

Commencement Remarks

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco
December 15, 2009 | St. Ignatius Church

I also congratulate those of you have graduated this afternoon/evening, as well as all of those who have supported you throughout your time on the Hilltop – parents, spouses, partners, friends & family. This is a proud moment for you and a huge relief for them.

It is customary for commencement speakers to point to an uncertain future. In this environment, that would be an understatement. Clearly, the economic tidal wave sweeping across the globe will leave none of us untouched in its wake. If your education has been costly, and it has, recall that it is the only investment you will ever make that can never be taken from you and its value only increases over time.

I also acknowledge and thank our wonderful staff and faculty who are the key to a USF Jesuit education that is, at once, academically rigorous and profoundly humanizing. I ask the faculty to please stand and be recognized.

You graduates have cause to celebrate: papers are all written, exams are passed, requirements fulfilled and diplomas in hand; but the ultimate gauge of the success of a USF education is not a grade or a diploma, but the quality of life that you choose to live – how and who you choose to be in the world.

As graduates, you are the value added to society by a USF Jesuit education. Over four and a half centuries ago, Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, wrote, “The Jesuit order hopes by means of its schools to pour into society persons capable of leavening it for good” – “persons capable of leavening society for good” – that’s you, and today/this evening we are “pouring” you into society in the hope that you will change it for the better. You are the leaven that Jesus spoke about in the story of the woman who used a miniscule particle of yeast to leaven three measures of flour into many large loaves of nourishing bread. When you feel overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude and complexity of the global challenges we face, do let the fact that you cannot do everything blind you to the something that you can do. I tell you what I was told by a Jesuit friend: that life is too short to sleep through and our culture is designed for dozing. Stay awake and stay at it.

A recent graduate, looking back at his years on the Hilltop, wrote: “my USF education helped me realize what I don’t want to do with my life. I don’t want to do something meaningless just because it offers security and a steady paycheck. I don’t want to sit at a desk all day in quiet desperation doing numerical calculations or answering the phone. I want to spend my life in the pursuit of things meaningful. I truly believe that we all have something great to offer this world. And I want to try my best to offer what I can. Maybe it will be simply raising a loving family and teaching high school English or maybe it will be as complex as being a tortured rock star. Maybe I’ll succeed or maybe I’ll fail. Then again, I think I can only truly fail by turning my back on everything I’ve learned here over the past four years: that knowledge without understanding and compassion is hollow. There are people I can serve and from whom I can learn and because of whom I can grow as a person. This is what USF taught me. And this is what I hope to build my life upon.” This graduate’s reflections recalled Jesus’ story about the person who built his house on sand with no foundation so that

when the river overflowed, his house was washed away. The story is not about engineering or architecture but about the consequences of the choices we make. May your USF education help you to chose well and wisely how and who you will be in the world because that will make all the difference – for you and the world. May God bless you and your efforts to lay a solid foundation for a satisfying life of meaning and purpose.

It was a joy for me to give you what may be your best-ever Christmas gift. And now I welcome you to the alumni association of the University of San Francisco. We will stay in touch with you.