

Commencement Remarks

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco

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I add my own words of congratulations to you graduates and those who have supported you through these past years of work and study – parents, spouses, partners, friends & family. If this is a proud moment for you, it is a great relief for them.

I also express my appreciation and gratitude to our staff and faculty, in particular. Let me cite an email I received this week from a member of this class: “My professors have challenged me greatly, cared about my personal development, and allowed me to focus my efforts on topics I found ultimately fulfilling.” He concluded, “I am forever indebted to you faculty for prompting me to think a higher level, and cannot thank you enough for all that you have done to make my time here worth the exorbitant cost of attending USF.”

Your time here at USF has been marked by a series of unprecedented traumas whose shock waves still reverberate around the world: the terrorist attacks of 9/11; the explosion of Columbia and the implosion of Enron; war in Afghanistan and Iraq; clergy sex abuse and its cover up by some bishops; a downward turn of the economy and an upward spiral of violence in the Middle East and Africa; and, most recently, the outbreak of SARS. This sad litany of events coincides with your three years at the University of San Francisco. These tragic events taken together paint a bleak picture, and may evoke feelings of discouragement and powerlessness in the face of such defeats for humanity.

We have watched stupidity, evil, arrogance, selfishness, greed, fanaticism and intolerance play themselves out on a global stage. The enormous progress that characterizes our period of history renders the barbarities of war and terrorism all the more paradoxical. Yet we see some light under this darkening cloud: firefighters sacrificing their lives in the aftermath of 9/11; the injured crew of a helicopter that crashed trying to rescue wounded Iraqi children; the doctor who refused to abandon his efforts to isolate the virus causing SARS and died of that disease. The worst of times calls forth the best from some people. As Vaclav Havel reminds us, “Hope is a state of mind, not a state of the world.”

We are, all of us, capable of goodness, whatever the context in which we find ourselves. Pope John Paul II recently spoke of “the very personal sins of those...who take refuge in the supposed impossibility of changing the world.” If we cannot stop war, end hunger and homelessness, cure cancer or eliminate the threat of terror, we can change the world – OUR world – however small and insignificant that world may appear to others.

There is a haunting story, a true story, a Holocaust survivor tells of standing in line at Auschwitz with her mother, her sister, and her sister’s little baby.

After the long train ride, all women and children, we were pushed out of the rail cars and divided into two lines. All of us were exhausted, confused and afraid but my mother somehow quickly figured out what was happening. Women with babies were sent to their death. Almost immediately, my mother took the child from my sister’s arms and said to her, ‘I am old and weak, women with babies will have an easier time and won’t have to work.’ With my sister’s baby in her arms, before she went through

the door leading to her death, she turned back to us and called out my name, ‘Raisa, take care of your sister.’ These were her last words. She knew how hard it would be for my sister to accept her child’s death and the gift of life my mother had given her.”
[Holocaust Museum, Washington, DC]

The fundamental human imperative – the very core of our humanity – is captured by those last words spoken by a selfless mother, “take care of your sister.” My prayer and hope for you today is that you will heed that imperative; that USF offered you the knowledge, the skills and the heart to take care of your sisters and brothers, and that in doing so you will change your world.

And now I have only to welcome you to the alumni Association of the University of San Francisco. You will be hearing from us!