
VALEDICTORY ADDRESS | Friday 24 March 2023

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, University staff, guests, and fellow graduates,

I first came to the University of Divinity in 2015 when I decided to defer a bachelor's degree in international studies at RMIT in order to pursue some theological curiosities. At Whitley College, I started the program NEXT which benefited me in more ways than I can communicate in this short speech. What I can say is that NEXT at Whitley introduced me to the immense beauty of the tradition; it introduced me to the writings of the saints, to the depth of icons, to the urgency of what it meant to love one's neighbour, and above all, to the wonderful grey and ambivalence of it all.

I finished my bachelor's degree in international studies and struggled through—like all of us—the task of negotiating a sense of purpose vis-à-vis one's material needs and the world's extraordinary injustice. After a time of what might be called “longing for the wholly other,” I began to think more about theology as discourse which transcends my local Christian context, but rather speaks to the most intimate part of what it means to be a person in the world, what it means to long for justice and goodness and love. Throughout my bachelor's degree I was asking: ‘What are the conditions for a religiously plural place to live together without exclusion and violence?’ Over time I started to intuit that this question's true home is in theology. I wanted to know, and I still want to know, what happens when theology is thought to belong to the broken middle of life lived in the political world. Because of this and—of course—many other reasons, in 2020 I returned to the University of Divinity to begin a Master of Theological Studies.

Since September last year, I have been studying a one-year master's degree in theology and religion at the Catholic University of Leuven, in a small student city near Brussels. After having studied at large universities such as RMIT and KU Leuven, I can confidently say that my most positive student experience has been—by far—at the University of Divinity where my student number is secondary to my name and where Whitley's beloved registrar Dorothy Morgan was always an email away. I cannot more loudly sing the praises of the ability to undertake a “supervised reading unit” which encourages independent study assisted by one of our academics.

The ecumenical aspect of the university allowed me to take units at other colleges, such as the unit at St. Athanasius called Holy Images, Holy Relics and Sacred Space in the Orthodox Tradition under the erudite Father Nebojsa. Or perhaps the units at the Catholic Theological College where I was studying epistemology alongside a group of young seminarians—a fact that my dad still finds hilarious.

Despite the relatively small size of the UD, there is an extremely high level of theology. I am particularly grateful to the originality and creativity of Professor Jason Goroncy's units on Death and Suffering as well as Prof. Scott Kirkland's units on political theology. Jason's classes reignited an interest in Simone Weil that had been lit in my high school philosophy classes, and his recommendation of Gillian Rose to my friend and peer Justin Bristow made its way to me. I am grateful to both Jason and Scott who encouraged me to write on these eclectic religious philosophers. I wait to hear back from Durham University in the UK and KU Leuven in Belgium on a PhD project titled: ‘The Virgin and the Rose: Dispossession as ‘feminine’ political theology in Simone Weil and Gillian Rose.’

I am excited about what lies ahead and will continue to reflect upon my time at the UD with the greatest fondness. Congratulations again to all the 2023 graduates.

Joe-Zane Boyle, Master of Theological Studies 2023

