

Student Lasallian Commencement Address
December 19, 2004
Presented by Ayanna A. Collins

Good morning, members of the Board of Trustees, Brother James, honored guests, faculty, staff, fellow graduates, parents, family and friends.

Picture this, a swarm of people, none of whom looked familiar. They were all moving things in and out of cars, trucks and rooms. Many had tear-filled eyes, and even more showed anxiety on their faces. As I looked around, I saw people on balconies hammering lofts for beds, and even more people milling about, looking for what to do next. No, this was not a dream; rather, it was the scene of Freshman Move-In Day. We had already registered for classes, with teachers we did not know, and we began to get our first taste of reality: high school had ended and it was on to a new and unfamiliar world.

As I came into Lewis, I was not sure what to expect. I am not Catholic, but I had come to a “Catholic and Lasallian University.” So many times I wondered what that meant, and what it had to do with my life. But over the past four years, I have learned by observing the actions of others what it means to be Lasallian in word and in deed.

One of the main things that I became involved with at Lewis was the Ministry Center. I would often find myself in the Chapel volunteering for one of the programs that University Ministry offered. And, in looking back, I realize that I learned so much more from volunteering than I ever could have given. I can remember working on Hunger Week each year. I would walk beside the signs that stated facts about the poor and destitute in our world, and it challenged me to not become complacent to their cause.

I also enjoyed the Koinonia retreat, a student-led weekend that focused on building a sense of community, and loving my neighbor as I love God. Some of my fondest memories come from being involved in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. I think back to being a freshman and sophomore, and spending countless hours talking in the cafeteria. Most of the conversations were ridiculous, and full of jokes; and many included Kristine, the spunky cafeteria lady. But the conversations I remember most were about Christian and Catholic theology and doctrine. It was these conversations that began to explain to me what Catholic and Lasallian meant.

On top of that, I began to find myself getting acquainted with the Brothers and other people that exemplified their faith. I became curious to know, what motivated these people? How could the Brothers commit their lives to poverty, and even celibacy, for the sake of others? What did it mean to believe in something so strongly that I would willingly give of myself for others, and actually enjoy it?! As I began to put all the pieces together, I began to see the pattern of Faith in Action. All of these people I had observed—whether they were the Brothers, my professors, my coaches, or my fellow classmates—were people that not only believed in God, but that also believed they were capable of changing the world through His help.

Due to the nature of our society, it is easy for us to become blind to injustices. It is also tempting for us to think that our limited contribution cannot make a difference. But, I agree with Margaret Mead, who said, “Never believe that a few caring people can’t change the world. For, indeed, that’s all who ever have.” In whatever you do, and in whatever job, city, and neighborhood you find your future, let it be one that is changed by your presence. Whether it is the courtroom or the corner office, the hospital bed working with patients, or the classroom working with lesson plans, I urge you to make someone’s world a better place.

As you close this chapter of your life, I hope that you will put your faith into action. I hope that you will continue in the Lasallian tradition of promoting justice for the underprivileged and underrepresented in our society. There is an ancient quote that simply states, “It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.” I hope that this will be said of me, of you, and of this generation—that we chose to light candles, instead of merely recognizing social problems, and were truly part of the solution. My prayer for all of us is that we will light our candles, and let God’s presence be the fuel to sustain our light as we go forward.

In closing, I exhort you, as M.K. Gandhi said, to become the change you wish to see in the world! Our features are not certain, as few things in life ever are. But with God’s help, I am sure that we will overcome whatever challenges we face. My prayer for all of you is that you will ignite your candles, and refuse to be conquered by the darkness. God bless and Congratulations!