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Commencement Address
Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University
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Salutation

President Engh, President Potterveld, Dean O'Brien, distinguished members of the Boards of the Jesuit School of Theology and Santa Clara University, Rector McGarry and Provost Jacobs:

I am deeply honored by the conferral of this degree from this institution which I have been privileged to serve during most of my academic and ministerial life. And I am especially gratified to be an honorary member of this graduating class. It is a real joy to congratulate you, class of 2018, and your proud families and friends, to honor your achievements, and to participate in sending you forth from this community of life and learning into the wider Church and world which you have been preparing to serve in various ways, now qualified by various degrees in theology, to be conferred shortly.

Address:

Reflecting on what I might say to you today as you now look back upon this significant phase of your theological education and forward to your theological ministries, I am aware that I am not speaking to you as our students but as the newest members of our professional and ministerial guild, as our new colleagues. So, I want to speak to you, not about *your* calling but about *our* shared vocation, the challenging vocation of the theologian in today's Church and world. "Theolo-

gy” in this sense embraces not only the scholarly activities of research, teaching, writing that some of you will pursue, preaching or active involvement in ministries of liberation and mercy, which will be the work of many of you. “Theology” denotes the whole enterprise of pursuing, tending, and promoting the mindful search for God in this particular historical context.

As I reflected on this vocation that we share, I found, somewhat to my own surprise, that what arose in me were not ideas or a theory on this subject but some memories of experiences that shaped my own life as a theologian. None of those I will share with you was spectacular or even remarkable -- except for the effect they had on me. And I thought that perhaps sharing them with you might encourage you to reflect upon analogous events in your own experience. What is most *significant* can sometimes get lost in the plethora of the so-called “important”.

The first event that arose in my memory was a casual conversation I had just after arriving in Berkeley, barely two months after defending my dissertation in Rome. One of my new colleagues at JSTB (as it was then called), probably trying to find something suitable for conversation with this strange new creature, a woman theologian, asked me, “How old were you when you first knew that you wanted to study theology?” I’m not sure what I mumbled at that moment but, in fact, when I later reflected on that conversation it reminded me, with a chuckle, of that old story about the defendant on the witness stand whom the cross-examining prosecuting attorney attempted to entrap by asking him, “And when did you stop beating your wife?” The defendant replied, “I didn’t.” “What?!” exclaimed the prosecutor, “You never stopped?” “No,” he replied, “I never started.”

When I tried to think about when I began to be seriously interested in theology, the real answer was “I never began” because I really could not remem-

ber a time when I was not involved in theological exploration. Were not all of us, even as children, as we dealt with the death of a pet -- or a parent -- the deferral of things hoped for, evil and injustice, happiness and suffering raising questions that were really about God? questions about nature, morality, death, hope, community, unconditional love, forgiveness, happiness?

In short, that question from my new colleague, made me realize that I, and probably everyone who has the leisure and privilege to think about life at all, always wants, perhaps without knowing it, to study theology. Most people just don't know that their pondering about life, about what really matters, is called theology. Some people, like you, have figured that out explicitly and claimed it as your own pursuit -- and that's why you are here today -- completing at least some stage of the formal ground work for a lifetime of theological questioning and reflection on what really matters.

That question from a colleague at the very beginning of my theological ministry, helped me realize, especially in hindsight, that becoming a theologian is not the choice of a job or even of a profession. It is a response to a VOCATION.... not a vocation that confers superior status or commissions us to deliver abstract solutions to theoretical problems. It is a vocation that gives us privileged access to people's deepest desires, however unarticulated they might be, and calls us to respond to them as Jesus did to his contemporaries -- in ways that enlighten, yes, but especially in ways that encourage and console, liberate and empower. It is a vocation to tending the truth about the most important issues in human experience. Perhaps that's why Jesus did not spend his brief ministerial life arguing with the learned but most of the time offering to his contemporaries parables that challenged them to *think* differently, yes, but especially to *choose* differently. Where and when did you experience your theological vocation?

The second instance that arose in my memory actually happened while I was preparing to study theology -- while I was a graduate student in philosophy. We were studying Plato, still my favorite philosopher. Running through Plato's philosophy like an electric current is the theme of TEACHING, which almost everyone who gets a degree in theology will do - whether in the academy, from the pulpit, or in direct pastoral ministry. For the vocation of the theologian isn't about pursuing a career. It is not even undertaken solely in order to answer one's own questions. It is always, in a very fundamental way, about helping others seek life-giving answers to the really important questions of human existence. Theology is intrinsically kerygmatic; it is about the "good news" that leads one who learns it to want to put it at the service of others. Theology, in other words, is not only a personal vocation to the quest for ultimate meaning in one's own life. It is a call to MINISTRY, and especially to the ministry of the word, to making truth fruitful in the lives of those to whom we are sent, that is, to teaching. So what has that to do with Plato?

Plato was formed by and he preserved for us the picture of his own personal and professional model and mentor, Socrates, a wandering philosopher (or we might say theologian, given the nature of his subject matter) who never wrote anything himself but got himself martyred for teaching people like Plato. Like another non-writing Teacher who followed him by five centuries, Socrates was executed not only because of *what* he taught but especially because of *how* he taught. Socrates called his teaching "midwifing," that is, bringing forth in his students, in pain and joy and hope, the best that was in them, new life for the world. Jesus used that same image in John 16, when he forewarned his disciples that, like a woman in labor, they would suffer in their ministerial endeavors but

would rejoice in the new life they would bring to birth. Socrates carried out this maieutic work of education primarily by questioning his disciples, pushing them to doubt the facile answer, to distrust the lazy meanderings of their own minds, and to interrogate the stock answers of the establishment, until they hit the bedrock of truth.

The city fathers of Athens knew how dangerous to established order this quest for truth could be, especially if it was inculcated into young people who still had the innocence and the energy to question the accepted “wisdom” of the *status quo*. When Socrates defied orders to stop teaching they sentenced him to death. But they offered to look the other way if he would just disappear from the city and not come back, if he agreed to stop TEACHING in Athens. Socrates, like Jesus centuries later who faced the same choice from the religious and political powers-that-be in first century Jerusalem, declined the offer. For Socrates to sacrifice his integrity to save his life would have been to invalidate all he had tried to teach his students. Teaching, as Socrates and Jesus understood it, is not a job. It is a MISSION that is inherent to the VOCATION of the theologian. Therefore, it is an expression less of what one *knows* than of who one *is*. So, the true teacher, especially one whose integrity is not for sale, no matter how high the offer, is always in danger from institutional power. Through the figure of Socrates, the greatest teacher of antiquity, I came to understand more clearly what Jesus, who was first of all a teacher, was really doing. Have you had such a teacher in your theological studies? one who taught you not so much a subject but what it meant to be a teacher?

The third experience that surfaced in my memory was upsetting to me when it happened and has remained unsettling, at some level, throughout my teaching ministry. And one reason I find Pope Francis, exercising his teaching ministry, so

attractive and exciting, is that, in a way he is the embodiment of an answer to the question this third event raised for me.

The event itself occurred a few days before I boarded the plane for Paris to begin my graduate theological studies. At that time Catholic Religious Life, to which I belonged (and still do), and especially that of women, was rigidly institutionalized. There were rules for everything and most of them started with “Do not....” What not to do, where not to go, with whom not to relate, what not to doubt or question, imagine, investigate, or believe. I landed in Paris in June of 1968, just as the student revolution exploded in the streets of the Latin Quarter and spilled over into the university I was to attend.

A friend of mine in New York, a Religious Brother with whom I had once made a retreat, drove me to the airport on the day of my departure and, as he bade me farewell, he said he had one piece of advice for me. I expected to be urged to pray daily, to study hard, and so on. But he said, “Remember this one thing: don’t ever *refuse* an invitation.” If ever in my life I had heard a recipe for moral, vocational, and theological shipwreck, that bit of advice was it. Catholic life at that point in history, and *a fortiori* Religious Life, could almost have been formulated as the inverse of that advice: “*Never* accept an invitation -- at least not until it has been vetted by authority, checked against the Rule book, and explicitly allowed by the necessary permissions. Needless to say, I had no intention of putting my friend’s dangerous advice into practice.

But almost before I got out of the airport in Paris I began facing the challenge of how to respond to invitations: the invitation to engage with people from cultures and religious traditions I had earlier met only in books where they were usually presented as erroneous or ignorant, if not evil; the invitation to read well beyond the Bible, the lives of the saints, or the Rule; the invitation to enter the

whole world of art and political thought from which Religious Life and Catholic isolationism had insulated me since adolescence; and the invitation to engage the explosion of new thought and sensibility gushing simultaneously from the just concluded Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), from the social-sexual-political cultural revolution that came to be called “the sixties,” and from the radical currents unleashed by liberation theology in general and feminism in particular. 1968 was a watershed year, indeed a defining year, all over the western world. Perhaps it could have been defined as a cataclysm of invitation.

Many times as something I had never heard of or thought about arose in my experience and I interiorly ran for cover in the rules and customs and expectations I had imbibed in my religious youth, I heard the voice of my friend saying “Never refuse an invitation.”

Over the years I learned, by much trial and error, that “invitation” was not synonymous with seduction or temptation, and the problematic and programmatic word was “refuse.” The response to an invitation was not a choice between mindless or spineless capitulation to whatever presented itself, on the one hand, and rigid conformity to rules developed for and in another place and time, on the other. An invitation was just that, something offered for one’s consideration, something that was, in the nature of the case, new, not domesticated by one’s already developed categories of “what Religious have always done,” or “what the Catholic Church has always taught,” or “how Americans have always lived”. The challenge was to renounce the *a priori* refusal of the new or different, to not shut down reflection before it starts and, instead, to risk engagement.

And what I gradually came to see was that theology, which was a VOCATION to seek the truth about ultimate reality, not just for oneself but in order to TEACH, to share it with others, could not be, to use Pope Francis’ vocabulary,

self-referential, a rat-race on a training wheel in a laboratory cage. It would only have something life-giving to offer if it was fully engaged with the reality of the world in which real people, including oneself, live and struggle. Does such an open approach have risks? Yes. Does not taking such an approach protect one from risks? No. But refusal of the invitation to engage does lead, almost certainly, to theological and ministerial *irrelevance*. And one thing the sixties began to expose was that, for many of our contemporaries, especially young people, the institutional Church had become largely irrelevant. That's partly what unleashed "the sixties." And it is what is reaping a bitter harvest in our own time. Your challenge, as theologians, is not so much that people do not believe but that they find what is proposed to faith irrelevant.

Which brings me to what I most fervently wish, hope, for you as you leave this special, perhaps somewhat protected, world of theological study, to take up your vocation as theologians, your mission to teach, the effort to accompany people in their search for God. I hope that you will hear a deep echo in your hearts of the life and words of Pope Francis who is such a marvelous model for all of us engaged in theology today.

Francis, as you know, is not universally popular in Catholic circles, maybe especially in some theological circles. And there is much discussion in the press about why everyone is *not* enamored of this engaging figure who, literally and symbolically, washes the feet of all; who lets a rambunctious five year old tug on his cassock while he is delivering a pontifical address to ecclesiastical dignitaries; who causes near cardiac arrest in his security detail by taking a grateful slurp of unvetted tea from a common mug handed him by an unidentified stranger in the crowd around his popemobile; who embraces people disfigured by poverty and disease and sin; who shops for his own, *black* shoes but skips the French cuffs; and

who speaks in an inclusive vernacular, “Fratelli e sorelle -- buona sera,” rather than intoning, “urbi et orbi”, in solemn Latin few in the audience can understand; and perhaps, most scandalously, who humbly admits -- as he did last week -- that he had spoken harshly without ascertaining all the facts and so asks pardon of those he hurt by discounting their experience, their suffering. What’s not to like about this Pope?

What’s not to like is that Francis does not just mingle with the people, take questions he hasn’t seen ahead of time, or speak without notes to reporters. These are not just charming idiosyncrasies. They are eloquent symbolic gestures that the guardians of the ecclesiastical city-state, like those of Athens in the time of Socrates and Jerusalem in the time of Jesus, recognize --and fear -- because of what is being symbolized. Today’s protectors of the *status quo*, including our own interior censors, like all such down through history, have a vested interest in maintaining the system that seems to work for *them*. They/we fear that if we admit that we were ever mistaken we raise the possibility that we could be mistaken again, even now. After all, one is either infallible or not. And the infallible, by definition, do not make mistakes, much less publicly apologize for them. It is not love, but power, that means “never having to say you’re sorry”. Even looking again, entertaining the possibility of revision, at questions we have declared “settled” would threaten the absoluteness of the whole system.

What Francis has been doing from day one of his service of the People of God, is “accept the invitations” offered to him by the suffering of people, the anguished questions of those rejected and banned by official religion, the widespread disaffection of youth. And not just questions that have been carefully selected, vetted, cleaned up, put into “papalese”, and pre-emptively nullified or invalidated by *a priori* appeals to established positions. He is engaging the real

questions of today, not first of all in theory but in terms of the people whose lives are touched, sometimes radically, by what is proclaimed as absolute. Francis knows that real wars are fought in trenches, not in marble corridors or paneled lecture halls. A war zone (and Jesus defined life as a war between the Reign of God and the Kingdom of Satan), needs “field hospitals”. The wounded cannot wait until a state-of-the-art medical center can be built. People who are suffering may not know how to cure themselves, but they do know what isn’t helping.

Francis is listening to and accepting, in the name of the whole Church, invitations we have been refusing for centuries. He is allowing experience to challenge theory, even the theories enshrined in ancient, seemingly irreformable doctrinal and moral positions. He is implicitly raising the question of whether the practices and even some teachings enshrined in the writings of his predecessors might be in need of re-examination.

What many do not like about Francis is that he, like Jesus choosing to stay in home of Zacchaeus the public sinner, or touch unclean women or lepers, does not close the door on the invitations, offered not just to him but to the whole Church -- and now in a special way to you, its newest generation of theologians. Francis is letting experience lead the Church into new dialogues. His message is an acted out acceptance of the fact that only God is God and that revelation is never closed because the revealing God is neither dead nor retired. The experience of people, *outside* as well as inside the institutional Church, the *laity* as well as the clergy, *women* as well as men, the *poor, uneducated, incarcerated, and ill*, as well as those in the halls of civil and ecclesiastical power are not threats to the Church but invitations to look again, to entertain the real questions, to be evangelized anew.

Francis’ latest Apostolic Exhortation which came out only a few weeks ago, (perhaps to help celebrate your graduation!), “Gaudete et Exultate” (Rejoice and

Be Glad) is an eloquent testimony to this disconcertingly exhilarating openness that beckons to you as you take up your theological vocation and mission. It is a call to embrace the Council's resounding affirmation of the *universal call to holiness*. Not only are all in the Church called to personal holiness but all in the Church are called to foster the holiness of the whole Church. So, Francis does not cite just his own writings or those of his predecessors, propose only the spirituality of his own Religious Order, make the culture of Latin America or Rome normative, talk of the People of God exclusively as "men" or "sons" or "brothers", or urge the laity to docilely and silently follow their pastors. He cites saints from every historical period, from diverse Religious orders and types of spirituality, from every walk of life and vocation in the Church, from episcopal conferences all over the world. He invites his readers to engage, to learn, to expand their horizons and imaginations, to accept the invitations of our time and culture to address the suffering of the world God so loved as to give the Only Son.

I think what Francis is saying to all of us engaged by vocation in the ministry of theology is "do not refuse the invitation of your time and place. Respond with integrity to every challenge, even the threat of persecution or death, and thereby prove yourselves worthy of the One you follow, in whose own ministry you are involved, and whose final approval is the only reward worth seeking."

Conclusion:

With all those who have served you in your theological development, I wish you GOD'S BLESSING as we send you forth with warmest congratulations into a ministry which, please God, will never be predictable or controllable or manageable. GODSPEED until we meet again.

