

Student Lasallian Commencement Address

December 2019

Presented by: William Riley

Good morning, members of the Board of Trustees, Dr. Livingston, honored guests, faculty, staff, fellow graduates, parents, family and friends. It is truly a pleasure to be speaking with you today. While I know that many of us graduates have already moved on to that next step in life, whether that is beginning our career in the workforce, going to graduate school, taking a gap year, or something else, your presence here today is a testament to your resilience in spite of disappointment and setbacks. For many the road might not have been easy, however, I am glad you made it in spite of everything. I am glad WE made it in spite of everything.

Today I would like to speak about our overcoming challenges when everything seemed to be against us, fulfilling our vocation or calling in life motivated by our passions, and then ultimately taking the skills and knowledge that we obtained through a Lasallian education to live our life in the spirit of Association.

I believe it's safe to say that we all have experienced our own troubles, problems, and challenges, but it's always important to sit back and reflect on the challenges that we have faced in life, and what has led us to this moment of our life. There were assignments that we had to do, papers we had to write, late nights and all-nighters that we endured. I am referring to the commuter students who would stay in the library for countless hours to ensure they had a quiet place to study, and the residents who would risk it all to go to the C-store for some Oreos,

despite it being 0 degrees outside. But just for a moment, I would like you to think about times in your life that were big challenges. We have all had them. Perhaps it was a serious illness, a death in the family, or the loss of a job. It is interesting to note how we remember the issue or problem, but especially how we felt before, during, and after they were over. For example, we can remember our first days of college and the questions we had. We were a little scared of what college would be like. Would we make new friends? Would we like our roommate? Would classes be too hard for us to handle? Would we be able to handle going to school and working? I know much has transpired since we first asked those questions; however, look at us today. The long-awaited day is finally here. We had to wait a little longer than most.....but we made it. I know there are some who graduated and unfortunately cannot attend today, but I hope they are watching online or will see the video of our ceremony later because this is truly something for all of us to celebrate.

We are truly at a privileged point in our lives. We can currently say that we all have our long-awaited bachelor's degree. Until recently, I didn't really consider how fortunate we are to have our degrees. Did you know that only 6.7% of the entire world's population has a college degree? 6.7%! So, my question now is, what will we do with that education? Most of us spent at least four years obtaining our degree,--something really precious and valuable because of the numerous opportunities that it will open for us now and in the future. Not only opportunities regarding jobs or things to advance our career, even though that is important, but opportunities to make a difference in the lives of others. (Pause) How will we use our education along with our gifts and talents to help others?

I remember back in 2015, I was blessed with the opportunity to attend the first Civil Rights Pilgrimage sponsored by Lewis. This was a journey that took a small group of students, led by faculty member, Dr. Dennis Cremin, and ministry staff member, Sean Ruane, to learn about the 1960's Civil Rights Movement in the southern portion of the US. One of the first places we went on this pilgrimage was Memphis, Tennessee, where we had the opportunity to stop at Lewis' sister school, Christian Brothers University, and speak to Brother Terrance Mclaughlin, a Christian Brother. Brother Terrance is 96 years old, and he is known for having integrated the first school in Memphis when he was principal of Christian Brothers High School back in 1963. During the time that the Lewis group was in Memphis, we had a chance to sit down with him and listen to his story of doing what's right despite numerous obstacles; we were also able to ask him questions. Because of how much time we spent as a group talking about our personal calling in life; I will never forget when one of us asked Brother Terrence about his vocation and what he believes he was ultimately called to do. His response to that question caught everyone by surprise. He said, "He didn't know." He then went on to explain that the majority of people do not have a single calling, but multiple calls that can change over time. Essentially, we are supposed to adapt and use our gifts to help others based on where we are called, despite the challenges. Each and every one of us have our own individual ways in which we can best serve others. While it may take a large amount of courage, determination, and a certain amount of risk, now is always the best time to do the right thing. And we are called to do just that.

While there were many things that I learned on that initial Civil Rights Pilgrimage, one of the biggest was experiencing the core value of Association. As I think back, something that is still captivating to me is how when we left Lewis to explore the South on that pilgrimage, we were

complete strangers. However, when we came back after only a week, we were incredibly good friends. This was the first time that I had ever experienced anything like this, but certainly not the last. In fact, later on that year, I had the awesome opportunity to attend the Lasallian Global Leadership and Understanding Conference in Rome, and to my surprise, the same thing happened. We started out as strangers from eight different countries, but we left realizing that we were all part of the same Lasallian family. Many of us still keep in contact even today, and despite our differences in nationalities, wealth, race, gender, religion, etc. we recognized our common humanity and realized that the things that divide us are so miniscule compared to the love that unites us. From both of these experiences I would be lying to you if I said that there were not times where people butted heads, and disagreed tremendously. However, once everyone remembered our common goal of learning from and understanding each other, we knew that there was nothing in the world that we could not conquer together.

So we have overcome obstacles despite the challenges that we faced, we are trying to discover our vocation using our passion and determination, and ultimately striving to make a difference in the spirit of Association. On this day of great celebration and joy, I encourage you to treat others with respect, to continue working hard, and not be afraid to take a positive first step. The Reverend Dr. King reminds us, “If you can’t fly then run, if you can’t run then walk, if you can’t walk then crawl, but whatever you do you have to keep moving forward.” So, class of 2018, whatever you do in the future, let’s remember to keep moving forward. Let’s go change the world, one step at a time. Thank you, God bless you, and may God bless the Lewis University Class of 2018.