

## Commencement Address

Delivered by the Very Rev Thomas Hopko, Dean Emeritus of S Vladimir's Seminary, on May 19, 2007

Your Beatitude Metropolitan Herman. [Your Eminence&hellip;. Your Grace &hellip;.]

Father Dean Erickson, fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, and most especially the honored members of the Class of 2007: Glory to Jesus Christ!

I am delighted to speak to you at this commencement ceremony today. This honor is especially significant for me since I came to this school as a student exactly a half century ago, in September 1957.

For forty of the last fifty years I was officially connected with St. Vladimir's. I was a student for six years, and, after five years as a pastor in Ohio, I returned to the seminary where I served as a teacher and pastor for thirty-four years until my retirement five years ago. This school gave me my spiritual life and my spiritual family. It also gave me my wife, and our children and grandchildren, for which I am inexpressibly grateful.

Father Erickson and the seminary faculty asked me to tell you today what I believe to be the most important things that I learned in the last fifty years. They asked me to do this in about twenty minutes. So what can I tell you in my remaining nineteen?

The first and most important thing is that we are boundlessly loved by God who blesses us to love Him boundlessly in return.

I can also tell you that we can love God as He loves us only by faith and grace, by His own divine power, and that we prove our love for Him by loving everyone and everything, beginning with our worst enemies, just as He does, with the very same love with which He loves us, the very Love that He Himself is.

And I can tell you that being loved by God, and loving Him in return, is the greatest joy given to creatures, and that without it there is no real and lasting happiness for humanity.

And I can also tell you, alas, that such loving is always a violent, brutal and bloody affair.

The God who is merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, who gives us his divine life and peace and joy forever, is first of all the Divine Lover who wounds His beloved, and then hides from her, hoping to be sought and found. He is the Father who chastens and disciplines His children. He is the Vinekeeper who cuts and prunes His vines so that they bear much fruit. He is the Jeweler who burns His gold in His divine fire so that it would be purged of all impurities. And He is the Potter who continually smashes and refashions and re-bakes His muddy clay so that it can be the earthen vessel that He wants it to be, capable of bearing His own transcendent grace and power and glory and peace.

I learned that all of these terrible teachings of the Holy Scriptures and the saints are real and true. And so I became convinced that God's Gospel in His Son Jesus is really and truly God's final act on earth. It is the act in which God's Word is now not simply inscribed in letters on pages of parchment, but is personally incarnate as a human being in his own human body and blood. And so I became convinced of the truth of all truths: that the ultimate revelation of God as Love and the ultimate revelation of humanity's love for God, are to be found in the bloody corpse of a dead Jew, hanging on a cross between two criminals, outside the walls of Jerusalem, executed at the hands of Gentiles, by the instigation of his own people's leaders, in the most painful, cursed, shameful and wretched death that a human being -- and especially a Jew -- can possibly die.

So to the measure that we are honest and faithful, and try to keep God's commandments, and repent for our failures and sins, we come to know, and to know ever more clearly and deeply as time goes by, what we have learned here at St. Vladimir's. We come to know by experience that the Word of God (ho logos tou theou) is always and necessarily the word of the Cross (ho logos tou stavrou). And -- in language befitting a commencement ceremony at an Orthodox graduate school of theology -- we come to see that true theologia is always stavrologia. And real orthodoxia is always paradoxia. And that there is no theosis without kenosis.

Theology is stavrology and Orthodoxy is paradoxy: the almighty God reveals Himself as an infinitely humble, totally self-emptying and absolutely ruthless and relentless lover of sinners. And men and women made in His image and likeness must be the same. Thus we come to see that as there is no resurrection without crucifixion, there is also no sanctification without suffering, no glorification without humiliation; no deification without degradation; and no life without death. We learn, in a word, the truth of the early Christian hymn recorded in Holy Scripture:

If we have died with him, we shall also live with him;

if we endure with him, we shall also reign with him;

if we deny him, he will also deny us;

if we are faithless, he remains faithful &ndash;  
for he cannot deny himself. (2Tim 2.11-13)

According to the Gospel, therefore, those who wish to be wise are constrained to be fools. Those who would be great become small. Those who would be first put themselves last. Those who rule, serve as slaves. Those who would be rich make themselves poor. Those who want to be strong become weak. And those who long to find and fulfill themselves as persons deny and empty themselves for the sake of the Gospel. And, finally, and most important of all, those who want really to live have really to die. They voluntarily die, in truth and in love, to everyone and everything that is not God and of God.

And so, once again, if we have learned anything at all in our theological education, spiritual formation and pastoral service, we have learned to beware, and to be wary, of all contentment, consolation and comfort before our co-crucifixion in love with Christ. We have learned that though we can know about God through formal theological education, we can only come to know God by taking up our daily crosses with patient endurance in love with Jesus. And we can only do this by faith and grace through the Holy Spirit's abiding power.

When we speak about "taking up our crosses" and "bearing our burdens" in imitation of Christ, by the power of God's Holy Spirit, we also learn by painful experience that the crosses we take up and the burdens we bear must be those that God gives us, and not those that we ourselves choose and desire. Thus we become convinced that when our burdens are unbearable and our crosses crush us in joyless misery -- and we become dark, depressed, despondent and desperate -- the reasons are evident. Either we are choosing our own crosses and burdens, and rejecting those sent to us by our merciful God whose thoughts and ways are not ours; or we are attempting to carry our crosses and bear our burdens by our own powers, and not by God's grace and strength given to us by Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Church.

And so we come to another conviction: The Church, the communion of faith and love (as St. Ignatius of Antioch defined it: *henosis agapis kai pisteos*), the community of saints who are Christ's own very "members" as his body and bride, is essential to our human being and life. We cannot be human beings &ndash; still less, Christians and saints &ndash; by ourselves. We need God and his wise and faithful servants. We need God's commandments and living examples of their fulfillment. We need the Church's scriptures, sacraments, services and saints. And we need one another. As Tertullian said centuries ago, "One Christian is no Christian." And as the Russian proverb puts it, "The only thing that a person can do alone is perish." Like it or not, we are "members of one another" in God. If we like it, it is life and paradise. If we reject it, it is death and hell.

So, in the end, because everything is about the true God and Christ and the Holy Spirit, and the Church's scriptures, sacraments, services and saints, and God's love, wisdom, truth and power, so too, therefore, is everything about the most important and Godlike reality of all, what St. John Climakos called "triple-holy humility": the humility of God himself that cannot be defined but can only be seen and adored in the crucified Christ, and in those who, by faith and grace, are co-crucified with Him.

Thus, if we have become convinced of anything at all as Orthodox Christians, we are convinced that human beings are not autonomous. The proclamation and defense of human autonomy is the most insidious lie of our day, especially here in North America, and in the Western and Westernized worlds generally. Human beings are by nature heteronomous. Another law (heteros nomos) is always working in our minds and members. This "other law" is either the law of God, the law of Christ, the law of the Holy Spirit, the law of liberty and life that can only be recognized, received and realized by holy humility, or it is the law of sin and death. (cf. Romans 7-8) When the law within us is God's law, then we are who we really are, and we are sane and free. But when that law is the law of sin and death, then we are not ourselves, and we are insane, enslaved and sold to sin.

More than fifteen hundred years ago St. Anthony the Great declared that "a time is coming when people will go mad, and when they see someone who is not mad, they will attack him saying, 'You are mad, you are not like us.'" (Saying 25)

It may well be that the time that St. Anthony foresaw is now upon us, or at least is rapidly approaching, at least in the West. And because of what we have learned, we know what we have to do about it. The same St. Anthony, with all holy people, has told us. I urge you, and, if I could, I would command you, to read St. Anthony's thirty-eight sayings in the Sayings of the Desert Fathers. Everything we need to know in order to live is there for us in its simplest and clearest form.

Abba Anthony first tells us that when we are plagued by whirling thoughts (logismoi) and worn down by an overwhelming sense of meaninglessness and futility (akedia), which we will be in this sinful world, we must simply and diligently work and pray, by pure devotion and sheer obedience. We must pay attention to ourselves and mind our own business. We must do our work, and let God -- and other people -- do theirs.

He also tells us that whoever we are, we should always have God before our eyes; and whatever we do, we should always do according to the testimony of the Holy Scriptures; and wherever we are, we should not easily leave that place.

He further tells us (with his friend Abba Pambo) not to trust in our own righteousness, not to worry about the past, and to guard our mouths and our stomachs. He tells us to take responsibility for our own behavior, and to expect to be ferociously

tempted to our very last breath. He tells us that there is no salvation for us without trial and temptation, and that without being tested, no person can be healed, illumined and perfected. He tells us that each one of us has our own unique life, that no two people are the same, and that each of us has to be the person that God made us to be (as Fr Paul Lazor, my dearest friend, so often says): where we are, when we are, with whom we are, from whom we are, and such as we are, according to God's inscrutable providence.

Anthony also tells us, as do all the saints, that our life and our death begin and end with our fellow human beings. He insists that if we have gained our neighbor, we have gained our God, but if we have scandalized our neighbor, we have sinned against Christ. He says that all of our ascetical disciplines, including our scholarly studies, are means to an end; they are not ends in themselves. The end is discernment (diakrisis) and dispassion (apatheia) and the knowledge (epignosis) of God through keeping His commandments, the first and greatest of which is love. And he teaches that our only hope to escape the countless snares of this world that seek to enslave us is found in one thing alone: Christ-like humility, with "a broken, contrite and humble heart," as the psalmist says, being our sole "sacrifice acceptable to God." (Psalm 51.17)

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I saw all the snares the enemy spreads out over all the world"; Abba Anthony said, "and I cried out groaning, "What can get through from such snares?" Then I heard a voice saying to me, "Humility";" (Saying 7)

An extended explanation of St. Anthony's teachings, and those of our Christian saints generally, may be found in a book published in 1867 in Russia. It is by St. Ignaty Brianchaninoff, and is called in English *The Arena: An Offering to Contemporary Monasticism*. I am convinced that every committed Christian, surely every seminary graduate, should feel obliged to read this book, meditating especially on its first part about the absolute necessity of keeping God's evangelical commandments (evangeliskii zapovedy), accompanied by St Ignaty's dire warnings to religious people -- especially those with theological educations and ascetical inclinations and mystical desires-- who may fail to keep the commandments of the Gospel because they accept the lie that they are "not like other people"; as they surrender to the delusion -- the fiercest and most destructive of all delusions for religious people -- that they are especially gifted, zealous and illumined. For, as my beloved Professor Serge Verhovskoy never tired of warning: "The worst of all sins is the lie, and the worst of all lies is the lie about God, and worst of all lies about God is the lie about God and me."

I would also recommend today, and, again, if I could, I would also insist that all thinking Christians, and surely all seminary students and graduates, be required to read one other book that contains, in my view, the most incisive analysis of what has happened to humanity in the last fifty years. It is C. S. Lewis's prophetic masterpiece written in 1944 called *The Abolition of Man*. This slender volume should be read slowly, methodically and carefully many times over. Parts of it, which I have read more than ten times, are still unclear to me. But its main point is crystal clear.

Lewis says that for human beings to see, know, love, adore and offer fitting thanksgiving for all that is good, true and beautiful in human life, and so to remain fully and truly human, they must possess and cultivate the uniquely human faculty that differentiates them from angels and beasts, and, we must also add today, from the artificial intelligence of electronic technology. Lewis calls this faculty the "Tao." He says that it may also be called the "image of God" or the "spark of divinity" or the Law or the Logos or the Heart. (Today, if he knew Orthodox literature, he might have also said that it may be called the Nous.) Whatever one calls it, it is the faculty whereby human beings intuit and contemplate the basic truths of human being and life that ground all ratiocination, discourse and disputation. Lewis claimed in 1944 that if the methods of education prevailing in the schools of his day prove to be successful, this uniquely human faculty will be obliterated, and human beings as we have known them will no longer exist. It will literally be "the abolition of man."

I am convinced that what Lewis foresaw has happened, and is still happening with ever more catastrophic consequences, in our Western and Westernized worlds. It happens that men and women who once were human are simply no longer so. They have become nothing but minds and matter, brains and bodies, computers and consumers, calculators and copulators, constructors and cloners who believe that they are free and powerful but who are in fact being destroyed by the very "Nature" that they wish to conquer as they are enslaved to an oligarchy of "Conditioners" who are themselves enslaved and destroyed by their insane strivings to define, design and manipulate a world and a humanity bereft of the God who boundlessly loves them.

Others have seen and said similar things to what C. S. Lewis saw and said: Fyodor Dostoevsky, Karl Stern, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Thomas Merton, the alleged atheist Anton Chekhov, and my most beloved Flannery O'Connor are among my personal favorites.

The challenge and joy — and the pain and discomfort — of reading such extraordinarily gifted people as these, whom the members of the Class of 2007 have most likely not read for their courses at St. Vladimir's (but who knows what the new curriculum will bring?), still lies before them. And this tells us why this present graduation ceremony is called a "commencement." It is a beginning of new things -- many wonderful and challenging and convincing new things -- that we wish for the men and women completing their studies at St. Vladimir's Seminary this day.

And this brings us to the last conviction that I may share with you today: Every day, by God's grace, brings us a new beginning. We are all always "commencing" a new spiritual adventure in living and loving as God lives and loves. It is never over. And it is never too late to start anew.

I congratulate the Class of 2007 for their remarkable achievements. I congratulate their families, friends and teachers, and all who cared for them during their time at the seminary. I pray that the Merciful Lord will bless, guide and protect

them in every way as they &ldquo;commence&rdquo; this new stage of their lives. And I thank God and the seminary faculty for the privilege and honor of addressing them, and you all, here today.