S. Kieffer, the President of the College

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NINETEEN HUNDRED AND FORTY-NINE

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By Mr. John S. Kieffer, the President of the College

Members of the Graduating Class, St. Johnnies old and new, and guests.

I stand here today grateful to the Seniors for their invitation to deliver the Commencement address. It is a pleasure to speak the last words you shall hear as students from the college, and to speak as a representative of those who have been your teachers for four years. Your departure is a loss to the college, a reminder that it exists in a world of flow and change; but it is also a gain to the college as you take your places in society and represent St. John's to the outside world. Commencement is a time to look forward, not back. And so, with unspoken remembrance of past toil, let us look to what lies before us.

The crisis of the world today spells out in capital letters the meaning of the crisis we at St. John's recognized twelve years ago. Breakdown of communication and loss of direction is no longer confined to the academic community, it is plain to the man in the street. The colleges and universities of the late nineteenth century rested secure in their faith in Adam Smith. Britannia ruled the ocean waves and Clerk Maxwell ruled the ether waves. Scholars could be comfortably sure that, as under *laissez faire*, tradesman, industrialist, laborer and farmer promoted the world's economic health by pursuing each his individual gain, so the domain of Truth was extended by each act of individual research. Today this comfortable assurance is dispelled. Marx and Curie have let loose forces to shatter that peaceful world. Originating in the library and the laboratory, they have swept into the market place and the factory, and in the process brought down the intellectual foundations of college and university.

The shattering of a world does not mean necessarily the ending of a world. It means that the next generation will have to put it together again. Building the world anew is an exciting task; you have work laid out for you. The test of our success with you will lie in whether you are going forth from college to build a new world or to plunder the ruins of the old.

I am not speaking inspirational generalities. The ruins are plain to behold. The plunderers are at work before our very eyes. They are those who contend senselessly for the prestige of public office and shame the great traditions of the Capitol with their self-seeking; they are those who make a caricature of the heroic freedom of the continent builders by

cloaking monopolistic pillaging with the banner of free enterprise. There is a side to American society today that reminds one of nothing so much as the spectacle of the barbarians of late Roman times squatting in imperial palaces and awkwardly strutting in shoddy purple. Our barbarians are more outwardly refined and often harder to recognize. Almost at times they seem to be all of us. Let me list a few of the pillagers: within the academic world there is the subsidizing athlete at one end of the scale, the cynical graduate student, working for his "union card" the Ph.D. degree, at the other. Or perhaps these are victims of more clever plunderers, the sports promoters and the educationalist racketeer. Outside there are the stock jobbers and suaver financial promoters, those labor leaders who have turned the hopeful aspirations of their followers into a source of profit and power for themselves, the salesman and advertiser, the entertainer, who enriches himself by appealing to public tastelessness. On every hand the work of patriotic plundering goes on, feeding on the credulity and fears of an unwieldy populace.

I sketch this picture for no demagogic reasons. I am not summoning you to a crusade. As thoughtful, well-balanced men you know this side of the world into which you are going and you abhor it. What I would do today is to consider with you what your St. John's experience has given you to help you live in this world and how in turn you can help St. John's to live in it. I dwell on barbarism and ruin, not because that is all there is, but because that is what challenges us all to building and rebuilding according to the pattern laid up in heaven. St. John's was chartered in our own heroic age to rebuild from the ruins of an earlier war the republic of learning that had been King William's School. Its charter affirms the principles of freedom of the individual and responsibility to society that are the American heritage. It makes plain that through liberal education these principles are kept in being. And it dedicates St. John's forever to this purpose.

Because of this dedication you have had four years of freedom and responsibility. You have practiced these principles in your studies and in your community life. You have made mistakes; you have abused at times your freedom and neglected your responsibility, but the fact that you have been judged worthy of the degree proves that in greater measure you have lived up to the principles. Living up to principles was the test of the auxiliaries in Plato's *Republic*. Knowledge of principles was the end to which the education of the guardians through dialectic was directed. Though I do not offer you to the world as ready made guardians, I do remind you that in idea and essence the work you have done for your degree has been directed towards knowledge of the principles you have lived up to. From the very beginning of your course with Homer's *Iliad*, the

nature and limitations of man's freedom have been a persistent theme, and his responsibility to his fellows your constant study. Freedom and responsibility have been portrayed epically and tragically in the characters of Achilles and Agamemnon, of Oedipus and Antigone. The ironic scrutiny of Socrates has helped you disentangle their essential statement from the bemazed opinions of the Sophists. The Hebraic and Christian scriptures have raised them to the high level of theology, whence Augustine and Thomas have drawn them down in systematic detail. The still unmet challenge of the scientific revolution, reflected in Bacon, Hume, Kant and Hegel, speaks to you today from the whirlwind of Marx and Curie. Has your reading of the Great Books fitted you to descend into this cave of the winds?

What hopeful signs can I point to, what prognostications make, that will fulfill my duty as Commencement Orator and yet preserve my honesty and intellectual integrity? I detect one hopeful sign. We hear less, as time goes by, of "the economic interpretation of history." The notion prevalent at the time of my graduation from college twenty-two years ago, that politics was meaningless has faded away. Too many of you through service in the Armed Forces, have participated in the ultimate politics of our times, not to have learned its awful meaning. The restoration of the supremacy of politics over economics restores to relevance the freedom of the will. It restores the possibility that you may face the world as rational men, that you and your society have choices open to you again. There is good or evil to be chosen and tragic greatness to be attained. I know this prediction of mine will be drowned out by the soothing voices preaching adjustment and offering psychiatry to exercise the world's ills. Do not listen! There is not a world to get adjusted to, but a free world to build, if you have truly gained the freedom signified by your degree.

Words inevitably betray us into generalities. Am I not an unworldly professor, naively ignorant of the realities you face, the need for a job or a professional training, the desire to provide for your families or to start a family? No, I am not. These are realities, but their reality lies in the ultimate happiness or misery that will come from the choices you make. Conditions and necessities will limit you and restrict your choices, but will not govern you, if you are truly realistic. This is what I mean when I affirm that the crisis of the world today has restored politics to its proper dominance as the art of governing society. The assumptions of the period between the wars that economic determinations governed still linger on in the stereotyped expression "we live in an age of specialization," "it's a highly competitive world." Many people still govern themselves according to these precepts. In hundreds of colleges students have chosen chosen courses to fit themselves for a job with Standard Oil, General

Motors, the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. A substantial minority have fled this bleak prospect by taking refuge in the lost cause of culture and the arts. I suggest that both these groups are unrealistic. The world you are fit to build and are going to build is a world of cooperation not competition. All signs point that way; the world federation movement, the gropings of the national administration toward policies of national assistance in housing, health, education and civil rights, the countless cooperative endeavors of private groups, all point to the end of the era of competition. You are equipped to find your place, to make your place in this world that is gradually emerging from the ruins.

Your liberal education must be thrown into the balance as the issue emerges whether the new world of cooperation is to be one of free and responsible cooperation of rational men or one in which the cooperative principle is exploited by the manipulation of a few. Those graduates who have trained themselves towards a specific job have placed themselves in jeopardy of becoming efficient servitors of the machine, technicians who permit themselves to be used as means to an unexamined end. This seems to be the avowed purpose of Soviet education. In our own society the same end is being pursued unconsciously. I do not subscribe to the view that a few wicked monopolists are deliberately constructing a fascist society. I do believe that the great industrial system we have built up is operated by people who see it as an end in itself, and this is the stage setting for fascism. The science of statistics is today arrogating to itself the queenship of science. The clever men in the cave are trying to be philosopher kings.

What can you who are going forth into this world do? First you must not flee from it, no matter how much you might long to imitate the nightingale. You must learn to know it, to discern the builders from the plunderers. You must find yourselves and which of the building-trades you belong to and then join that group to which you belong. It may be that some of you are auxiliaries and should properly be engaged in restraining the plunderers, whether as journalists, as teachers, as lawyers, as physicians or divines. Some of you will be men of gold, men who will seek understanding and through Socratic examination make clear to the rest of us the ends towards which we are building. Each of you will keep this goal before himself, but some among you will make it your whole lives. I wish I could give you clear advice where to seek the discipline for the career of guardian. Certainly not in the graduate schools. The only place I know is in that "graduate school" of the liberal arts towards which Scott Buchanan pointed, but which is yet to be built. Some of you may help to build it. Finally all of you are artisans, men of iron and bronze, doing your democratic part in the work of society.

If we are to build this new world I see rising, that work must be done, with a full rational sense that whatever job you hold is a necessary part of the whole, and that you are doing what you are best fitted to do in it.

St. John's has not prepped you for graduate school though many of you will go to graduate schools and be prepared to do good work there, nor has St. John's trained you for specialized jobs in industry. To many people this means we are not a college. Often we are damned for doing nothing but read and talk. Of course we do much more, but certainly through having you read the Great Books we have drawn you from the hurried, harried seizing of the moment, the Faustian ambiguity of the modern world. By getting you to talk we have prepared you for life in a human world, where you will talk and listen and be listened to. If you have merely learned to talk to one another in a special jargon, we have failed. The fact that your final orals are open to the public, symbolizes the purpose that you are to talk to all your fellow men. Expect and learn to be misunderstood, but patiently seek understanding. There is no immediate measure of your success, but the more fully you belong in the St. John's community, the more you will take the measure of the world's cheap and obvious standards. For the cooperative building to which I point you, you will often have to stand alone. You will stand alone the more easily because St. John's will always be standing behind you.

What can you do to help St. John's live in this world? For one thing, you can continue to live in St. John's, by never abandoning the Great Books. As long as you live in St. John's, St. John's will live in you. But St. John's lives not as an idea only, but as a community on this campus devoted to a common purpose. Your choices, of profession, of causes to support, of lives to live will speak, well or ill, of St. John's and will draw attention to our purpose. Your widening experience will equip you to return and tell us how we can do our job better.

I have a few more words to say. I have been talking to you about the world you are going into and help build. St. John's College is also going into that world. We have a job of building to do here and need cooperation in doing it.

What is St. John's College? It is the program, we would all say, yet everyone of us would say in a different way what the program is. In one sense St. John's is a myth; not a falsehood, but a wholeness of an idea towards which we all strive, but never grasp in its wholeness. The idea is the purpose to teach students to think, to give them through the Great Books, the stretching of their imaginations out from their immediate and passionate responses to sensation to the greater world that men have created or discovered by reason.

St. John's is a logos, a connecting of many elements. When we try

to bring the program into daily practice we are making a logos of a myth. It is this which is so difficult, because connections are hard to make. The faculty are often discouraged in their attempts and much of our discussion comes to degenerate into trivial dealings with the crooked progress in day to day learning and teaching. Yet the common purpose expressed in the myth, holds us together.

Last January I said in a college forum that St. John's College was bigger than any individual. This I said in a particular context. Today I want to repeat it and to generalize it. In the cooperative endeavor that we are there is room for all individuals who accept our purpose, and participate in the bigness of St. John's. St. John's is bigger than any individual, even than Scott Buchanan. He himself realized this and left St. John's because there was forced on him the state of being St. John's, which, if St. John's was to be, could not be. Buchanan's angelic utterances will echo forever through these grounds. They will, if we are true to our purpose, be responded to by other voices, in a great chorus of learning.

St. John's College is bigger than any group — students, faculty, board, alumni, community. St. John's invites all individuals and all groups, who share our purpose, to join with us in the task of building the college for the future. It invites anyone, whether student, tutor, board member, alumnus, who cannot join in this task to leave and let us get on with the work we have to do.

I would not end on a negative note. I would like to raise before you the colors of St. John's, black and orange, and learn from them what we are. The black is the depths of Plato's cave, the orange, the rising sun, seen through the disappearing mists of ignorance. We are always in the cave and are the cave. It is our essence as learners. Let us hope that we may some day come out into the clear golden sunlight of the Platonic ideas.

