

## Valedictory Address | Class of 1998

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When I was a younger man, my Dad used to take my family and me to the dark fields outside of town where we would climb up onto the hood of the car for an evening of star-gazing. After we all settled down he would start to show us things; he would raise his arm and as he would point with his finger way up at bears, birds, and warriors, the Andromeda galaxy, and the Milky Way, our eyes would follow the invisible lines shooting up so that we could see what he saw. I still remember the warmth of our family time and the cold trembles of fear that would course through my body at the depths of these nebulous mysteries. Since coming to this big city of bright lights, I have seen how those heavenly miracles have ceded place to the multitude of bright lights, which by hiding the infinite marvels of the night-sky have ironically darkened the sensibility of city-dwellers to the awesome majesty of creation and its creator. And yet, gathering in the basement of this church for the past eight months has been a small group of students who have begun to learn the secrets of heavenly navigation – of a different order. Like my Dad pointing up to the stars, Dr. Jeffrey would point his finger up at so many paintings, while all the professors would point through their words to equally beautiful truths.

Tonight we have gathered as the extended Augustine College family to honour the labour and love of these teachers and the dedication of our supporters, to reminisce on the year with smiles and laughter, and, finally, to say goodbye at this the conclusion of a year of God's tender mercies.

First of all, I must say that for all of the successes of this year, I believe they have been uniquely due to the intercessions of so many people. For those of you who struggled for us from a distance in

prayer, I cannot thank you enough. I have learned this year, that for some unfathomable reason, God has granted us humans, who are the quintessence of dust, access to the throne room of the Sovereign, where he has granted us the dignity of causality. I know that someone sitting in this congregation has been using the Pauline prayers in their supplications for us, for while looking for a fitting prayer for tonight, I could not find one that had not already been abundantly answered. Among so many other blessings, we have been encouraged in heart, and united in love, towards receiving “the full riches of complete understanding, in order that we may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”

What have we learned this year? One of my favourite discoveries was the 17th-century work of Blaise Pascal; in one of his *Pensées* he penned the following pithy words: “*Combien de royaumes nous ignoront!*” How many kingdoms we ignore! Before this year I would look from the top of the Peace Tower down at the urban sprawl of Ottawa and see the normal things: new buildings being erected, the zooming of many cars, tulips sprouting from their flowerbeds, the scurrying of ant-people, and so many monumental, ancient trees. But then I would close my eyes, and I would see my eyelids. Now, when I am up there, I close my eyes and begin to truly see the most beautiful, intricate realities that I never before knew existed.

First of all, with my newly piqued imagination, I see the strolling of long-since-dead prime ministers, the shuffling of horses and carts, our grandmothers skipping in the streets, the building of a canal, the settling of farmers and

families, and the founding of a nation. I close my eyes tighter and look far off into the distance of time and place and marvellous apparitions march up in front of me and some even talk to me: Moses gives me the law, Socrates asks me what piety is, Paul writes me a letter, Augustine picks a pear, St. Francis preaches to the birds, Giotto paints St. Francis preaching to the birds, St. Thomas Aquinas summarizes, Palestrina and Schutz compose, Kurelek and O'Brien paint, and diverse others likewise exercise the gifts they have been given.

For the past eight months our professors have unveiled each day a small, new section of that fabric covering the most complex, most colourful, most multi-faceted sparkling object ever made by man. This object is the story of man, the story of all that we have ever done in our mandate to fill and subdue the earth, and to have dominion over it. All mixed together are great philosophical debates, masterful oratorios, sculptures, passages of Scripture, plainchant liturgy, countless Latin phrases, spirals, paintings, science experiments, verbals, cathedrals, and many, many books. What does this infinite-dimensional enigma resemble? A hodge-podge? A big, 57-ingredient pot full of ketchup? A great big mess?

No, none of these things. The story of all human life is the most beautiful mosaic I have ever seen. Like a stylized tapestry or a rich Persian rug the woven patterns of history swirl in rich, flowing motifs that manifest themselves, then disappear, then recur later with renewed spirit and intensity. Since time began people have discovered in nature, in revelation, or in themselves ideas that have infused in them an ardent vigour lasting decades or centuries until some great calamity or stagnant tedium induces the destruction of the old idea, allowing a newly discovered truth, or lie masquerading as the truth, to arise amid the debris. In societies' changes over time, from ideas to their due consequences, one can so often

observe rational and ordered developments in a cyclic harmony. Our professors have shown us that the changes make sense.

For many, such changes are unpredicted and shocking, but in every generation stand some who with deep vision and even deeper love engage the accepted ideas, both true and false. Through the prophets' works of past times, and under the guidance of our faculty and writer-in-residence, we have begun the journey of understanding the times and learning what Israel – that is, the New Israel – and the West should do. We have gained an apprenticeship to wisdom, founded in truth, goodness, and beauty, rooted in the Scriptures. Our own beliefs have passed through the fire, some to earn the demise they deserved, while others have emerged intact and greatly strengthened. And so, the job of our teachers is now over. Our responsibility is not to be like one who looks at his face in a mirror, then goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like, but to live our lives according to the standard we now better understand, to search for truth, and to strive to be culture-changers. This is our call and our duty and our delight.

Professors, we have come to this point tonight because of your striving to make the words of Paul Bunyan true in our lives:

He who would valiant be  
'Gainst all disaster,  
Let him in constancy  
Follow the master

There's no discouragement  
Shall make him once relent  
His first avowed intent  
To be a pilgrim.

You have become for us what Mary was for the boy Jesus in Michael O'Brien's painting called *The Presentation*. Jesus, nestled like a gosling deep in its mother's protective, downy embrace, cradles in one hand the Scriptures – his

Scriptures – while with the other he reaches up to touch the gentle cheek of the one who had so faithfully set him on his little stool by the kitchen fire countless times to recount the stories that he had witnessed, to make him memorize the laws that he had made – indeed, to teach the Teacher. This painting resonates inside my heart because I myself have experienced this, firstly while growing up with my own Holy Family and once again this past year as you have invited me – all of us – to enter your lives and into fellowship with you at school and in your own homes, at dinners and at teas, on hikes and at celebrations. And throughout our time of communion you have set us on your knees, wrapped your arms around the small group of us, and taught us truth.

To all of us who now leave at the conclusion of this year, the most wonderful year in my whole life, to my friends I would like to read you a passage that Jessica gave me before she left. It is from C.S. Lewis's *The Four Loves* and it is all about us and the absolutely unique brotherhood and sisterhood we all shared.

“... Each member of the circle feels, in his secret heart, humbled, before all the rest. Sometimes he wonders what he is doing there among his betters. He is lucky beyond his desert to be in such company. Especially when the whole group is together, each bringing out what is best, wisest, or funniest in all the others. Those are the golden sessions....”

Now that our time together is winding down it seems too simple, too trite to say “I will miss you.” When we were all deluged with an endless succession of papers during the late-March Dark Night of the Brain, I knew April 19th would be a day of joy, a culmination long anticipated. Yes, I knew this day would be a day of great relief and satisfaction. But as many times as the words ‘April 20th’ have crept into my mind, I have spurned them, hoping to find some happier thought to dry the growing wetness in the corners

of my eyes. Yes, I will miss you, because I have grown to know some of the love that Christian community is supposed to have. Tomorrow, April 20th, we will hurt. Next week we will still hurt. But over the coming months that ache of absence will transform into the peaceful, deep certitude experienced by Paul after his departures from his many fledgling churches. He never knew whether he would see his brothers and sisters again but he could pray that by God’s will the way would be opened for them to come together.

Tonight I would like to close my talk with all of us, my fellow students, our professors, our families, and our friends, thanking and praising the One who has brought us together at this time. I have seen ample evidence that God loves to bless his people; he loves to lavish upon us the best things from his storehouse of riches: love, joy, fellowship, truth, wisdom, and mirth. Tonight we celebrate his goodness.

Let us bow our heads.

Take our lives and let them be  
Consecrated, Lord, to thee;  
Take our moments and our days,  
Let them flow in ceaseless praise.

Lord, we bless thee for our creation, preservation,  
and all the blessings of this life,  
But above all for thine inestimable love  
In the redemption of the world  
by our Lord Jesus Christ;  
For the means of grace,  
And for the hope of glory.  
And we beseech thee,  
give us that due sense of all thy mercies,  
That our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful,  
And that we show forth thy praise,  
Not only with our lips, but in our lives;  
By giving up ourselves to thy service,  
and by walking before thee in holiness and  
righteousness all our days;  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord,

To whom with thee and the Holy Ghost,  
be all honour and glory, world without end.

Amen