

*St. Mary's Seminary & University
Roland Park*

Commencement Address 2021

Rev. Phillip J. Brown, P.S.S., JD, JCD

Thank you, Fr. Stevens, for that very generous introduction. Thank you most of all, however, for your service to St. Mary's Seminary & University and to the Society of Saint Sulpice. We were here at St. Mary's together in the early 2000's, then again since 2018 after we both returned to St. Mary's from other assignments.. You have been a seminary rector yourself, so you understand the challenges of being a rector better than most. You have been a steady, strong support personally, a wise counselor, and a most generous and effective faculty member and administrator. You are the kind of colleague and confrere anyone in the priesthood, especially in seminary ministry, would be extraordinarily blessed to be able to work beside.

I also want to acknowledge and thank Fr. Paul Maillet our Vice-Rector, an equally good friend, strong and effective administrator and good advisor, with whom we share a deep love for good music.

Also, deep gratitude and thanks to Fr. Dan Moore the Sulpician Acting Provincial. Thank you so much for being here today Fr. Moore. You are a most valued friend and confrere and are providing outstanding leadership and service to

the U.S. Province of the Society of Saint Sulpice, as you did as a faculty member when you were at St. Mary's and in your prior assignments.

A special word of thanks and appreciation to Dr. Rebecca Hancock the Assistant Dean of the Ecumenical Institute for your very fine work this year, especially for chairing our graduation committee and making this all happen in such a superb fashion. Recognition and thanks to Dr. Brent Laytham, also, our outstanding Dean of the Ecumenical Institute who is on sabbatical this year, but whose presence and support have nevertheless been felt throughout the year.

Deep gratitude and thanks as well to my predecessor Fr. Bob Leavitt who is here today for being not only a friend, but a mentor and a benefactor who has been a steady and strong support since I first came to St. Mary's in 2001, but especially during the past five years since my return as President-Rector.

There are always others behind the scenes who deserve to be acknowledged and thanked, Betty Visconage our Senior Vice President for Administration who does so much for St. Mary's, but especially tonight for your hard work putting this graduation ceremony together, along with Sue Grieg our facilities manager and her assistant Krista Kronios both of whom work harder than anyone could imagine to make things work smoothly every day, but especially events like this graduation. And Vicki Semanie our Vice President for Finance who among so many other things makes the dollars appear out of nowhere that make it possible to put on

events like this. Leslie Davis, the Administrative Assistant to the Vice Rector, and my outstanding Executive Assistant Angela Citro without whom they would have carted me off to a mental asylum long ago.

And finally, Archbishop Lori: You have been such an extraordinary support to me personally but most importantly to St. Mary's Seminary & University. St. Mary's is as fortunate as the Archdiocese of Baltimore is to have you as our Ordinary and the "First Superior" of St. Mary's Seminary; Chancellor of the University and Chair of our Board of Trustees, we could not be more fortunate in having you as the Archbishop of our Baltimore. Thank you so much for all you do for St. Mary's, for the Archdiocese and for the Church.

I am, of course the President-Rector of St. Mary's Seminary & University, a rather exalted title even though St. Mary's is not the largest seminary in the country or the world, and I dare say, without fear of contradiction very probably the tiniest university in the world.

I remember my own graduation ceremony at the University of Michigan in December of 1974 (I had taken a semester off to discern my future, so I graduated a semester late)—but I have to admit, I couldn't remember who the commencement speaker was or a word he said. So don't worry, I'm not expecting you to take notes, you've done enough of that over the past several years, or to

remember anything I say, either. It won't be that important. So, I'll try not to say too much.

I googled my graduation and found out the speaker was Donald Thomas Campbell, a Professor of Psychology at Northwestern University—No wonder I couldn't remember who he was or anything he said. I may even have dozed off during his address. [Hey, you, in the third row—wake up!] Google says the major focus of his career was studying false knowledge, biases and prejudices, and how they relate to race relations and academic disciplines where erroneous theories are promoted by those with vested interests. Gosh—I wish I'd listened a lot more carefully and *could* remember what he said! It would sure come in handy these days!

We've lived through a very challenging sixteen months, haven't we, St. Mary's Seminary & University and Ecumenical Institute Classes of 2020 and 2021. A year ago in January we started hearing about something called a “novel coronavirus” that might be a problem. By February it started to spread alarmingly in East Asia and Europe, and by March 15 we had to make the difficult decision to ask everyone to go home and to finish the semester online. The resident seminary community was able to come back in August with strict protocols in place to keep everyone safe, but the EI decided to continue online for this academic year. Sadly, we were not able to have a graduation ceremony last year—but I'm so happy we're

able to have one this year—aren't you? [pause] I'm especially happy that last year's EI graduates are here with us today, and also some of last year's SOT grads. We will have a special graduation ceremony for the other SOT students during Alumni Days in the fall and those who are here today are, of course, welcome to come back for that ceremony, too.

I know it has been a very difficult year. It has been difficult for all of us, and for everyone, but we are beginning to see some light ahead, which we can all be thankful for—especially for the vaccines and developing immunity that promise a much more normal life before long. Nevertheless, our resident community did stay safe all this year—no COVID cases while in residence, not even a positive test, due in very large part to the generosity of our honoree this year, Sr. Helen Amos, and Mercy Medical Center. [Applause]

As difficult as the year has been for everyone here, it has been the most difficult for those who have lost a loved one to COVID-19, so I'd like to ask that we take a moment of silent prayer for all those who have died from this dreadful disease.

[Moment of silence]

I think we should also take a moment of silent prayer for the family members and loved ones left behind also, even as we pledge ourselves to reach out to them and console them and support them through a difficult time of mourning. [Moment of silence].

For those of you at the end of your St. Mary's graduate study journey, St. Mary's Class of 2021, if this were an old time a cowboy movie like those of my generation loved to watch when we were kids, this would be the moment when you would be riding off into the sunset. I'd like to propose, Class of 2021, that you will *not* be riding off into the sunset, but into the *sunrise*, because light is beginning to dawn on the earth again: The light of hopefulness, the light of opportunity, the light of fear overcome, of victory over disease; a light of evangelical opportunity for those who have devoted years of study to the Gospel and preparation for Christian ministry; a time for missionary disciples.

I believe COVID-19 has set the stage for a time of new evangelization, for a return to faith by many, and new-found faith for many more. And you, Class of 2021, are the disciples, the apostles, the evangelizers who will lead many to new-found faith, and many back to faith that needs only be stirred into flame; faith that has lain dormant for years, or perhaps only during this pandemic year of darkness. It is you who will lead many out of darkness into the wonderful light of Christ, renewed and new-found faith ready to dawn in the lives of many. You riding off not into the sunset, but out of darkness into the break of day.

*Ma poi, ch'i' fui al piè d'un colle giunto
là dove terminava quella valle
che m'avea di paura il cor compunto
Guardai in alto e vidi le sue spalle
vestite già de' raggi del pianeta*

Che mena dritto altrui per ogni calle.

Dante Alighieri, *Inferno, Canto Primo:13-18*

*But then, when I arrived at the foot of a hill
Where that dark valley ended
Which had afflicted my heart with such fear
I looked up high and saw its slopes
Clothed already in rays of the sun
Which guide every person along the right path*

I love Dante Alighieri and the Divine Comedy. Forgive me for showing off a little, but it's such beautiful poetry, and so to the point this May of 2021; such a perfect image for the Classes of 2020 and 2021, riding off not into the sunset, but into the dawn. We have passed through a dark night of pandemic and are emerging now into the vaccine and immunity-led first light of dawn; into the bright sunshine of a post-pandemic world; a world full of hope, full of opportunity for the Class of 2021 and the life of ministry that lies ahead for you.

My best advice as you move into this brighter day and a lifetime of service is to remember the fundamentals of your faith: The world you will minister to is not perfect. It is fallen. It's full of sin, but also full of people who don't want to sin; who want to do better; who do what they do because they are seeking something good, even if mistaken about what is truly good. If the world weren't broken, if we could do it on our own, ministers would not be needed; there would have been no need of a Savior. So be gentle with the wounded—but also with the wounding; the

wounders are often more wounded than the ones they wound. Our service is about healing, not judgment. We bring the sunlight of healing, forgiveness, and salvation, not the burning glare of condemnation or the weight of shame. We're there to lift the burden of shame and restore human hearts, to lift people up to know their true dignity. Be a healing presence, not a burdening weight. Commit to carry *yourself* the heavy burdens you lift from the shoulders of others, and you will find your own way to Christ. Walk with Him; take up your cross, take up His cross, that glorious, joyous, burdensome saving Cross of ministry and you will know serenity, satisfaction and a joy beyond all you could ask or imagine.

My advice: Smile a lot. Be a bit of sunshine for everyone you meet. Make their days better for the brightness you bring into their lives.

Take the punches of life with aplomb. The grace of the One you serve will be enough for you.

Run the race well; keep the faith. A crown of righteousness awaits you.

Live lives of gratitude. Whatever life brings your way, there's always something to be grateful for. You'll a lot happier if you are, and it will empower you to make a difference—in your own life and in the lives of others, in the world.

Don't forget St. Mary's. Come back, often. Our Lord said everyone who gives up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for His sake will receive a hundred times more. Please, let St. Mary's be one of the hundred. St.

Mary's will always be a home for you, one of your homes, forever. Remember what the poet Robert Frost said: "Home is the place where, when you show up at the door, they have to take you in." You'll always receive a warm welcome here at St. Mary's, Classes of 2020 and 2021; we'll always take you in.

So now, Classes of 2020 and 2021, prepare to ride off—not into the sunset, but into the dawn, into a sunrise of hope, opportunity, evangelization and pastoral care: A future beyond what you can now imagine. Take what you have learned here and make a difference; a positive difference. You will change lives; you will change the world—you will change them for the better because of who you are, because of what you did here, because of the loving heart you discovered here that continues to grow.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to share my heart with you this evening, Classes of 2020 and 2021, faculty, administrators and our most valued guests here in person and those livestreaming. God bless you all. Let us ride off now into a sunrise of blessings, opportunity, and Gospel ministry.