

May 13, 2007

Commencement Address to St. Bonaventure University Class of 2007

by Dominic Monti, OFM

Esteemed President, Sr. Margaret; Chairman McGinley and the other members of our devoted Board of Trustees; distinguished faculty colleagues; dedicated staff; proud families and friends of the graduates; and last, but most especially, the members of the Bonaventure class of 2007:

Before all else, congratulations to you. After all, you are the reason all of us are here this beautiful day. You should bask in its rays. This is your day, a time to relish the fruits of your hard work over these past years.

The fact that today is also Mother's Day is a reminder, though, that your successes reflect more than just your own efforts – that in large measure they are due to those special people – your parents – who have loved you, sustained and supported you, and yes, when necessary, put up with you. No doubt today, they are proud, relieved, perhaps even broke – but then they would undoubtedly tell you that you are worth it! So sometime today, make a quiet moment to tell them how proud you are of them.

Your teachers also share this occasion with you in a special way. For them it marks the culmination of a joint venture. Their dedication, scholarship, and commitment have served to challenge you, setting before you a standard by which your efforts and successes could be measured. For you, I publicly salute and thank them. I know your respect and admiration for these men and women to be heartfelt and enduring.

I am deeply honored to have been invited here to be with you on this special occasion. Not long after Sister Margaret had knocked me off my feet by asking me to offer these remarks, I confided to one of your classmates whom I am proud to call my friend that I had an inside scoop on the guy who was going to give the commencement address this year. “Who is it”?!!, he entreated. “Anderson Cooper? Elliott Spitzer? Michael Buble? Ryan Seacrest?” “Noooooooooooo,” I said, looking in the mirror and saying to myself, “I’m not even my own dream speaker, Emeril Lagasse.” I did think at first that given the general practice of American universities to invite some prominent figure – a political or business leader, a media or entertainment celebrity, like one of the “Fab Four” my friend mentioned - to address the graduating class, I was a rather in-house choice, a perhaps all-too-familiar face for the job.

But then Sr. Margaret explained that as St. Bonaventure University prepares to celebrate its 150th anniversary in 2008, the Trustees had decided that this year's commencement ceremony would pay tribute in a special way its Franciscan heritage – both the tradition and the people who profess to embody it – us friars – who in many ways have been this school's life-blood for the past century and a half. “Who better than you,” she said, “to talk about that?”

“Who better”? As usual, Sr. Margaret’s logic was hard to dispute. After all, I have been a friar for many years now, and I have devoted a good deal of that time studying and teaching the Franciscan tradition. Furthermore, there is something quite appropriate for me personally joining you at this event, for this year I mark the 40th anniversary of my own graduation from Bona’s.

Yet, at the same time I felt somewhat daunted preparing for this talk, for I am not being asked to deliver an academic lecture or conduct a class – something I do all the time - but to speak at a moment of special significance to people whose lives have become intertwined with my own.

I began to put this task into perspective, though, when I recalled the experience of Mario Cuomo, the former governor of New York. Not long after he took office, he was asked to give the commencement address at St. John’s University, and so he turned to the President, Fr. John Flynn, for some sage advice. Gov. Cuomo recalls, “and this is what he told me – the God’s honest truth. He said, ‘Mario, a commencement speaker should think of themselves as the body at an old-fashioned Irish wake – they need you to have the party, but nobody really expects you to say a great deal.’”

And so, with that dose of reality, and remembering that today is really a day to focus on your accomplishments, not my words, let me say something about the Franciscan heritage of our alma mater - and you.

Most everyone seems to believe that it is largely the ongoing presence of the Franciscan friars over the past 150 years that have given shape to the unique “Bonaventure spirit.” Let me give just two examples – one ancient, the other more recent.

During the 1880’s, St. Bonaventure’s College was increasingly competing with sports teams from other colleges in the region. And so, at a meeting in April, 1888, the ancestor of today’s Student Senate found itself debating what color should mark the jerseys of the baseball team. The minutes recorded that “there were a good many speakers who expressed their ideas clearly and forcibly.” But in the end, after consulting the student body, it was easily “decided that the sons of St. Bona’s would henceforth adopt as their emblem on the playing fields that color with which for seven centuries the sons of St. Francis had gained so many victories in the moral battlefields of the Christian world.” There was apparently something about the spirit of their Franciscan teachers and mentors that impressed and shaped those young men that they identified with and wanted to bring to their athletic efforts.

The other example is much more recent. In the fall of 2003, your first semester here, a reporter from the New York Times arrived on campus to do an article on the fall-out of the basketball scandal that deeply shook the Bonaventure world earlier in the year. The reporter noted: “Founded in 1858, St. Bonaventure has tried to compete in basketball without sacrificing its Franciscan values. Brown-robed friars mingle with and mentor the students in a campus of red-brick and maples. But what happened here pushed aside those ideals – the same ideals that Chairman Bill Swan carried about in a weathered pamphlet in his shirt pocket. Said Lee Coppola, the Dean of the Russell Jandoli School of Journalism and Mass Communications, ‘There’s a camaraderie that stems from the basic tenets of the Franciscans: that all people, all things, should be treated equal. When you see these men walking around in their brown robes

and sandals, you're kind of inspired to treat people in a nice manner. That's the kind of spirit this place builds. So did this [scandal] hit everybody hard? You're damn right it hit everybody hard!"

Lee was right: the scandal that spring dealt a severe body blow to the spirit of this University. Some alumni were angered, feeling that the deepest values they associated with Bona's had been betrayed. But the vast majority rallied to re-affirm that same spirit; in that sense, the crisis called forth the best in our alumni. Our Trustees, with Bill Swan and later Sue Green at their head, stepped into the gap, providing critical leadership that rallied the University community. Within a week of the crisis, other alums volunteered to lend a hand: Jack McGinley, to chair the Special Review Committee; Paul Grys, to take up the reins as Interim Athletic Director.

The tremendous men and women who stepped forward in that hour of need proved to me that there truly was a unique Bonaventure spirit. It demonstrated that this University indeed stood for something – that Bona's is not simply a place to go to school and get a degree. It molds you for life. And the University's community unquestioning loyalty and support of me – a man they hardly knew - in my role as Interim President, demonstrated that the "Bonaventure spirit" was inseparably tied up in their minds with "the men walking around in their brown robes and sandals." They had seen it embodied in friars they knew – and so they were willing to accept me sight unseen. Yes, Bill Swan carried about a pamphlet having a list of Franciscan values – contemplation, respect, love, peace, joy, compassionate service – but for Bill these were not simply nice ideas that existed in print – but things he deeply experienced during his years with Franciscans at St. Bonaventure.

This personal impact of the friars was evident from the very beginning of this school. One hundred and fifty years ago, Fr. Pamfilo da Magliano was deeply involved in the construction of the first building of his dream – a Franciscan college. He had arrived in Western New York – at the age of 31 - with three other friars from their native Italy just two years earlier as missionaries to an emerging American church. The historian may marvel at the accomplishments of this young friar – a veritable whirlwind of activity - in the twelve years he spent here: founding a new Franciscan province, a college, a seminary, five parishes, numerous mission churches, and two congregations of religious women. But his deepest impact was on the students he touched over those years. One of those first Bona's alums looked back:

"He (Fr. Pamfilo) was a man of extensive learning. . . [but also] profound humility and unwearied patience . . . whose heart went out in sympathy to everyone. The homeless, the erring never knocked at his door without experiencing the hospitality inculcated by St. Francis to his children."

Yesterday, at the baccalaureate Mass, Fr. Michael used a beautiful chalice, a gift one hundred years ago [1905] to Fr. Joseph Butler, President of St. Bonaventure, on the occasion of his jubilee. At that point, he had been teaching here for more than 30 years and had been the President for almost two decades. Records tell us that over 450 alumni gathered to celebrate the event. This may not seem like a particularly large crowd to us, but then we have to remember that at the time Bona's had only 250 in its student body! That would be equivalent today of some 3500-4000 alumni returning at one time! It is not hard to see in that tremendous turnout the

undying admiration of those alums to their “Fr. Joe,” whose humble yet forceful attention to their total welfare had molded them for life.

This is certainly true of my experience. As I look back now at my time at Bona’s in the 1960s, certain friars come alive very vividly in my memory:

Fr. Aurelius Fell, one of the most effective teachers I had, who did a lot to enkindle my love of history – who regularly failed me on quizzes until I learned to cut the BS and get to the essential point.

Fr. Enrique Aguilar, whom I did not have in class, but whose schedule seemed to coincide with mine. In our conversations back from Plassmann back to Falconio and the [then] friary, I met a gentle contemplative who radiated peace and joy.

Fr. Gaudens Mohan, a Medieval Latin scholar with a tongue as salty as a sailor’s, who always provided a sympathetic ear and practical counsel to undergrads in distress.

Br. Ferdinand Woerle, a delightfully simple man, characterized by hard work and an affectionate embrace of all.

Fr. Gervase White, my theology teacher and long-time friar in residence in Robinson Hall, known to us as “the Coach,” whose insights deeply marked Bona’s students for life – and who first suggested to me that I might have a Franciscan vocation.

[Fr. Dan Hurley was not stationed here during my years here, or I am sure I would have mentioned him too!!]

Anyway, I decided to take up Fr. Gervase’s hint. Three things stood out for me in all these friars: they were authentically human, down-to-earth men, utterly free, comfortable being themselves; they were happy; and they were there for me – they were there for all of us. These men had evidently discovered something I wanted to see for myself.

I suppose that all I have been saying about the Franciscan heritage here at Bona’s marks me as a true Franciscan philosophically as well, the disciple of John Duns Scotus and William of Ockham. These medieval thinkers emphasized that what we know best as human beings are not abstract ideas and lofty theories, but the individuals we come to experience in the precious miracle of the here-and-now. For generations of Bona students, “Franciscan values” were not so much something that were taught, but “caught” through the lives of flesh and blood Franciscans who tried to embody them. The lessons they taught were more real than any book could convey.

The names of the friars I have mentioned are all simply names to you. But then I am sure you have names in your own mind – people who have made such an impact on you: friars - and Franciscan women now as well, like Sr. Margaret herself - as well as lay teachers and staff who possess that “Bonaventure spirit.” I was moved by the letter one of you wrote several weeks ago in the BV expressing your gratitude for having experienced the Franciscan presence here at Bona’s. And your class’s farewell gift to the school – a new processional cross bearing the image

of the Christ who spoke to the young St. Francis – is an eloquent testimony of the impact of the Franciscan heritage on you.

Why did generations of Franciscans pour their blood, sweat, and tears into this place? Why do we Franciscans still want to serve here?

Several years ago, the friars of the St. Bonaventure and Mount Irenaeus communities drew up a joint mission statement, affirming our desire to “to be partners in the process of creating and sustaining centers of learning.” Like Pamfilo da Magliano, Joseph Butler, Thomas Plassmann, and the friars of my youth, we believe that the religious experience, the insights and example of St. Francis of Assisi have a uniquely significant contribution to make to contemporary education. They – and we – believe that Bonaventure is worth our dedication because it is first of all a place of learning. We choose to commit ourselves to building this school because we want to be present at a critical point in the lives of young people - that juncture where a person’s vision of the world and values are formed. Recent sociological research confirms what generations of educators intuited – that a person’s formative years – roughly between the ages of 12 and 24 – give them the values they will carry throughout the rest of their lives. What are the “Franciscan values” that we see contributing to the educational process? Let me single out several, using the words of our University’s strategic plan.

First of all, discovery. Francis of Assisi was convinced that everything in creation exists because an all-good God wants it to exist. So, if God is good, everything in the universe reflects God’s goodness in some way. Francis saw that the key to human existence is an attitude of reverence, gratitude, indeed, awe – in the face of the reality that is all about us and within us. And so the learning process is crucial – human life is a process of learning to see the world as it truly is, a dialogue that draws out and shares the rich diversity of reality. But that richness is sometimes not apparent. The young novelist, David Foster Wallace, tells a great little story about this:

“There are two young fish swimming along one day and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, guys, how’s the water?’ So the two young fish swim on for a bit and eventually one of them looks at the other and says: ‘what the hell is water’?”

Often we have to learn to recognize what has been right before our eyes all along – and unfortunately it sometimes is the most important realities in life that are the ones that are the most difficult to see and to talk about. You all took Cath-Fran and know that Francis, after all, wasn’t born Saint Francis – he had to learn to see that everything came from the hands of a good God. Much of his conversion process was learning how to see the world and people as God sees them. He instinctively ran from the hideously deformed lepers who had been exiled from the town of Assisi – it was only when God led him among them that he came to see their true humanity - that what was bitterly repugnant to him became a source of enlightenment. Francis had been indoctrinated that Muslim “infidels” were out to destroy his civilization and his faith; he learned to see in the Sultan another like himself – a believer seeking the truth.

Because Francis came to see that everything and everyone that exist flow from the one “all-powerful, all good Lord,” he believed that truth is actually quite simple. When and if people

finally get the bigger picture, the larger context, they might begin to see the way out of their problems. But to do this we must be critical thinkers, rising above our inherited prejudices and blind spots. As Albert Einstein once put it, “the significant problems we have cannot be solved at the same level of thinking with which we created them.” We need to learn to see our world afresh.

That is why we friars were very excited about the creation of Clare College. Founded on the intellectual vision of our school’s patron, it has been constructed to let all Bona’s students experience the rich diversity of this good earth and the people in it, and yet come to see the larger vision that unites that diversity through some basic human truths. I hope that an important part of your Bonaventure experience has been to become a little less sure of yourself, to be just a little more critical of your certainties, to be a little more open and receptive to the truth that comes from others.

Today, your teachers and mentors are here to testify that you have indeed learned well; I was privileged to have some of you as students, and know for myself the talents that you have developed. There are many academic accomplishments among you to salute. But let me just mention the graduating members of Bona’s College Bowl team who for the second year in a row defeated many “big name” schools, capturing the Region II title. Congratulations!

As you leave Bona’s, let your future efforts demonstrate that you have learned well, that you bring that attitude of discovery into all your efforts. May you always realize that truth cannot be possessed, but only received. May you continue to be open, vulnerable, engaged in life, open to the many discoveries that such an attitude will bring you.

But this is only half of what you have learned at Bonaventure. For life is not simply a matter of insight, but action. Learning is not simply a matter of knowing the world, but embracing it. Discovery of the reality of the other must lead to love and compassionate service. As Francis would express it, “A person only knows as much as he or she puts into practice.”

Franciscans believe that true discovery of our world leads to an ever deeper appreciation of the uniqueness and dignity of each person. Each individual has an originality, an unpredictability, which is the source of his or her irreplaceable value in this world. But we are also convinced that no individual man or woman can be fully a person without others. As a great Franciscan thinker, Eric Doyle, expressed it: “A human being is by definition a being-with-others, a being-for-others.”

I know that you have experienced “being-with-others” in a very special way during your year’s here at Bona’s. Our tight-knit campus provides a fertile ground for nurturing the discovery of the richness of other people, of bringing the uniqueness of each individual into high relief – and yet providing the opportunities of binding those individuals into strong communities of belonging. Your class came to know the precious reality of two such individuals – Lavelle Matthews and John “Deuce” Dlugocz, and so mourned their loss. You have enjoyed the opportunities offered by the Richter Center; and now the Café La Verna will present a new venue for the bonding for which Bona’s has always been noted – although lattes may never totally replace “Margarita Night” at Don Lorenzo’s or “Cup Night” at the Burton! The wonderful relationships you have

forged here make it difficult in many ways to leave – but know that you will have them for the rest of your lives, ties that will bind you forever.

But it is the second of those dimensions of being truly human – a “being-for-others” - that truly distinguishes your class and for which you will be remembered here for many years.

You participated in traditional Bona’s service opportunities such as Bona Buddies and the Warming House, and you were enthusiastic pioneers in new opportunities to serve others—the Journey Project and SIFE. But most of all, the class of 2007 will be remembered for “making a difference” as BonaResponds mobilized nearly 300 students, family members, alumni, and folks from the local community, volunteering to spend the spring break of 2006 – not on the beaches of Panama City or Cancun, but further West, on the Gulf Coast destroyed by Hurricane Katrina. You may have brought back a tan anyway, but you also returned vastly enriched by your experience of reaching out to others in need. I can tell you, I was never more proud to be a friar than I was shortly after that spring break, while helping out in a parish over the weekend. A woman stopped me after Mass and said: “I see you are a Franciscan, and you mentioned being connected with St. Bonaventure University. Aren’t you the school that sent all those young people down to help in the Katrina relief effort? You must be doing something right up there!”

I do believe that “we are doing something right up here at Bona’s.” I am deeply edified that BonaResponds was not a one-time shot: that even now, as soon as this ceremony ends, some of you will be traveling to the Great Plains to assist victims of the recent tornadoes that have devastated that region. I believe that we “are doing something right,” because you have learned to embrace this world – in all its suffering and pain – and to turn toward it in compassionate service. You are living proof that the “Franciscan values” of which we preach have taken root in a new generation.

As you go forth from here, instead of railing against a cruel and unjust world, embrace the people in that world and call them friends – and then, use your experience to “let yourself be changed, so that you become the change you want to see in others” (Gandhi). Instead of concentrating your efforts on finding the work you love, nurture love within you. That way it’s always with you and can shine into whatever work you do, and enliven and warm whatever workplace you find yourself in.

Class of 2007, I have confidence in you. I know you have great dreams for yourselves and our world. I believe in you, I respect you. All of us are here today because we love you. Today, I stand here grateful for having shared some time with you.

May the Lord bless you and keep you as you commence a new stage of your good journey, for you are special people. You are Bonaventure’s Best.