

DESALES UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
“LIVING THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE WITH A
BURNING DESIRE FOR HEAVEN”
MAY 22, 2010
MOST REVEREND JOHN O. BARRES, STD, JCL, DD

Class of 2010, today’s commencement exercises mark the beginning of a new phase in your life. Embarking upon and thereafter managing a career has never been an easy or simple process but it is even more complex today because of a tough economy and a challenging job market.

How should you face these challenges? In pondering that question you will do well to live the words of the Patron saint of this University. In one of the best, and most succinct, pieces of career advice I have ever heard, St. Francis de Sales said, “Be who you are and be that well.”

Think about it. “Be who you are and be that well.” If you are able to discern through prayer and life experience how your natural abilities and personality mesh with your interests and long-lasting drives, and if you have the courage and fortitude to follow that light, you begin to discover whom you are.

But don’t stop there. Dare to do something that modern society finds increasingly foreign. Dare to recognize that you are a child of God; that despite your imperfections God loves you; and that God has given you your natural abilities, talents and interests for a purpose. He wants you to use them to help the world by bringing holiness into it.

Our Church and our globalized society are in desperate need today of teachers, doctors and health care professionals, lawyers and politicians, financiers, accountants, social workers, actors, media professionals and venture capitalists who radically lay down their lives for Jesus Christ and serve His people and His Church by bringing holiness into the world.

In John's Gospel, John the Baptist gives some excellent but thoroughly countercultural 21st century career management advice when he says: "Christ must increase, I must decrease." (John 3:30) By dying to ourselves we rise to whom we really are in Christ. To a prosperous but disenchanted world that worships celebrity and power, these words seem more than simply impossible—they seem utterly incomprehensible. Yet, they are neither.

Instead they represent true wisdom, a wisdom that has proven its truth not for a news cycle or two but for 2000 years. From a Catholic and a Salesian perspective, we can only discover whom we really are in Jesus Christ – the Light of the World and the Light of every career and vocation path.

How can that be done? Again through a willingness to follow a different path than set out by our prevailing culture -- a fidelity to the Mass and the Body and Blood of Christ as well as to the Sacrament of Penance, a fidelity to a daily life that draws focus, purpose and energy from prayer, the inspired Scriptures and a deep and lasting commitment to helping the least of our brothers and sisters. Taking these steps will help you to discern whom you are in Christ.

Very much related to this is the question of marriage.¹ I hope, of course, that many of you will be open to a calling to the priesthood or religious life. Indeed let me warn you that if you live in this Diocese and I get word that you might be open to the priesthood you will not only be hearing from the Holy Spirit, you will be getting a call from me as well.

Nevertheless, most of you sitting here today will be married over the next ten years or so. There is a chance that you have already met your future spouse casually or more seriously. There is a good chance that you will meet him or her sometime in the next decade at work or through some mutual friends. You won't know until it happens.

I love to hear how couples meet, or more accurately how God brings couples together. My friend Joe met his wife Jackie in Philadelphia on St. Patrick's Day and asked her for her phone number. Unfortunately, Jackie forgot to tell Joe that she was leaving the next day for a month in Ireland. Joe called that number every day for a month with no answer. But finally

¹ My focus on the Sacrament of Marriage in this Commencement Address is inspired by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' recent document *Marriage: Love and Life in the Divine Plan* (Washington DC: USCCB, 2009).

Jackie returned, answered the phone and more than 30 years and five children later, they live a beautiful Catholic marriage.

Or take the case of Clark. He met a young Catholic woman named Catherine at a party at McGill University in Montreal. Their first meeting turned out to be a long debate on abortion, with Clark arguing vehemently for a “woman’s right to choose.” Later that night Clark asked his roommate “Do you think Catherine would go out with me?” His roommate’s response was blunt: “Clark, you’re nuts. Go to bed!”

It turns out that Clark wasn’t totally nuts since my sister, Catherine, did agree to go out with him. Today they are married and living in St. Louis and Clark is a banker, a Catholic convert and an ardent advocate of the Gospel of Life.

Or consider Jack and Missy who were college classmates in the early 90s. They barely knew of each other’s existence in their college days but met at an alumni function in New York City a few years later. Now here is the strange thing. When they looked through Jack’s graduation photos, it turned out that Missy was in every one of the pictures hovering mysteriously “by chance” in the background!

I wonder what your story will be. The who. The what. The where. The when. The why. The how.

There are many societal challenges that often result in a lurking cynicism or fear about whether marriage works at all today. Among other things, there is a growing culturally sanctioned narcissism that leads many to never quite understand that marriage cannot exist without full sacrifice on the part of each spouse.

There also exists a contraceptive mentality that separates the love and life-giving dimensions of marriage, as well as an attempt to redefine marriage by denying the unique pattern of spousal and familial love brought about by the complementarity of male and female that is fundamental to the existence and well-being of society as a whole.

Marriage is also challenged by cohabitation before marriage, which gives an illusory sense of prudence in regard to making a decision about marriage. But because it ignores or considers irrelevant the truths of the Ten Commandments and Christ’s teaching, pre-marital cohabitation actually leads to significantly higher rates of divorce.

The list goes on and on. But while it is important to diagnose contemporary challenges to marriage, it is far more important to say that marriage is not only possible in the contemporary world but it is, and will always remain, a life and world-changing sacrament. Marriage not only can work. It remains a glorious path to Eternal Life.

Indeed that is precisely what you should be focusing upon when you think of marriage. To put it simply, you and your spouse should focus your view of marriage on Heaven.

Now, I realize that even to many of you who are striving to lead Christian lives, this advice will seem hopelessly naive and impractical, especially when you and your future spouse are trying to figure out how two different career paths can be synchronized geographically and financially or how your different backgrounds and understandings affect how you function together emotionally in marriage. Heaven is a worthy goal, certainly but how can you focus on that goal when thinking about marriage?

And yet I will repeat my advice. You and your spouse should focus your view of marriage on Heaven. C.S. Lewis, the great Christian apologist, once said that the people who are most productive in life are the people who keep their eyes fixed on Heaven. Why? The answer to that is simple, and some would say simplistic.

Yet, it is an answer whose truth has proven itself throughout Judeo-Christian history. And that is, if our eyes are fixed on the ultimate goal of Heaven and eternal life, then all the other questions of life pertaining to marriage, career path, family, finances -- yes, even the crosses you will carry together in marriage -- will fall into place and into proper perspective, direction and balance.

Think for a moment of the greatest pleasures human beings experience in life. A few months ago in Vancouver, after years and years of intense training, a handful of outstanding Olympic athletes stood on a podium, heard their nation's anthems played, and had a gold medal hung around their necks while tens of thousand cheered. It was an incredible moment of ecstasy for each of them, yet over time that moment will slowly fade away until it becomes only a wisp of ancient memory.

Or think of that moment on election night when a politician who has wanted to be the President of the United States ever since childhood is told that he or she has triumphed. It is an incredible moment, yet it too will fade over time as the burdens of the position begin to mask the lingering afterglow of victory.

Think in the context of marriage of the ecstasy involved in husband and wife becoming one flesh or the ecstasy involved in the birth of their first child. As with all things of this earth, though, they too will fade.

None of these moments, as beautiful and as joyful as they are, can compare to "one moment" of ecstasy in Heaven, an ecstasy that will last not for a decade or a century but an ecstasy that will last forever and ever. Saint Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians: "Eye has not seen, ear has

not heard...what God has prepared for those who love him.” (1 Corinthians 2:9) And a great Churchman, Cardinal Merry del Val, put it this way in his spiritual journal: “Receive everything from God and your life will be the first stanza of an eternal hymn, the dawn of a happiness without sunset.”

This eternal “happiness without sunset” is where your focus should be. It is precisely this focus that will shed light on every practical detail, every item on your to-do list of every day.

The goal for you and your future spouse is the spirit of holiness and mission that will lead both of you to Eternal Life. Pope Benedict XVI, like Pope John Paul II before him, has repeatedly said that he wants to canonize married couples. Why shouldn’t some of those future couples be members of the DeSales University Class of 2010?

While the culture tells you that such a thing is impossible, if you look into your hearts you will find it is not. It is what God wants for you. It is what you are called for. It is the end for which you were created. And you can do it.

The intimate love you have for each other in Christ will also overflow beautifully to your children to help lead them to Eternal Life as well. I love this description of the fatherhood of St. Thomas More, Martyr and Patron Saint of Statesmen, Politicians and Lawyers: “More sought to befriend his children and lead them to the divine Teacher within. He befriended them to such an extent that they came to want to do good and to seek God, just to please the father they so greatly loved...More cultivated virtue in his children by treating them as he saw God treating him...He saw every conversation, no matter how trivial its subject, as an opportunity to cultivate the garden of that child’s soul.”²

St. Thomas More was an enormously successful lawyer, diplomat, statesman and writer on the European stage of the sixteenth century. But with all his accomplishments and success in the world, he always realized the importance of being a holy husband and a holy father – all the while, keeping his eyes on Heaven and Eternal Life.

As Christian spouses and parents, you and your future wives or husbands will be called to “sacramental mysticism,”³ a love for the Body

² Gerard B. Wegemer *Thomas More: A Portrait of Courage* (Princeton: Scepter Publishers, 1995), 85, 88.

³ See Pope Benedict XVI’s December 25, 2005 encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est* 14.

and Blood of Christ, and a bold confidence in the moment by moment graces that are part of the Sacrament of Marriage.

JRR Tolkien, author of *The Lord of the Rings* and a passionate Catholic, in a letter to his son near the end of his life, explained the power of sacramental mysticism: “I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. There you will find romance, glory, honor, fidelity and the true ways of all your loves upon earth.”⁴

Remember as you leave DeSales University today that every Mass has cosmic significance. Every Mass is celebrated on the Altar of the World.⁵ And remember that it is in the Body and Blood of Christ that you will find the true way of all your loves upon earth – the love that you will share with your future husband or wife, the love that you will share with your future children, the love you will share with the world.

Congratulations upon your graduation. I will pray, and ask for the intercession of St. Francis de Sales, for each of you, your families and your future spouses. May God bless you.

⁴ As quoted in James T. O’Connor *The Hidden Manna: A Theology of the Eucharist* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 336.

⁵ See Pope John Paul II’s April 17, 2003 encyclical letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 8.