

What a wonderful occasion. As I sat and watched you all receive your test amurs, be acknowledged by your peers, your friends and your family, the privilege of being able to experience first-hand the sense of celebration and success is both heartening and humbling.

Archbishop Geoffrey Smith, Bishop Chris McLeod, the Heads of churches and religious orders and other representatives of partner churches of the university, including Bishop Paul Smith and Rev Peter Morel, the Chancellor, Dr Graeme Blackman, members of the UD community, Heads of College and academic staff in attendance, and, most important of all, you the graduates and your family and friends gathered, it is my distinct pleasure to offer a few words of thanks.

As a person that was actively guided away from pursuing further study of mathematics mid-way through secondary school it might seem a little strange that I start by repeating some numbers. If you look at the graduation ceremony booklet 108 people are listed as graduating at this ceremony. They represent all 12 Colleges and 2 Schools. Among us this afternoon we are privileged to have 29 people here in person, representing 8 Colleges and 2 Schools. It speaks of the rich diversity of denominations and locations within the university – Australian Lutheran College, Catholic Theological College, Eva Burrows College, St Barnabas College, St Francis College, Uniting College of Leadership and Theology, Whitley College, Yarra Theological Union, the School of Professional Practice, and the School of Graduate Studies. As graduates, you are now an integral part of a very distinctive institution, not only here in Australia but across the globe – a collegiate, ecumenical university. You represent a tangible expression of what can be achieved through diversity in a shared commitment, “to address issues from a sound and reasoned theological viewpoint and to offer society opportunities for dialogue with traditions and values that have been refined over centuries” [University of Divinity Act 1910]. I suggest an annotation is appropriate, ‘and will continue to be refined...’. So, please look around, take in this moment and acknowledge each other’s success. In fact, please join me in giving one another a round of applause!

Among your many achievements that culminate in this formal celebration today I share three observations. I trust you will hear them as an indication of the admiration we all have for what you have done. They signal why celebrating your graduation is so important and why it is a reason for joy – and above all else, a reason for hope.

First, I express my great admiration to you for the commitment to undertake formal study of your faith tradition. In our setting here, within St Peter’s Cathedral as a place of worship, sitting among family and friends, and with other like-minded people, at first glance such a decision might have seemed relatively straight-forward. A decision that was entirely understandable in your personal circumstances. But let us step outside this space and the landscape is very different – the place of Christianity in society, let alone any form of religion, is a vexed one. The idea of engaging in formal study of religion in a university setting is also contentious. While the earliest universities in Europe were founded within the context of theology as one of the core disciplines, here in Australia the study of theology was formally barred in the statutes of the earliest universities in Sydney and Melbourne. You have chosen to undertake critical interaction with the Christian faith tradition, engaging in the intersection of the dynamic of faith and reason at a cost, both personally and financially. While this graduation ceremony is a moment in time, I acknowledge it is the culmination of much effort – as eloquently explained by Daniel and Kate. Which leads me to the second observation.



Namely, the importance of the choices we make, individually and at a communal, societal level. In particular, I focus on how we use the varying levels of agency that are at our disposal in given situations. I assume most of you will have made a note about attending today, whether in an electronic device or some other location, to block out the time – Thursday, 13 February 2025. It is a date that offers us some examples about the importance of choices. I have chosen three to mention. First, in 1633 February 13 is the day Galileo Galilei arrived in Rome. He travelled to Rome to appear before the Inquisition to explain his views expressed in *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* that had been published the previous year. For the second example we come forward to the last year of the Second World War, 1945. It is the first day (strictly speaking the first night) of the bombing of the city of Dresden in Germany, initially by the Royal Air Force and then followed up with raids by the United States Army Air Force the following day. The third example comes from this century here in Canberra, in 2008. In the House of Representatives, the then Prime Minister, Mr Kevin Rudd, presented a motion for voting, a formal ‘Apology to Australia’s Indigenous Peoples,’ particularly the Stolen Generations, on behalf of the nation. Each one of these events incorporated many choices. For each one there was reason for hope regarding the purpose and the anticipated outcome.

With the passage of time comes the luxury of hindsight. It can be relatively easy for us to look back and find reasons to be both critical and complimentary about choices made in each of these examples. These events are defining moments in the lives of many individuals and communities. They are part of the larger story of both the capability and the frailty of humanity. Some points in time suggest reason for hope and confidence, while others may seem more to be occasions of despair, irrespective of what might have been thought to be good and just intentions at the time. What follows those moments is important regarding our sense of continuing to have hope for the future. And so, to my third point.

Your successful completion of the award is testimony to your commitment to engaging in genuine dialogue. Here, I am particularly referring to your readiness to be risk takers. So much of the public domain is dominated now by polarization and entrenched views. Echo chambers of likeminded people often foster fear and disdain for the ‘other’ and act as enablers of hate speech and hate action. The lack of a willingness to listen and to reflect and to self-critique is readily nurtured by the increasing interconnectedness of people through social media. In distinct contrast, your course of study demonstrated your openness to enter into a dialogue with the Christian faith. The trust, the openness, the curiosity and the learnings, about yourself, about the faith tradition and about how others engage with that rich heritage of belief and practice is now a vital resource. You have modelled the importance of listening, the ability to reflect, to be open to other experiences, to ask questions, and to address difficult subject matter. Your time as a student is a story of risk, courage, trust and empowerment. As we heard in the reading from Colossians “that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God.” You are voices for good, and above all, you are a source of hope.

As I conclude, I encourage you not to see this graduation ceremony as the end, but as the beginning. I am encouraged for the future. It is what you do with your experiences, what you have learned about yourself that is important. What the next part in the story entails as you apply your learnings, whether it be in professional, community, and/or personal settings, is where the sense of anticipation lies. It is there that I find reason for hope and excitement. Thank you and Godspeed.

Professor James McLaren, Vice-Chancellor

