

This Life and Life Everlasting

1987 Honors Convocation: Distinguished Faculty Message

by Germain Grisez, The Flynn Professor of Christian Ethics

Every community honors its members who excel in what it prizes. An academic community prizes excellence in studies. So this morning we honor members of this college community who have done outstanding work. Their good use of their gifts merits commendation.

But as a Christian community, we also see and honor a deeper merit—merit before the Lord. We know that every worthwhile gift comes down from above—from our heavenly Father (cf. Jas 1.17). His grace precedes, accompanies, and perfects all our work. But God's grace never renders our work unnecessary.

The Council of Trent teaches that God shows his great goodness by making his gifts also be our merits (DS 1548/810). Justifying us by faith, God sanctifies us by our works, as St. Paul explains: "Faith in the heart leads to justification; confession on the lips to salvation" (Rom 10.10). Obviously, he is talking about a sincere profession of faith, which shapes an energetic Christian life.

And so, in today's celebration we both honor our fellows and give thanks to the Father through Jesus (cf. Col 3.17). Aware that God has accomplished everything excellent which those we honor have done (cf. Is 26.13), we rejoice both in their merit and in God's goodness to them.

Although we honor many students this morning for their excellent work, by definition only a minority can excel. The majority necessarily falls short. What about those who are not being honored this morning? Must we and they be disappointed with their less than excellent work?

In some cases, yes. For some do not make good use of their talents. Lacking self-discipline, they waste not only their own time and resources, but others' as well. Thus, those whose work falls short must ask themselves whether they are wasting their opportunity here.

But many whose work does not merit commendation will be able to answer in all honesty that they are doing their best. They share in the

deeper merit we honor. For those who faithfully do their best, although they do not enjoy the rewards of excellence, do morally good work, which is pleasing to God. Faithfulness is difficult for those who do not succeed and it is a better gift than success.

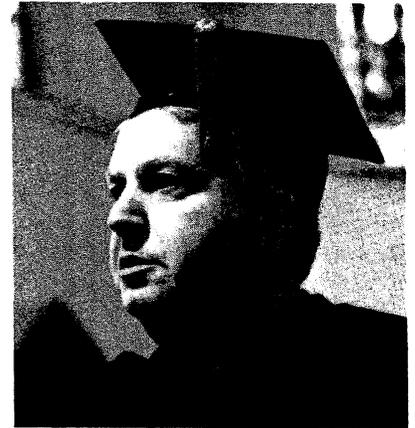
In appreciating the superiority of faithfulness to success, a Christian academic community differs from a nonbelieving one. For the secular humanist, human acts are only means for achieving ends, and so unsuccessful efforts are valueless. But as Christians, we see in human acts more than means to an ulterior end. For we know that when "God, in the beginning, created man, he made him subject to his own free choice" (Sir 15.14).

As spiritual realities, our free choices are more than passing events. By them we determine ourselves and constitute our relationships with one another. In freely choosing, we are our own self-makers under God. Thus our choices and commitments last. By our acts we shape our souls and build up the fellowship of everlasting life. That is the main point of our lives in this passing world.

Scripture testifies to the fact that choices last and shows its importance. The seer of the Apocalypse explains the dress of fine linen, brilliant white, worn by the bride of the Lamb: "The linen dress is the virtuous deeds of God's saints" (Rv 19.8). Likewise, the author of Hebrews makes it clear that Jesus' one act of self-sacrifice makes him forever our mediator (cf. Heb 10.14).

Therefore, we see the superiority of faithfulness to success. Success counts as fulfillment in this passing world, while faithfulness contributes to the everlasting fulfillment of everything in Jesus.

Secular humanists criticize Christians on this score. Marxists say that religion is the opiate of the people, and liberal nonbelievers consider it a distraction from realistic concern about this world. But these criticisms have been answered



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decisively by the Second Vatican Council.

To appreciate the Council's vision, we can compare it with two other views of the relationship between this life and life everlasting.

According to one of these, which may be called the "classical" view, this life has almost entirely an instrumental significance. It is hardly more than a means of reaching the next life. This life is a time of testing; those who avoid mortal sin pass the test and graduate into heaven. There they will gaze upon God forever.

According to another view, which may be called "modern," this life has much more than instrumental significance for reaching heaven. Indeed, apart from certain inconveniences, such as suffering and death, this world already is heaven, according to the modern view. Of course, it is heaven in a somewhat immature state. Underestimating the significance of the radical evil of sin and its consequences, this view suggests that humankind will eventually transform this world into a virtual paradise.

The vision proposed by the Second Vatican Council, in its *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, differs from the classical and the modern views. The Council makes it clear that in the fallen human condition it is very difficult to live a good life in this world, and that a good life will not be entirely successful and happy.

Like Jesus himself, good Christians must encounter evil and strive to overcome it with healing love. They can anticipate some success in this effort. But they must also expect to experience frustration, resentment, and defeat. For the world is riddled with evil, and the wicked do not meekly surrender when they receive the offer of peace which God makes in Jesus. Thus, to follow him is to accept the cross. These aspects of Vatican II's teaching clearly conflict with the modern view.

But the Council's teaching also goes beyond the classical view, especially by stressing the real continuity between this life and everlasting life. Jesus has shown the right way to live in the fallen world and lifted human nature to a new dignity. In doing so, he shows that the fulfillment proper to human persons is intrinsically valuable, and that life in this world is more than a mere means for reaching heaven.

The Council's vision is expressed most strikingly in articles 38-39 of its document, *The Church in the Modern World*. There the Council teaches that while God calls some to the religious life,

He summons others to dedicate themselves to the earthly service of men and to make ready the material of the heavenly realm by this ministry of theirs. Yet he frees all of them so that by putting aside love of self and bringing all earthly resources into the service of human life they can devote themselves to that future when humanity itself will become an offering accepted by God (GS 38).

In other words, most of us are called to offer God dedicated work for human well being in this world.

The Council also teaches that the Eucharist, with its transformation of the temporal and natural into the everlasting and glorious, is like a down payment on heaven. Thus, the heaven for which we hope somehow already begins in this life. As deformed by sin, the Council explains, this world must pass away, and a new creation replace it. However, since charity and its

fruits will last, the new creation already has its beginning in human works of love.

In this world, the Council teaches, "grows the body of a new human family, a body which even now is able to give some kind of foreshadowing of the new age" (GS 39). Thus, while earthly progress must not be confused with the growth of God's kingdom, living a good life in this world does make an essential contribution to the building up of the kingdom.

And Vatican II goes on to explain how life in this world contributes to building the kingdom:

After we have obeyed the Lord, and in his Spirit nurtured on earth the values of human dignity, brotherhood, and freedom, and indeed all the good fruits of our nature and enterprise, we will find them again, but freed of stain, burnished and transfigured. This will be so when Christ hands over to the Father a kingdom eternal and universal: 'a kingdom of truth and life, of holiness and grace, of justice, love, and peace' [Preface of the Feast of Christ the King]" (GS 39).

This is truly a splendid vision of the significance of life in this world and its relationship to everlasting life.

This morning it helps us appreciate the value of the academic excellence we honor. It is a great good, and all who share in it with a spirit of service to Jesus and his kingdom will find their accomplishments again, cleansed of sin, when they rise to everlasting life.

But those who faithfully do their best without succeeding also will find their work raised up. As the Lord will make good all the defects, injuries, and mutilations of our bodies when he raises us up to share in his glory, so he will make good every shortcoming in faithful work.

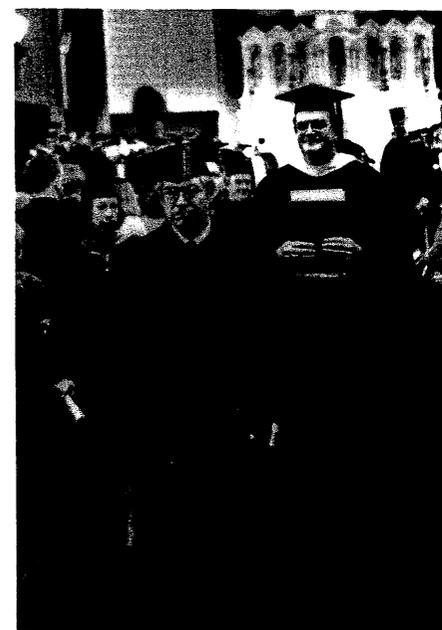
I hope that you will make the Council's teaching your own and shape your lives by it. If you do, you will always be aware of the everlasting significance of your daily work and the absolute superiority of faithfulness to success. Living your faith will not make moral compromises. Rather,

knowing that Jesus is building the everlasting kingdom in the life of his Church on earth, you will faithfully do the best you can and patiently suffer what you must, trusting that if you live and die in Jesus, you also will be raised up with him.

This confidence is essential. With faith we accept the truth of God's self-revelation and promises. But even with faith, one can live like a nonbeliever, thinking: Let us party and fornicate, for tomorrow we die! To live as a true follower of Jesus, one needs more than faith.

One needs firm and lively hope. Jesus, "for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross" (Heb 12.2). We likewise must "continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel" (Col 1.23).

Only with hope can one entrust one's life to the Father as Jesus did, letting go of this life like an aerialist swinging out over the abyss of nothingness, certain that beyond the veil of death the Father's strong arms will catch one and lift one high.



Dean William Meredith, accompanied by Dr. John Campbell and Mary Stein, Mount vice presidents, led the recessional at the Honors Convocation.