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BACCALAUREATE ADDRESS
St. John's College
Class of 1991

I am honored to have been asked by President Agresto to deliver today's baccalaureate address. I was a bit surprised that he asked me to do this, as I have for some time expressed my reservations about the appropriateness of such a service for St. John's. Ours is not a Christian college in any sense. The College's very name, the beginning of which we are rightly reminded must always be spelled ST, period, and never SAINT, apparently derives from the New Testament only by way of the arcana of Freemasonry, which meant a lot to some of the founders of our country, and to some of the founders of St. John's as well.

I have never doubted the appropriateness of invocations and benedictions at official College functions, primarily because I am a Christian who believes there is a God who listens to prayers, and because I believe that St. John's College needs all the help it can get. That our non-believing colleagues on the faculty allow the rest of us prayers at convocation and commencement is a silent expression of tolerance and respect that those of us who are believers must be willing to reciprocate.

It is most appropriate, I think, for students to congregate with their families and friends and tutors of like mind in the holy places that hold their allegiance to pray there for divine protection and guidance for themselves and for the College, and to offer thanksgiving for what has already been given. But the baccalaureate service is a College function and a Christian service, both together, neither one more than the other. It is hard for me to know what to make of that fact. It is also hard for me to know what the baccalaureate address should consist of. The address is that part of the service that most fully acknowledges that this is an academic occasion, a festive celebration of the achievement of our graduating seniors and our ongoing enterprise of learning with and from one another in a living conversation of great antiquity, of which only some of the interlocutors, it must be added, have been Christians. And yet the baccalaureate address is surrounded and buttressed, perhaps even guarded, by an array of such things as introits, canticles, hymns, psalms, biblical lessons, prayers, and blessings. Still, even in such a setting it must address not only the Christians in our midst but the non-Christians, and non-believers simply, as well. And it must do this not by way of proselytizing. It is hard for me to know how to proceed.

Today bells are ringing across the West in celebration of the Feast of Pentecost, the occasion when the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Divine Godhead, is believed by Christians to have descended on the disciples of Jesus after He had bodily ascended into Heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, from whence He shall come again in glory to judge the quick and the dead. The Book of Common Prayers for the Episcopal Church gives

two Gospel readings for two separate celebrations of Holy Communion on Pentecost. In the first reading, from the Gospel according to St. Luke, Jesus says to his disciples, "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and it shall be opened to you." The seeking that Jesus here enjoins is not the inquiry we are engaged in at St. John's. Our activity at the College is, at its best, philosophical. That is, we seek those truths that the unassisted human intellect can secure for itself, appealing only to those things that present themselves in our experience with flesh and blood evidence or for which a rational account can be given. To the extent that we follow the way pointed out by Socrates we do not set our sights by what we are told in advance can, in any case, be seen only through a glass darkly.

And yet the seeking that Jesus commands must have something in common with the seeking that Socrates exemplifies. Those of us who are Christians are commanded to understand our faith better, not just so that we can render an account of it contra gentiles, but so that we can render an account of it to ourselves - so that we confuse it neither with knowledge nor with mere opinion. Faith is an act that has the moral certainty of a willed conviction in response to a command "written in the heart of man," a command that can be ignored but cannot be silenced. To this extent faith differs from mere opinion. But it also differs from knowledge, in that what the act of faith assents to does not compel assent, but at most commands assent. For the Christian, the content of faith is not something of which he can be intellectually certain, for he cannot give an account of it grounded solely in evidence he has access to on the basis of his intellect simply. To that extent the content of faith is, strictly speaking, incommunicable. Because of this the Christian is told not to judge, i.e. he is not to presume to have an insight into what is going on in the secret recesses of his neighbor's soul, which by the Christian's own account, no one can know but God himself. In seeking we are told that we shall find, even, as this first Gospel reading says, that we shall find the Holy Spirit. But as to how and when, the text is silent.

The second reading is from the Gospel according to St. John. Jesus says to His disciples that He will pray to the Father who shall send his disciples the Holy Spirit whom He calls both the Comforter, who will abide with them forever, and the Spirit of Truth. It might be tempting to see the Spirit of Truth as something like the spirit of the free and rational speculation that is the hallmark of Western philosophy. Such an interpretation could hardly be more misguided, for Jesus has said earlier in the same chapter "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life." A tutor at St. John's once said that we hardly encounter anything more offensive in the books than the assertion of this man that He is the truth. It is indeed offensive, unless one believes, as does the Christian, that this man is also the Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father before all worlds, being of one substance with Him, who for us and for our salvation was incarnate in human flesh, suffered, died, and was buried, and

that he rose bodily from the dead after three days and ascended bodily into heaven.

To the philosophers all this is foolishness, as the apostle Paul saw clearly. He had been to Athens (of all places) where we are told that he discoursed (dielegeto is the Greek) with members of the current philosophical schools. They let him speak at length and heard him out with, one suspects, tact and reserve. But when he spoke of the resurrection of the dead, not the immortality of the soul, mind you, for this was a notion with which they were, as we know, well acquainted, but when he spoke of the bodily resurrection of the dead they laughed and said, in effect, "That's all very interesting, Paul. Let's hear that one again." When Jesus declared to Pilate "Whoever is of the Truth hears my voice," Pilate responded, "What is the truth (ti estin aletheia)?" provoking, incidentally, Nietzsche's acerbic observation that this pagan is the only figure in the New Testament who commands *respect*. Pilate's ti estin aletheia was met with silence by Jesus. This question (the very shape of which reminds us of Plato and Aristotle) was not the beginning of a dialogue, so to speak, but the end of one. The Holy Spirit is called by Jesus the Spirit of Truth, but the Truth as Jesus understands it and the truth as, say, Socrates understands it have in common only the fact that, for both, it is what lights up the soul of man.

When I was a student at St. John's in the early mid-sixties, the Bible was treated with a kind of polite disdain, and sometimes not so polite, by most of the faculty. There were exceptions, to be sure, but disdain was the rule. It did not fit well with the rest of the program, except as a source that explains later things we read. It did not fit as well with the program as the Summa Theologiae of Thomas Aquinas, which is hardly surprising. For although Thomas was a Christian he was able to speak the language of Aristotle, and he spoke of things that non-believers could constructively argue about with believers before the tribunal of reason. When I returned to the College as a tutor in 1979, the Bible was given much more serious attention, by all or almost all the tutors, it seemed. The Bible has been made ours, a book for believers and unbelievers alike, by regarding it primarily as a book of stories. However, unlike other books on the program, we did not read it as it was intended to be read, namely as the historical account of God's covenants with man. It seemed odd to regard the Gospel, in particular, the good message of our salvation from our own folly and wickedness, as a story, somehow of a piece with the epics, tragedies, comedies, and novels that we read together. The present relatively easy accessibility of the Bible to believers and non-believers alike has been accomplished by allowing it to slip quietly into the poetics of the College. It is taken more seriously than before, and that is surely an improvement, but it is not an unqualified improvement. If the quarrel between believers and unbelievers at the College was more strident a quarter of a century ago than now, at least both parties had clarity about the central fact that faith is not, and cannot become, a liberal art.

In any event, there is no way that revelation could get its full due at a College devoted, as ours is, to reason and fully communicable human experience.

But in spite of the unresolved and perhaps unresolvable antagonism between revelation and reason a Baccalaureate service has something to offer believers and unbelievers alike, namely an occasion to gather in a church to reflect on our lives, where they have been and where they are going. I would like to read from two poems that speak to the experience of being at church, in a sanctuary set apart on consecrated ground, "in the world but not of it." The first of these is entitled "Church Monuments." It was written by George Herbert sometime in the early 17th century. It is a devotional poem by a Christian.

> While that my soul repairs to her devotion,
> Here I entomb my flesh, that it betimes
> May take acquaintance of this heap of dust;
> To which the blast of death's incessant motion,
> Fed with the exhalation of our crimes,
> Drives all at last. Therefore I gladly trust
>
> My body to this school, that it may learn
> To spell his elements, and find his birth
> Written in dusty heraldry and lines;
> Which dissolution sure doth best discern,
> Comparing dust with dust, and earth with earth.
> These laugh at jet, and marble put for signs,
>
> To sever the good fellowship of dust,
> And spoil the meeting. What shall point out them,
> When they shall bow, and kneel, and fall down flat
> To kiss those heaps, which now they have in trust?
> Dear flesh, while I do pray, learn here thy stem
> And true descent; that when thou shalt grow fat,
>
> And wanton in thy cravings, thou mayest know,
> That flesh is but the glass, which holds the dust
> That measures all our time; which also shall
> Be crumbled into dust. Mark here below
> How tame these ashes are, how free from lust,
> That thou mayest fit thyself against thy fall.

The second is a poem by a contemporary poet, Philip Larkin, and is entitled "Church Going." Like the poem by Herbert, it notes the proximity of church graveyards to churches. It is a bit long and I shall quote only the last of seven verses. The earlier verses describe his solitary visits to churches, which are in many cases abandoned to the elements and speak to the general decline in church going characteristic of our time. I do not know if Larkin is a Christian. If he is, one could not tell it from this poem.

> A serious house on serious earth it is,
> In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,

Are recognized, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground
Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

Both poets, who inhabit worlds apart, speak of the seriousness that one is invited to in such a place as this, a seriousness both poets relate to an enhanced awareness of our mortality.

Mortality might seem an odd subject to bring up in any baccalaureate address, and I shall not dwell on it. Your deaths, dear graduating seniors, are, I trust, far from you, farther by and large than from your tutors. And yet it is the awareness of mortality that lets you live a human and not merely animal life, as we learn from the first book we read together in the program. By facing up to the finitude of life, you can resolve to make something of it, which means setting out to fill productively the vast spaces of time you envision before you, rather than allowing your youth to be an excuse for indolence. Nothing is more easily squandered than youth, save the maturity of an older age that too easily assumes it is too late to begin what should have been begun before.

Your liberal education has been initiated at St. John's. It goes without saying, I am sure, that it has hardly been completed, as a liberal education is a lifetime long, if not longer. Liberal education has this in common with faith - it looks beyond itself; it understands itself to be a movement from darkness toward light.

Not as dean, nor as a representative of the College at all, but as a tutor who has been learning with you, and who is a Christian, I extend my prayers on this Pentecost Sunday that God will bestow upon you and all of us here the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

James Carey

Church of the Holy Faith
Santa Fe
Western Pentecost, 1991