

## Commencement Remarks

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco  
December 17, 2004 | St. Ignatius Church

Never doubt the capability of good, committed persons to change the world.

My final words are much the same as the opening words: congratulations and thank you. Congratulations to you graduates and thank you to your parents, spouses, partners, friends and family for supporting for you throughout the years at USF. This is a proud moment for you, and I assume you realize that it is a great relief for them.

I also take this opportunity to express my gratitude and appreciation to our staff and faculty, in particular. You leave the Hilltop today; they remain as the heart and soul of this Jesuit university.

I was tempted to switch hats this morning when I handed you your diploma, which is probably the most expensive Christmas gift that you will ever receive. Remember that your Jesuit education remains with you for the rest of your life; it can never, ever be taken from you. Happily, my responsibility is only to give you your diploma – not pay for it. That also may take you the rest of our life.

We are just a week away from Christmas, so let me tell you a true story I read last year about this time in the *London Tablet* by Dominic Milroy. The setting is a cold, grey day in London just before Christmas, on a crowded subway car where everyone is carefully avoiding all eye contact in the spirit of alienation, isolation and solitude that permeates public transportation.

At the second stop, the author's eye catches a splash of bright red, which turned out to be a very large balloon in the hands of a small black child who was clearly delighted with his trophy. It was not an ordinary balloon but a special Christmas balloon, on a polished wooden stick with a bright gold knob at the top. The mood of the subway car lightened just a bit as the boy entered the packed car with his family.

At the next stop, the heavy silence was shattered by the arrival of a fair-haired girl of about seven who was screaming as she clutched her father's jacket. She was a Down's Syndrome child. There was nothing anyone could do to comfort her, and everyone simply tried to pretend that she wasn't there. Everyone, that is, except the boy with the red balloon. The author writes:

"First, I noticed him standing on tiptoe, with a look of concern as he tried to identify the source of the crying. Then he disappeared, but the red balloon started making a hesitant journey down the carriage, held aloft on the stick above the heads of the crowd. When we reached the next stop and the doors opened, the little black boy appeared next to me and stood in front of the little girl. As even more people struggled into the carriage, he said, in quite a loud and grace voice: 'Hello, this is for you. Happy Christmas. Goodbye.' Then he disappeared into the crowd."

The author continues:

“The effect was instantaneous, electric and cumulative. Everyone heard the words and turned to look at what was happening. The little girl stopped crying, clutched the balloon and started to show it to her father, to me and to all her neighbors. That was what we had suddenly become: neighbors.

... It seemed astonishing at the time, that one small gesture could change the sense of everybody's grim and silent alienation into the sudden warmth of community... I don't know, of course, whether the boy was Christian, Muslim or agnostic, but what was clear was that he had quite simply given away to a complete stranger, what was at the moment his most precious possession.

We all had the sense that what had happened was important. How might the world be changed if everyone acted like this?”

What has happened here in Saint Ignatius Church is important. Stop and think for a moment how the world might be changed if every college graduate understood that their education was given to them so that their knowledge and skills could be given to others. To paraphrase the great anthropologist, Margaret Mead, never doubt the capability of good, committed persons to change the world; indeed, it's the only way the world changes.

And now I extend to you all the warmest of welcomes to the alumni association of the University of San Francisco. We will be in touch with you. God bless you.