

DeSales University

Commencement Speech

17 May 2014

It's a great honor for me to receive the *Doctorate in Humane Letters* from the DeSales University. This is truly an unexpected and surprising recognition, for which I sincerely thank the Board of the University and the President Fr. O'Connor. This recognition is not only unexpected but also undeserved, considering, among other things, my poor knowledge of the English language, which you are called to endure for the next ten minutes. Please, accept my apologies at the onset!

In looking for the reasons for this honor, I think that it isn't hard to find them in my nearly forty-year-long service at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, one of the Dicasteries of the Holy See that was created after the Second Vatican Council, as a result of the Council itself. This has been a very rich and absolutely special—although not unique—experience, which has allowed me to accompany, almost personally, “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age”¹ and especially of the poor. I have been able to do this from a privileged situation. This,

¹ Ecumenical Council Vatican II, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, no. 1.

indeed, is the situation of those who, in the service of the Pope and the universal Church, and precisely in virtue of this service, are in daily contact with what is happening in every part of the world in the field of justice and peace. In this respect, I received, in the course of these long years, direct testimonies from Christians and non-Christians who are active at every level of the Church, in national and international institutions, in the world of work and in civil society. In the course of these decades straddling two centuries, during which, with the phenomenon of globalization, the world and its problems have changed so much and so quickly, I have, in the midst of all, been able to identify a permanent feature: promoting the cause of justice and peace ultimately means defending the human person and his or her true rights, that is, rights that have a foundation in his or her duties as a creature to whom the Creator has given everything, beginning with life itself, and which also have their origin in Nature and Reason. If the problem is not put in these terms, then it's impossible to talk about social justice or about the right to sustainable development and the related issues—which currently are, for example, access to water or the hoarding of land or mining resources. It is also not possible to talk about peace and about politics as the construction of the common good through the democratic system. In fact, if the latter is based

only on the numbers of the majority and not on what is intrinsically good for the human person, that system can turn into a perverse one.²

As *Commencement Speaker*, I could continue talking about these issues, since I have been given the freedom to do so, but Cardinal Peter Turkson, the President of the Pontifical Council, has advised me to keep my speech short! Now, since I have so many young people before me, I would like to share with you some of the beliefs that I have gained over the years. Yet, being neither a professor nor a mother, please accept these few ideas as coming from an aunt and a godmother—which I indeed am. That may perhaps be easier for you!

Here, then, are some of my beliefs that I would like to submit for your consideration.

Believing in eternal life or not. The difference in the lives of each of us is made by the fact of believing in eternal life or not. Everything seen in the perspective of eternity assumes different contours and becomes meaningful. A historical event considered as oriented toward the boundaries of eternity is judged by a distinct yardstick. This is true also for every life. There are, for example, particularly troubled lives, marked by

² Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the Parliament of the Federal Republic of Germany*, Reichstag in Berlin, 22 September 2011.

disease, spiritual suffering or adverse circumstances—in a word, characterized by failure—and, yet, when considered in relation to a life that does not end here, these lives also have value and can find their deeper meaning. Of course, I say this not to invite to fatalism or disengagement, because a good position, in eternal life, has to be earned! This is true especially for those who have received, without any special merit, more talents than the others.

Not only what can be scientifically demonstrated is true. We are living in the era of science and technology, and many of you have studied the sciences and will enter into careers in these fields. I admire you a lot, as I admire and rejoice in the progress that science and technology have allowed mankind to make. Nevertheless, I would like to express another of my deep convictions: not only what can be scientifically demonstrated is true.³ I say this not only to gain your sympathy, since I'm simply not scientifically and technologically gifted, but because due consideration should be given to the truth, that cannot be demonstrated, of values such as responsibility, honesty, humility, and mutual respect, which are also mentioned on the website of your university, where these words glide on

³ This is one of the favorite topics of the Pope emeritus Benedict XVI; cf., for example, his *Address in Regensburg*, on 12 September 2006, or the *Angelus* of 28 January 2007.

the home page over eye-catching pictures. It's necessary to consider also, if not above all, friendship and love of neighbor, which is much more than a feeling; it is, rather, "an elementary ardor that nourishes life" as the young Dutch Jew Etty Hillesum wrote just a few days before her death in Auschwitz.⁴ In fact, without friendship and love of neighbor, all possible achievement in the field of science and technology will not, by themselves, make humanity progress.

The truth is complex. I have yet another conviction that I will share with you, and that is acquired as the years pass: the awareness of just how complex the truth is. Especially when we are young - or at least this is what I thought when I was your age - we think that everything is black or white, that everything is either good or bad, and that some people are right and others wrong. Now, thinking in this way is inherently positive because it implies that we believe in objective truth, and this, in times of moral relativism, is much deserving! However, it's also true that the reality in which we live, especially in our days, is getting more and more complicated, and that it's getting increasingly difficult to make a discernment in the social, political, economic situation, because so many

4 E. Hillesum, *Lettere 1942-1943*, Milano: Adelphi Edizioni, 2004, pp. 114-5.

aspects have to be taken into account, and not only the technical or scientific ones but also historical and cultural aspects, for which we need to resort to multiple disciplines. Then again, even personal behavior or everyday situations—related, more often than not, to the lives of families—are motivated by a mixture of components that has to be taken into account, if we want to freely evaluate them in accordance with the truth, and consequently with justice and charity. So, as one of my old professor used to say: if the solution is easy, you can be sure that it's wrong!

Do your best in your own state of life and learn to look back. After completing your studies, many of you will embark on a career or continue to study, responding in this way to your personal vocation. Some of you have perhaps always known what they wanted to do: there are those who have a passion for mathematics, others are born artists or craftsmen, some want to be engineers, while yet others want to be missionaries, and there are those who want to write books or have an innate sense for business, and finally there are also those who, like me, have never felt a particular vocation. I would like to make to the latter a suggestion, which to some extent also applies to the former: move along with the circumstances,

always trying to do good and avoid evil; and every once in a while look back to consider carefully what has happened to you in your life. You will see that in everything there is a logic, an itinerary, sometimes a very bumpy one, that God has planned for each of us, even for those who do not experience a precise vocation. God has done this with the help of our beloved ones, of those who love us, protect us and pray for us. This is so, even when they are no longer there: if the seed does not die, it does not bear fruit.

The importance of the word. Finally, if there is something that has always impressed me in the human being, it's the link between the perfection of his or her body and intelligence, his or her spirit and soul. Now, this connection is due to the word, which is what gives human beings the ability to express themselves and so to enter into a relationship with others. When you think about it, being able to name objects and people, being able to “translate” in words reasonings, abstract ideas, and feelings, is such an extraordinary fact that it leaves you awestruck. The believers can't help seeing a Mind, a higher Wisdom, behind this fact. Maybe that's why I like to write always trying to look for the most appropriate words, and why what I do best is to write books for kids! I like

it especially because, since I write in rhymes, I found out that to look for rhyming words for storytelling is a very very amusing game!

Yet, of course, my passion and my amazement before the word and the human being's ability to express himself in words leads me to make a more serious consideration. Perhaps it's precisely because of the exceptional nature of this human capacity that the Word—with a capital "W"—is so important for the Christian religion. This is precisely why God creates through the Word, why Jesus Christ "is the God's final Word to humanity" and Jesus Christ alone has the words of eternal life, as says St. Peter, the great sinner, who is capable of repenting, crying and asking for forgiveness and accepting it.

Coming from Rome, there's no other way for me to conclude my speech than by inviting all of you to imitate St. Peter!

Flaminia Giovanelli
Under Secretary
Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace