

**“Choosing the Path of Principle-Centered Leadership”
Baccalaureate Sermon
Illinois College**

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**+ Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

President Steuer, distinguished members of the Board of Trustees, faculty and staff, honored guests, graduating class of 2013, families and friends:

I am very happy to be with you today, not only because I was asked to serve as your baccalaureate speaker, but also because I too am a member of the graduating class of 2013, not of Illinois College, but of the University of Notre Dame, where I will be receiving my Master of Business Administration degree next Saturday in South Bend, Indiana. So I come to you today with very fresh experience as a student, so recent that my very last class in the Executive MBA Program at Notre Dame was just yesterday!

With you, I know what it means to do the reading assignments, work with my study team, do the homework exercises, sit through lectures, participate in class discussions, make classroom presentations, write

papers, study for tests, take quizzes and exams, and then wait for grades to be posted. With you, I know what a relief it is to be finished! So believe me when I say that I know very well what went into your accomplishment, and I really mean it when I say, congratulations on your achievement!

So why do we do it? Why go through the stress, hassles and expense of higher education? Certainly the diploma you receive today will provide you with a credential that will help to open doors for you in your professional careers. But a deeper reason is one that I learned in my first year Latin class in high school and which I still remember: *non pro schola, sed pro vita*, which means, our studies are not just for school, but for life. I am sure that you have learned lessons and made friends here during your years at Illinois College that will remain with you throughout your lives.

As we celebrate your graduation, I would be remiss if I did not note that our nation today also honors our mothers, without whom so many of our achievements would simply not be possible. Certainly I would not be the person I am today without the influence of my mother. Many of our mothers have taught us through the example of their own lives to “love one another because love is of God” (I John 4:7). To all of you mothers, and

to you who will soon be mothers, I wish you a very happy Mother's Day and I gladly bestow my blessing upon you.

THE SHELTERED CAMPUS

Dear graduates, a college campus may well be likened to the Shire of J. R. R. Tolkien's great work, *The Lord of the Rings*, one of my favorite pieces of literature. The Hobbits who lived in the Shire "were, in fact, sheltered, but they had ceased to remember it."¹ The same might be said of most college students today, for a college campus can be likened to the Shire in that, so long as students remain on the campus, they are often, like Hobbits, "quite content to ignore and be ignored by the world of the 'Big Folk.'"²

I say this not to be demeaning, but rather to recognize the reality of the world in which you have lived these past few years. It is of benefit to students that they are sheltered without remembering it so that their energies and efforts may be better attuned to their studies.

But there is also a disadvantage to this sheltering. As degrees are pursued, the outside world continues to plod along, often without being noticed by those whose lives are taken up in their studies. But now that the

time of your studies has come to an end, it is time for you to leave the shelter of this campus.

The world to which you will soon return is different from when you began your studies a few years ago. Much as the evil power of Sauron threatened the life of the Shire, so, too, the looming power of the Evil One threatens the life of our nation and of each one of you individually. Just as the Shire was saved through the efforts of simple and humble Hobbits, so, too, can our nation be saved by the simple and humble efforts of its citizens, including yourselves. Doing so, however, will depend on choices that you will make in the years ahead, decisions that will be shaped by the values that you have learned at home and in the course of your education.

TWO WAYS FROM WHICH TO CHOOSE

In the Bible, Psalm 1 describes two paths or ways from which to choose in life. Serving as a preface to the whole Book of Psalms, Psalm 1 uses striking similes to contrast the destiny of the good and the wicked. The psalm views life as activity, as choosing either the good or the bad. Each “way” brings its inevitable consequences. The wise through their good actions will experience rootedness and life, and the wicked,

rootlessness and death. This choice for good or evil is inherent in God's plan since the beginning of creation. The spiritual battle between angels and demons, led by Saint Michael against the forces of Satan, and the earthly struggle of right versus wrong that has confronted humanity since the time of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, is the same challenge that we all face day in and day out. Education has an important role to play in learning how to deal with those challenges, but the question remains yet to be answered about how the learning that your diploma represents will be put into practice in your lives.

In that regard, I am pleased to note that Illinois College has a Leadership Program, a wonderful opportunity which many of you have taken to develop your minds and characters in ways that allow others to see the fruits of your education ever at work in your lives. Through this certificate program, you have watched timely and provocative films such as "The Philosopher King" and "Pray the Devil Back to Hell." You have contributed to the program in creative ways with art and original video contests. You have honed your leadership skills in important campus activities and positions as peer health educators, editors and writers for the student newspapers, and as members of student organizations and literary

societies. You have engaged in service to others through the Jacksonville Food Center, New Directions Homeless Shelter, Big Brothers/Big Sisters, and the Prairie Council on Aging. You have spent your Spring Break making a difference in Chicago through the Urban Life Center.

All of that is noteworthy and commendable, but participating in such a leadership program does not provide an automatic guarantee that you will choose the right path in life. I know because when I was a young priest I had the privilege of participating in a fellowship program called Leadership Greater Chicago. Twenty-five of us were nominated by prominent civic, religious and business leaders to participate in this year-long fellowship because they saw in us qualities that they thought showed our potential for leadership ability. They were right. That group has produced some very powerful and successful leaders. While most of that leadership has been for the good, some of it unfortunately led in the wrong direction. On the positive side, for example, one of my classmates worked his way up from the mail room to become the President and CEO of Commonwealth Edison Electric Company. Another classmate is currently working in the West Wing of the White House as Senior Advisor to the President of the United States. But two other leadership classmates went in

the wrong direction, ran afoul of the law, and spent time in jail. So I think it is fair to ask: which path will you take?

PRINCIPLE-CENTERED LEADERSHIP

In his best-selling book published over twenty years ago, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey wrote of the importance of what he called the Character Ethic, which “is based on the fundamental idea that there are *principles* that govern human effectiveness – natural laws in the human dimension that are just as real, just as ‘unchanging’ . . . as laws such as gravity are in the physical dimension.”³ To illustrate this point, he re-told this story published by Frank Koch in *Proceedings*, the magazine of the Naval Institute:

Two battleships assigned to the training squadron had been at sea on maneuvers in heavy weather for several days. I was serving on the lead battleship and was on watch on the bridge as night fell. The visibility was poor with patchy fog, so the captain remained on the bridge keeping an eye on all activities.

Shortly after dark, the lookout on the wing of the bridge reported, “Light, bearing on the starboard bow.”

“Is it steady or moving astern?” the captain called out.

Lookout replied, “Steady, captain,” which meant we were on a dangerous collision course with that ship.

The captain then called to the signalman, “Signal that ship: We are on a collision course, advise you change course 20 degrees.”

Back came a signal, “Advisable for you to change course 20 degrees.”

The captain said, "Send, I'm a captain, change course 20 degrees."

"I'm a seaman second class," came the reply. "You had better change course 20 degrees."

By that time, the captain was furious. He spat out, "Send, I'm a battleship. Change course 20 degrees."

Back came the flashing light, "I'm a lighthouse."

We changed course.⁴

My dear graduates, in the course of your lives you will encounter many people who will throw their titles, power, prestige, influence and wealth at you demanding that you change course to suit their whims. Remember that a person of principle is a lighthouse that cannot change course from the path set out for us by the Lord. Remember that Jesus said, "You are the light of the world" (*Matthew* 5:14) and that this light is entrusted to the baptized to be kept burning brightly. Stay true to your principles and follow the beacon of Christ's light that will lead you to His kingdom.

As you take up this challenge to be a principle-centered leader, there will be many who will oppose you, some in small ways and others with great force, but they are not to be feared; they are to be loved. In the face of such opposition, let us pray with Saint Thomas More:

...teach us to bear patiently and gently all injuries and snares treacherously set for us; not to smolder with anger, not to seek

revenge, not to give vent to our feelings by hurling back insults, not to find an empty pleasure in tripping up an enemy through some clever trick, but rather to set ourselves against deceitful injury with genuine courage, to conquer evil with good...⁵

If we stay true to our principles in this way, the Lord will see fit to grant us peace and all good.

Recently the Catholic Church received a new leader who has inspired both Catholics and non-Catholics. In choosing his name, Pope Francis pointed to the example of Saint Francis of Assisi, which I now offer as helpful inspiration for principle-centered leadership. It was Saint Francis of Assisi who urged his friars, saying:

Go, proclaim peace to men and preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Be patient in trials, watchful in prayer, strenuous in work, moderate in speech, reserved in manner and grateful for favors, because for all this an eternal kingdom is being prepared for you.⁶

Centuries before Saint Francis of Assisi, Pope Saint Leo I was called “the Great” because in the year 452 he peacefully persuaded Attila the Hun to turn back from his invasion of Italy.

Pope Saint Leo the Great was also known for his powerfully persuasive writing and preaching. In one of his most eloquent sermons, Pope Leo said, “such is the power of great minds, such is the light of truly believing souls, that they put unhesitating faith in what is not seen with the bodily eye; they fix their desires on what is beyond sight. Such fidelity could never be born in our hearts, nor could anyone be justified by faith, if our salvation lay only in what was visible.”⁷

With these words I now close and I warmly congratulate each of you graduates on this day that is filled with relief and joy. Today your academic achievements are celebrated and a new horizon opens before you. Let us pray that it will be one in which you choose the right path, and in which you will flourish and thrive.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

NOTES

¹ J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring: Being the First Part of the Lord of the Rings* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1994), 5.

² J. R. R. Tolkien, source unknown.

³ Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change* (New York: A Fireside Book, published by Simon & Schuster, 1989), p. 32.

⁴ Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, p. 33.

⁵ Saint Thomas More, "The Sadness, the Weariness, the Fear and the Prayer of Christ Before He Was Taken Prisoner: A Commentary on Matthew 26, Mark 14, Luke 22, John 18." In *The Sadness of Christ and Final Prayers and Benedictions*. Gerard Wegemer, ed. Clarence Miller, trans. (New York: Scepter Publishers, Inc., 1993), 72.

⁶ In Saint Bonaventure, *The Life of Saint Francis*, 3. Henry Edward Manning, ed. (Rockford: Tan Books, 1988), 19.

⁷ Pope Saint Leo the Great, *Sermo 2 de Ascensione* 1-4; PL 54, 397-399.