



COLLEGE OF MOUNT SAINT VINCENT

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Remarks to Graduates, 2018

Graduates of the College, like each of us, like everything, each word in every language has an origin or history. For example, the word terabyte comes from the German word for monster: monster bit. The word aghast means frightened by a ghost.

Languages can be very different from each other. The Greek word for truth meant “that which is no longer hidden or obscure.” In Latin the word truth, *veritas*, has its origin in law, authority, and fear. Our English word truth comes from German and means faithful or loyal, as in faithful to a contract.

The translation of these different words for truth in different languages can change completely what we mean by the same sentence.

The Western Church used Latin. So when St. John quotes God, saying: “I am the Way and the Truth and the Life,” in Latin it sounds like “I am the Way, the fearful authority, the law, and the Life.” We can hear in Latin much of the Old Testament where God’s anger and power can seem capricious and terrible.

The Eastern Church keeps the original Greek. In Greek the same sentence reads, “I am the Way, I am no longer hidden or obscure, I am the Life.” How much gentler and reassuring this version of God sounds to us. In Greek, we think we hear the gentleness and comfort of the New Testament.

And if we go to the German origins of the English word for truth, we hear, “I am the Way, I am loyalty and faithfulness, I am the Life.” Think about how much these different definitions or conceptions of truth shift how we might understand power and responsibility.

We are proud that you are graduating from Mount Saint Vincent. You can be proud, as well. You are graduating from an extraordinary institution—extraordinary because your faculty and you do not resort to simplicity, false clarity, slogans, or self-deception.

I know many of you. I know you see that truth can simultaneously carry all of these connotations—that at the same time, truth can mean no longer hidden, can mean authoritative, can mean faithful and loyal. And I know you see also, that all of these connotations share something: truth always refers to some standard, commitment, or faithfulness beyond oneself.

Truth is not the same as perception.
Truth is not the ego writ large.
Truth is not self-indulgent.

Of course, we can try to be truthful and be in error. We can be sincerely wrong. But as Reinhold Niebhr wrote: “you cannot pray a lie.” This is not a post-truth world. A lie is a lie.

In graduating from this great College, you know it is your responsibility to see that every human being is created equal. You know it is your responsibility to see that every human being has dignity and worth. You know that you are called to see the face of God in everyone you meet. And you know that we all share the obligation to serve God in the ways we serve each other.

Graduates of the College of Mount Saint Vincent, you are servant leaders. You each have a destiny. Corazan Aquino, our single most prominent alumna, lived these truths. She had modesty. She had strength. She had courage. She led a revolution. She led the restoration of democracy and the rule of law. She sought social justice and service to the poor.

Now, a generation later, the Philippines is again led by a murderous, lying, authoritarian, a man who has weaponized the internet, a man who claims to champion those in need while subverting the rule of law and the institutions of democracy.

The power of this murderous authoritarian does not mean Corazon Aquino lived or died in vain. Rather his example, like the example of other tyrants summons each of us to greatness—whether our lives are modest or grand, whether we live here or in the Philippines.

As Americans, as people committed to the equality of democracy, we still each have the liberty and responsibility to choose virtue. We each have the responsibility and choice of honoring every soul we meet. We each have the responsibility and obligation to serve God and each other. We each have the responsibility of Truth.

As graduates of the College of Mount Saint Vincent, you have the courage, judgement, and character, as well as the goodness, discipline, and knowledge, to stand for what is right, to stand for what is beautiful and great, what is true, and to serve God and each other.

Thank you for these years together. It’s been a privilege to be with you.