

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, colleagues, graduates, family and friends...

It's a joy to participate in a such a significant rite of passage as this, honouring the achievements of these finely gowned and capped people! And so may this be a time of great celebration, whilst recognising that glad completions may well symbolise radically new beginnings!

When considering what I would share this evening, I recalled how moving last year's Graduation at St Peter's Cathedral was for me. The reason being, I'd taught just about every Uniting College graduand present, yet more to the point, I knew them not merely as 'my' students, but as fellow travellers who had also been changed by theological education. Positively and irreversibly so.

So, the question I'd like to pursue briefly this evening is, why is such a depth of change often the case, and how might these impactful experiences of theological reflection contribute to a more peaceful, unified world?

Well, for one, theological education at its best, does not regard God as the object of our possessive scrutiny. On the contrary, the beautiful and beautifying mystery of God remains the subject of both our fidelity and wonderment. And while that is a scholarly pursuit on one level, it concerns itself, ultimately, with a desire to be encountered - and further formed - by the gifting of divine love. St Irenaeus of Lyon said it clearly, if not bluntly: "It is better and more profitable that we should be uneducated and know little, so as be drawn nearer to the love of God, than we should think ourselves deeply learned and experienced..."

Indeed, it has long impressed me that another Saint, St Benedict of Nursia, likened Christian formation to enrolling in a school for service to God, in which the self-emptying love of God is to be learned over time and rehearsed in community, thus safeguarded for the wellbeing of the whole.

I don't see much difference between Benedict's monastic ideal, and the hope of contemporary theological education undertaken within the riven environments in which we presently live. That being, an explorative journey into greater capacities for love and wisdom within a heartbreakingly combustible world. In fact, Benedict's poetic words are applicable to us all, I believe:  
[for] ... when the heart has been enlarged, the path of God's commandments is run with unspeakable sweetness..."

Ah, "when the heart has been enlarged!" That is what I knew to be true to our graduands last February and no doubt is in evidence here tonight: an increased capacity for service to God and the world certainly, but one that arises out of deepened appreciations of selfhood and a corresponding calling to vocation (ministry). A soulful shift, if you like, into the good graces of acceptance, wisdom, imagination and spirited mercy. A tangible movement beyond the binary worlds – binding worlds – of common religious practices, wherein our one precious world is unnecessarily divided into 'us and them,' or into lightness and dark.

One of things I have always sought to impress upon theology and ministry students is that at its core, the Christian faith lives and breathes within with the harmonising beauty of paradox; that is, the art of holding seeming irreconcilable differences, such as "truly God, truly human," or "one in three, three in one," in creative tension, generating as it were, in the words of T.S. Eliot, "a third point of departure." Imaginative steps in a unitive direction.

Friends, I'd put to you that we, in both the church and wider society, are presently in desperate need of third points of unitive departure; conscious movements beyond tribal forms of identity that condescend towards another's; respectful behaviours transcending long held cultural practices that have assumed a superiority of knowledge, most often western, male and white in expressive form. And open postures of faith that enable us to see fully the lived experience of those who display a spiritual way of life beyond Christian frameworks of belief.

Perhaps that is a lot to expect from theological education and formation! Obviously, I do not believe so. Because at its beating heart, Christian theology is grounded in the undying eschatological hope – the vision beautiful, no less - of all things being reconciled, thus renewed, in God's time and wholly within the gifting of the Trinity's sure, tender embrace.



Our responsive calling as those schooled theologically, I would assert, is to serve and rehearse that unitive end in sight for the whole creation: to be practicing communities of reconciliation and understanding - communities in which the diverse gifts of its peoples are used for the encouragement and edification of all.

In the alluring words of the great Vatican II pastor/theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Only beautiful theology, that is, only a theology which, grasped by the glory of God, thus is able to transmit its rays, has the chance of making any impact in human history by conviction and transformation." All else, I suspect he would argue, is but an 'uglification' of Christian doctrine that cannot, by virtue of its over dependence upon the rational mind, penetrate, thus enlarge, the inner recesses of the human heart.

So, University of Divinity graduates of 2026, my charge and blessing to you, is that grounded in your learning and formation, may you continually seek to transmit the beautiful rays of God's glorifying and reconciling love into fractured and seemingly irreconcilable worlds, on small or large scales, allowing your courageous self-giving to arise from a kindness of soul, a clear wisdom of mind, and an overflowing heart.

We love because God first loved us. Indeed so!

May you then stay in, and be continually nurtured by, that enfolding, outrageously initiating and liberating love. And may there be joy and fulfillment in your spirited participation in the Christian Gospel.

Thank you.

