

Commencement Address
University of Notre Dame
May 19, 2013 Pentecost Sunday

Thank you, Notre Dame, for the joy of your company, the gracious invitation, the warm welcome, and the high honor of this degree.

It was so obvious I almost missed it . . .

See, ever since, almost a year ago, Father Jenkins, with characteristic thoughtfulness, invited me to deliver this commencement address, I've been mulling over just what to say to you, class of 2013.

Only Friday a week ago I still had not yet completed this talk, and I got on the train in New York City to travel to D.C. In Philadelphia, a distinguished looking man boarded the train and sat next to me.

He turned out to be a fanatical, in-your-face, obnoxious Notre Dame alumnus! You ever met one? Nice to meet you! Now I guess I am proudly one, after the privilege of this honorary degree which I so appreciate and cherish! He begins to speak with obviously radiant pride and gratitude about Notre Dame, telling me his faithful Jewish parents wanted him to attend a Catholic college - - because, in their words. "The Church founded the universities, and educate better than anybody else" - - and reporting to me that, even as a faithful Jew, he considers his four years here at this Catholic university a gift beyond measure. When I told him I'd be here for graduation, he beamed.

"Father," he went on, holding my arm and looking me in the eye, "let me tell you *the secret of Notre Dame*. It's not the library, as first-rate as it is; it's not the professors and

courses, as stellar as they are; it's not the campus, as enchanting as it is, or even the football team, as legendary as it is. No, *the secret of Notre Dame* is really a person, whom we Jews call 'Miriam,' and you Christians call 'Mary.' She's there . . . she looks down from the 'golden dome'; and, if you really want to discover *the secret of Notre Dame*, visit that grotto you Catholics call " Lourdes." There's something there . . . no, there's *someone* there . . . we call her *Notre Dame*, and she's *the secret of her university*."

Thank you, Howard. Hope you're listening to me now, as you promised me on that train you would. Because with those words you solved the riddle about what I should say in these few moments. That was Mother's Day weekend; it was May, the month dedicated to her; and I had just returned, with fifty sick and disabled people, from a pilgrimage to the "real" Lourdes in France. So obvious I had almost missed it . . . I'm going to speak of Notre Dame . . . *Notre Dame* . . . our Lady . . . Mary, the mother of Jesus.

One can make the point that she's perhaps the most important human person ever. Even history itself is divided "before" and "after" the birth she gave to her firstborn. She was there at Christmas at His birth; at Cana, His first miracle; at the foot of the cross; at Pentecost, the feast we celebrate today.

"But when the appointed time came, God sent His own Son, born of a woman . . ."
St. Paul writes the Galatians;

"And while there in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to her firstborn . . ." records St. Luke;

"Mary said to the servants at Cana. 'Do whatever He tells you . . .'" reports St. John;

"Near the cross of Jesus stood His mother . . ." recalls the Beloved Disciple;

"The apostles were in continuous prayer, together with Mary, the mother of Jesus . . ."
writes St. Luke in the Acts of the Apostles, in the account of Pentecost.

Notre Dame . . . Our Lady . . .

John Ruskin held that "every brightest and loftiest achievement of the arts, dreams, advancement, and progress of humanity has been but the fulfillment of that poor Israelite woman's prayer, 'He who is mighty has magnified me!' . . ."

While Wordsworth extolled her as "our tainted nature's solitary boast."

"All things rising, all things sizing, Mary sees sympathizing . . ."

. . . claims Gerard Manley Hopkins, as you, the class of 2013, have sensed her maternal presence "rising, sizing, and sympathizing" these blessed years on a campus wrapped in her mantle, and praise God that Father Sorin and that pioneer band of priests and brothers of the Congregation of the Holy Cross placed this most noble endeavor under her patronage from day one 171 years ago.

Might I propose to you, my new classmates, class of 2013, that she's not just our patroness, but our model. It all comes down to this: she - - Miriam, Mary, Notre Dame, our Lady - - humbly, selflessly, generously, with trust, placed her life in God's hands, allowing her life to unfold according to His plan. She gave God's son a human nature; she gave the Eternal Word - - God the Son, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity - - flesh. That's called the *Incarnation*. God became one of us.

"And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us." The *Incarnation* . . .

Now, as you complete years at this acclaimed university dedicated to her, you are asked the same pivotal question the Archangel Gabriel once posed to her: will you let God take flesh in you? Will you give God a human nature? Will He be reborn in you? Will the *Incarnation* continue in and through you?

I dare say you gratefully claim that God's Word has certainly taken flesh on this campus in your years here: in your classes and professors, in your friends and service projects, in the prayer and sacraments, in the "all-nighters" and exams, in the memories and promises.

And now it's your turn to let God take flesh in your lives.

You can answer the way Mary did, "Let it be done to me according Thy will" - - *Fiat* . . . or, you can reply with a term New Yorkers use, "forgetaboutit!"

Notre Dame challenges us to reply, *Fiat!* Yes! For, at her best, this university has the heart of Mary, meaning this university gives us *Jesus* and *His Church*, and clings to them both with love, loyalty, and service.

Here at Notre Dame we do not strive to be like Harvard or Oxford, but like Bethlehem, Nazareth, Cana, Calvary, and the Upper Room at Pentecost . . .with Mary, as the "Word becomes flesh" in the one who called Himself "the Way, the Truth and the Life."

Here our goal is not just a career, but a *call*; not just a degree, but *discipleship*; not just what we've gotten but what we're *giving*; not just the now but *eternity*; not just the "I" but the "*we*"; not just the grades but the *gospel*.

My friend on that train ride ten days ago, now my fellow alumnus of this university, will be glad to know that I took him up on it. Last night I snuck down to discover *the secret of Notre Dame*. Kind of a cool breeze off the lake; the voices of visiting families and friends, the songs, and laughter subsided as I got close; there were the candles, hundreds of them, with wax droppings to remind us of prayers of past generations; there many of you were, kneeling, standing, sitting on the ground; there was quiet, there was a welcome; there was light; there was peace; there was warmth; there was Notre Dame, Mary, our Lady.

There was *Bethlehem*, as I saw moms, dads and grandparents beaming over their babies of twenty-two years ago, now graduates;

There was *Nazareth*, as families were united in prayers of thanksgiving;

There was *Cana*, as students remembered miracles;

There was *Calvary*, as one or two of you had tears in your eyes, perhaps recalling a past or present cross or crown of Thorns, made a bit more bearable by the one also called the *Pieta*.

There was *Pentecost*, as this class whispered that favorite prayer of Father Hesburgh, united with Our Lady and the apostles in that Upper Room, *Come, Holy Spirit!*

There, I joined my prayers with yours, with hers, and entrusted her university, with her call, her mission, her Catholic identity, her excellence, yoked to the truth of the Gospel;

There I prayed for this class of 2013, their folks and families;

There I prayed for Bishop Rhoades, and for our much missed Bishop D'Arcy, for Father Jenkins, the board, the alumni, the benefactors, the faculty, staff, for Father Dick Warner and Congregation of the Holy Cross.

There I prayed for you, Howard . . . because, on that train ride, you were right: at this grotto there's a touch of the transcendent, a hint of the beyond, a whisper of the sacred, that reminds us that we're not just minds and bodies, but hearts and immortal souls, called not to a "crap shoot" called life but an *adventure in fidelity* that beckons us to *cast out to the deep*, and, yes, even walk on water toward Him, the Son of God, the Son of Mary; she'd remind us that He has a plan for us, that these years of college have been a part of it, and that we're happiest when our plans are consonant with His.

There indeed was *the secret of Notre Dame*, not *something* but *someone*: our Lady, who gave the Divine a human nature, and invites us, equipped, please God, with what she's given us here, to do the same!

Congratulations Class of 2013.

May Jesus Christ be praised!

May Notre Dame, our Lady, reign in our hearts! Tell the world our secret!