

**1991 COMMENCEMENT
VALEDICTORY ADDRESS
SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE**

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Brother President, Members of the Boards of Trustees and Regents, distinguished faculty, Mr. Donahue, family, friends, and my classmates:

First, I want to thank the Class of '91 for giving me the opportunity to address you. You have given me so much life and love in the past four years and I thank all of you for that.

Some of you heard Father Martin Jenko speak when he was here last month. He was a hostage in Lebanon for 19 months. Prior to his kidnapping, while he was a missionary in India, Father Jenko experienced a state of deep despair. He said that he had joined the priesthood because he had a global vision to change the world. But one look around him at the severe, massively widespread poverty of India made him realize that his efforts could never make a conceivable difference in the lives of those people. It was during this time that Father Jenko found a young boy lying on the side of the road, filthy, and crippled by polio. He lifted the boy and carried him to the hospital the missionaries had set up, and within 6 months time, the boy was able to walk again. Father Jenko specifically remembered the experience of walking alongside this boy back to his village because he realized then, "If one child walks, all of India walks." His "impossible" goal to change the world became more real.

Graduating from college, we hear a lot about changing the world. Not just change for change sake, but the expectation that once we hold that diploma we can somehow make the world a better place. I think most of us have just ignored that idea not only because it sounds trite, but also because it sounds like an insurmountable task. We know full well that given the best

efforts of anyone here, we will not wake up tomorrow morning – I mean, afternoon – in a noticeably better world.

It doesn't have to be that difficult, though. As Father Jenko discovered, if you touch just one person's life, you have changed the world. From what I've seen of the Class of '91, a lot of you have already discovered that, through your generous volunteerism and your spirit of responsibility to others. Members of this class headed into the worst hit neighborhoods of the Bay Area following the earthquake and donated countless hours of their time during mid-terms helping the American Red Cross to sort donated clothing and prepare lunches in makeshift shelters. Some senior men have been part of a group of students taking leftover food from our cafeteria to the Oakland Catholic Worker. Others have done tutoring and organized after-school activities at a youth center in Oakland. A member of our class not only worked to educate the campus community about worldwide human rights abuses as head of the Students for Peace and Justice, but also was instrumental in getting a Women's Group started here to facilitate more equality between the sexes. One man sitting among you set up a campus-wide used clothing drive and picked up bundles of our excess to send to the poor of Mexico. A woman in this class gave up 10-15 hours every Saturday to rehabilitate sick and injured animals at the Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito. Another woman painted those new recycling cans that are all over central campus to try to save resources for future generations.

Of course, some of us have not dedicated ourselves to the needs of others, and have yet to find the joy of service. Graduation from college is the perfect opportunity to begin. I encourage you to do so. Soon.

As graduates of St. Mary's you are part of a history of dedication to the rights and dignity of others. In 1970, the killing of four student anti-war demonstrators at Kent State University enraged college students across the country. Following Princeton's lead in the East, St. Mary's College was the first school on the West Coast to organize a campus sit-in to protest the killings. 400 colleges nationwide eventually followed suit.

For almost twenty years, student members of MEChA have organized an annual Christmas party for children of migrant farm workers. And January Term Christian Service projects in the South Bronx, and the Brothers' mission in Tijuana have drawn students to service for several years.

This spirit of solidarity with oppressed peoples, of generous, selfless giving of time and commitment is a mark of St. Mary's graduates. As hundreds of thousands of college students across the country graduate

this month, we should ask ourselves: What sets these graduates of St. Mary's apart? It is a spirit of service that is fostered within us from our first days here. This College has given us a notion of success that has nothing to do with the salaries we earn or the possessions we accumulate; rather, our success is based on how we have bettered our little part of the world. Because as I work to better my part of the world and all of you work to better yours, we will begin to overlap, and then significant improvements will be accomplished.

St. Mary's College was founded on the ideal of sincere, generous service. The Lasallian tradition, along with the Catholic and liberal arts traditions of the College, are the life of this institution. The Lasallian tradition is named for the founder of the Christian Brothers, Saint John Baptist de La Salle, who dedicated his life to teaching the poor of France. We are now Lasallians. Central to the Lasallian tradition is the enlightenment that we all have an eternal destiny, that there is a spiritual dimension to our lives and it must be nourished. Lasallians speak of a spirit of zeal, of being on fire with love and service, that arises from their faith and the application of that faith in their dealings with others. As graduates of St. Mary's, we are now Lasallians. As part of that family, we share the Lasallian zeal, as well as the Lasallian responsibilities. From here forward we have a lifelong responsibility to preserve each other's dignity, and to cultivate the presence of God within ourselves and in others. If this sounds like a heavy burden to carry, that's because it is one. But just as you feel the weight of this responsibility, feel also joy in the knowledge that as Lasallians we have been entrusted to carry out this tradition.

Does this mean that you have to catch the next bus to El Salvador to lead a movement against political oppression, or fly to Bangladesh and distribute relief supplies? Not necessarily. As the bumper sticker says, "Think Globally. Act Locally." That action begins in our families and other personal relationships, by making generous acts of mercy to the people we live with and work with. Small acts of love that are given for no other reason than to cultivate God's, Adonai's, Allah's presence in your life require a real, concerted effort. And that effort of kindness is nurtured and developed on a larger scale, extending beyond our own little spheres into the lives of people who are not like ourselves, who we do not have daily contact with, who

we find easy to ignore. We are now Lasallians. That does not mean that writing a check to your pet charity will fulfill your responsibility. Catholics have always been great at making donations, and relying on others to take care of their responsibility. As Lasallians, though, we are called to *specific*, active service, to getting our hands dirty. We have a responsibility to back up our claims with evidence of our conviction.

We must have the courage to speak out against injustice, to make it be known that we will not tolerate racism, we will not tolerate sexism, we will not tolerate homophobia. We must acknowledge – in truth – that all are equal members of the human family and must be treated as such.

This is not optional. As Christians, we have accepted the charge of Jesus Christ to live in a spirit of service, and to respect each human being – no exceptions – as a sister or brother. This is not an exclusively Christian ideal by any means. This transcends creed and denomination. The Dalai Lama of Tibet, on a recent visit to the Bay Area said, "It is time for us to live out our universal responsibility - nation to nation, and human to human."

There is nothing wrong with working for success and producing profit in the careers that our degrees will award US. But as Pope John Paul II cautioned in his latest encyclical, our pursuit of profit must be tempered with charity and justice. If our financial gains are not balanced with a constantly growing spirituality, we will find our lives sorely lacking. As Lasallians, we must not let our zeal, our fire of love and service, subside.

We don't have to look far to see what human greed and selfishness has done to our world, from horrific human rights abuses in China, Central America, South Africa, and elsewhere, to extreme poverty in every part of the world, to a devastation of global resources. As college graduates, we have our proverbial work cut out for us. We just must never give up on the task because it seems impossible. It begins right here, today. If you want that diploma to mean something, make it mean something truly significant, that you now have the education and the Lasallian spirit to right some human wrongs. As people of worth, of dignity, people who have been redeemed and are loved, people who have destinies, we can touch others' lives in a myriad of ways, and that my sisters, my brothers, will change the world.