

Graduation Honors

St. Mary's Seminary and Ecumenical Institute

16 May 2018

Archbishop Lori and Bishop Madden, Fr. Kemper and Fr. Brown, Dean Burke and Dean Laytham, faculty colleagues at St. Mary's Seminary and Ecumenical Institute, parents and spouses, family and friends, and most importantly this evening's graduates of the Seminary and Ecumenical Institute:

We are here to honor our graduates. So that's what I would like to speak with you this evening: graduation honors - - three brief thoughts on what honor is, why it is important to give and receive honor, and why God cares about what we are doing.

But I should first say that I am honored at the invitation from Fr. Brown and Dean Laytham to briefly address you this evening. I was initially trained in theology by Vincentians for two years at Kenrick Seminary in St. Louis, so besides my interest in university education and the ecumenical interests Fr. Brown mentioned, I have an investment in both the education of Catholic seminaries and the Ecumenical Institute. So I am indeed honored to be here.

Let me turn to my three questions about honor. You can already see that I am more teacher than preacher, as many of you already are – although I will later share with you about the interesting results one time I was asked to preach.

But I begin more abstractly: what is “honor”? I take honor to be part of a family of terms for recognizing each other, terms for giving and receiving recognition. The family includes not only *honoring* and *recognizing* but also

admiring, praising, and even glorifying each other.¹ Indeed, glory, Augustine once said, is “the judgment of people when they think well of others.”² It is a judgment – not simply in our heads but in our practices: our graduation vestments (not meriting a Met gala on Catholic fashion, with the exception of the Archbishop and Bishop and the President’s bling, but marking honor), our processing, giving and receiving your degrees, celebrating afterwards. All these embody a judgment that says we think well of you. To thus honor you, to give you some recognition, some glory, is to think well of you. We – your teachers, your family, your friends – honor you.

Why is this important to point out? This simple judgment and gesture of giving and receiving glory and honor and recognition is essential to who we are as individuals and a people – yet it is not easy to do it right, to give or receive honor well. For example, the definition from Augustine arose from his critique of concepts and practices of honoring and glorying among his fellow Roman citizens. He thought too many of his fellow citizens sought glory and honor for its own sake – turning, we might say, honor or glory itself into a god.³ But Augustine also noticed that giving and receiving honor and glory at least tempered their quest for wealth and power – and tempering such quests, Augustine rightly thought, was a good thing: if you care whether people honor you, you probably won’t steal their money in the quest for wealth or enslave them when you seek power. As in Augustine’s

¹ On the family and more, see Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice. A Defense of Pluralism and Equality*, Chapter XI (Recognition).

² *City of God* V, 12. Aquinas made Augustinian point succinctly: bathe the honor you give and receive in the virtue of temperance (ST 2a2ae, q. 145)

³ Castenada: “It is gold or glory or God that all people seek.” story from Coles on Weil @ 149.

time, many of our arguments today are arguments over how to give and receive honors, struggles over who is paying attention to whom, arguments over mistakes the culture has made in honoring – the argument over statues to Confederates is an argument over honoring, as well as how to repair mistakes we have made in honoring.

These problems with giving and receiving honor, glory, recognition (thinking well of each other, being well thought of) are partly addressed by turning to my second point. We obviously honor, recognize, give some glory to each other for multiple reasons. I do not want to impose a single order to the reasons all of us honor you, our graduates, this evening. I can imagine spouses and families honoring you for your years of sheer endurance of your curriculum, for simply finishing, for regaining evenings and weekends for yourselves and your families and friends. But, as one who has spent most of his life at universities, I propose that you are being honored, and the rest of us are honoring you, because of what I would call your academic, educational, or intellectual accomplishments. Whatever the name, I mean we are honoring you for what you have done over these years -- interpreting Scriptural and other readings, writing essays on the Church and our scandalously divided churches, on Christianity and other religions, engaging in conversations on ethics and the environment, on our races or classes, or our cultures and nation-states. It is good, very good, for us to honor you and for you to be honored (to be recognized, given some glory) for these intellectual accomplishments -- to periodically think well of each other for our academic, educational, intellectual achievements.

But, as with honoring in general, so some in church and culture are wary of honoring such academic, educational, intellectual achievements. For example, what can these honors have to do with forms of life shaped by Christian faith, hope, and love? That's a large question. But rather than make an argument for the relevance of these achievements to faith well lived, let me give you a personal example of one of the only times in my life when I preached .

Many years ago, when I taught at the University of Detroit (at one time the largest Jesuit university in the world), I was invited to a service honoring a pastor (Pastor Jones, as I recall) who graduated from our Masters program. I arrived at the church, sat at the back, and was, in the first of a few surprises that Sunday afternoon, escorted to the front of the congregation. Having been thus honored, I sat while several city pastors rose to the pulpit to congratulate Pastor Jones. Their overriding theme was clear: don't let this fancy degree from this fancy University spoil your pastoring!

And then, after the pastors had their prophetic say, in another surprise, the moderator said, "It is now time to hear from Professor Buckley". I wish I had known about that custom. But I had no interest in disagreeing with the theme of the pastors. I knew and know at least as many and even more stories about uppity academics than they did. Untempered honors of any sort can go to our heads.

But for some reason I began talking about how what Pastor Jones had actually studied and learned was, quite simply, how to read the Bible – not just to read through it, not just to quote it but to study the Bible with heart and mind and life.

And then yet another surprise: I heard several “Amens”! I knew about “Amening” from books, from radio, from T.V. But I had never been “Amened” in or outside the classroom. So I did what I learned seemed to come naturally: I kept talking – about how we needed to study to learn to read the whole Bible, not just quote the parts; about how we had to study to learn how other Bible-readers over the centuries had read and mis-read the Bible, about how we today follow in those good and bad Bible-reading traditions as followers of Jesus, who also learned to grow in wisdom (Luke 2.52). At each stage the Amening increased. Pastor Jones later told me I did a pretty good job of “following the rabbit” (as he put it), at least for a Catholic who was a teacher and not a preacher. I was honored by his praise, no matter how qualified. But here’s the point of my anecdote, a point you graduates already know but I encourage you to remember: your pastorates (whether they are churches or some other setting) are hungry and thirsty for lots of things – but they are hungry and thirsty for the knowledge and learning you have as well. Bring it to them, pay it forward, as you continue to grow in your own wisdom and knowledge. They will honor you. They will Amen you. So it is good, very good, to honor you for your academic, educational, intellectual achievements.

This question of how we integrate our academic, educational, intellectual achievements into our personal and social lives leads to my third and final point. As I’ve said, honor and glory and recognition is something we give to and receive from each other, for academic, educational, intellectual and other reasons. But it is also, of course, what we receive from and therefore give to God. Giving glory to God is something we are charged with,. I think the Gerard Manley Hopkins poem carved in

Loyola University's natural sciences building at the corner of Charles and Cold Spring: "the world," no matter how seared and smeared, says Hopkins, "is charged with the glory of God".

But this is a mysterious and even paradoxical glory, compared to the glory and honor we give to and receive from each other, the glory I have talked about so far. The glory, honor, and praise we give to God is utterly unique – this is why Jesuits and Calvinists say God's glory is every greater – hence we do all things "to the greater glory of God". But Jesuits and Calvinists are not the whole story, as Dominicans and Franciscans and Sulpicians and Vincentians, along with the Lutherans and Methodists and Mennonites would rightly remind them. The ever-greater glory we give to God is only a response to the way God glories in, honors, recognizes, and thinks well of us. How does God honor us? The answer is the basic catechism we all know. Quite simply, God honors and glorifies us in creating us in a far-flung physical, social, and personal cosmos, in becoming Jesus Christ's Jewish flesh, who dies in dishonor and rises so all of us can live in the Spirit, now and in eternity. This is, to say the least, quite an honor, to be created and redeemed for life with God and each other!⁴ God cares about the honors and glories we give to each other because they are our response to the God who thus glorifies and honors us.

Time permitting, which it does not, we should re-think my first two points about honor in light of this third. Given God's aim to honor us with participation in God's own life, how can we honor those our world dishonors - - the hungry and thirsty and naked, the sick and the imprisoned? And how can we bring your and our

⁴ Karl Barth makes this point well in Church Dogmatics II/1 (on God's glory) and III/4 (on human honoring), where "honor" is tied tightly to Kant's "respect".

academic, educational, intellectual skills to bear repairing their dishonor in light of the Word (the Logos) made flesh who dwelt and dwells among us? But three points is enough.

To our graduates, please accept our honor, our glory, our praise for your academic achievements. Pay your learning forward to your pastorates, wherever they may be. And do this in response to the God who honors us by seeking to make us part of God's own life. And then, in a few minutes, join in the party in your honor.