

Loyola School Graduation Address
June 4, 2010
Father Michael Sehler, S.J.

Father Katsouros, Mr. Lyness, Board of Trustees, members of the graduating class of 2010, faculty and staff, parents, families and friends, I would like to offer my warmest congratulations on this happy occasion. With the help of your parents and teachers, you graduates have successfully completed the course of studies at a prestigious institution of learning. You have survived the homework, the quizzes, the term papers, the book reports and the DBQ's in a program distinguished for its fidelity to the great educational tradition of the Jesuits and their lay colleagues. You all look happy and proud, and you should. You have earned your graduation. But excuse me if I inject a note of healthy realism into this day's joyous proceedings.

As Archie Bunker used to say to his wife every evening when he came home from work, "It's a jungle out there, Edith!" Indeed it is. And to survive and to prosper in that jungle, you need to be very careful about the way that you try to profit from your education. In a word, you must be selective.

Some of the things you have picked up in your four years at Loyola will be very useful. You have amassed huge amounts of information, facts, and skills. You have been accepted into some of the better institutions of higher learning, where the process of self-improvement, so happily begun, will continue for several more years. With hard work, ingenuity, luck, and a little help from your friends, these will some day help you make enough money to buy enough things to insure your self-fulfilment and lasting happiness.

On the other hand, some of the other things you may have picked up in your time with us range from the useless to the dangerous. Some well-intentioned teachers have probably tried to infect you with some of their own idealism. In one way or another, they may have tried to develop in you a moral sense that values such qualities as honesty, generosity, and even sexual responsibility. Some have attempted to distract you with talk of social consciousness, and have even tried to make you feel not only sorry for those less fortunate, but even obligated to try to help them. You probably still have some of their slogans rattling around in your heads—like “men and women for others,” “for God’s greater glory,” and “the following of Christ.” In your Theology classes, and liturgies and retreats, they have tempted you to look for some larger meaning in life, to dabble in questions of ultimate concern, to question whether there is more to life than earning, spending, accumulating and consuming.

There is only one sure way to insulate yourself against all this fuzzy idealism. Remember why you came to Loyola in the first place, and why you are going to college in the next place. What’s the bottom line?

The bottom line is: How much do you make a year? How much do you own? How good is your credit? Next year, and the year after, how much more will you be making, and how much more will you own? Remember the advertisement for Cadillacs: “You are what you drive.” Don’t forget the most basic doctrine of our national religion: Happiness can be bought. Money buys products, and products

can fulfill us. Products can satisfy our deepest human longings.

The religious people tell you that we are created to love persons and to use things. But practicality demands that we love things and use people. Don't let relationships, or religion, or idealism get in the way, as you claw your way to the top. Getting to the top is worth the effort, because in the game of life – as everyone should know – the one who dies with the most toys wins. . . .

Don't get me wrong. I'm not against religion, as long as you keep it in its proper place. Religious consumerism is all right, but Christian discipleship is not. Let me explain. Discipleship, the following of Christ, implies that in setting your priorities, God's will and the values of Jesus Christ will play an important part. Consequently, in deciding what to do with your life, how you make your money, and what you spend it on, you actually try to find out what God wants and how Jesus would want you to act. This kind of religion is a major distraction. It might make you doubt whether this job is really worth doing, even for big bucks. It could make you wonder how faithful you are in your relationships. It might even damage your self-image by making you feel guilty about such trivial matters as infidelity, greed, and superficiality. It could even make you question the whole world view of rugged individualism. This is scary stuff, indeed.

On the other hand, religious consumerism is O.K. What do I mean by religious consumerism? Think of your parish as a store, and your pastor as a storekeeper. On the shelves of this store are such handy items as baptisms, weddings, wakes, funerals

and safe schools for your children. Drop by when you need one of these services.

Otherwise, stay away.

If you think that I am exaggerating the pitfalls of Christian discipleship and the dangers of taking religious education too seriously, consider the real-life case of Edward Hardiman. Mr. Hardiman graduated from Fairfield University, a Jesuit institution in Connecticut, only a few years ago. On that occasion, he received the Loyola Medal, the university's highest honor. Here are some excerpts from his acceptance speech:

My life has been ruined. I have come to know what Jesuit education truly is, and a life turned upside down is one of its many implications. I have found that faith and Jesuit education are two-edged swords. I have also learned that faith and the Ignatian tradition serve to afflict the comfortable. They have challenged me to reject the militarism, consumerism and materialism glorified by our society, and to attempt to "live simply, so that others may live." I have come to value a new definition of success during my time at Fairfield. I am challenged daily to remember that all that I do is done "for the greater glory of God," and that all my actions affect the people of God in a positive or negative manner. In my service to the guests at soup kitchens and shelters, or even to my friends and peers here at school, God is at the heart of my every action and interaction. I realize that many people will dismiss my thoughts as naïve, and something that I will grow out of when I enter the "real world." But the "real world" can be found where the people of God are suffering, working, and

praying, to make God's earth a more human place. As you can see, my life is truly ruined according to today's standards. . . . And I couldn't be happier about this.

Well, . . . sad stories like this one are mercifully few and far-between.

Fortunately, there are many high school graduates who have kept clear heads, and gone on to college with their priorities and goals in order. We know this, thanks to an annual survey of incoming college freshmen conducted by the American Council on Education and by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. Over 200,000 freshmen at 390 institutions are interviewed every year. Among other questions, they are asked whether they think that certain goals are important to pursue in college. One of these goals is to develop a meaningful philosophy of life; the other goal is to become financially well off. Over a 20-year period a smaller and smaller number have thought that developing a meaningful philosophy of life is important.

On the other hand, each year a larger and larger number identify financial prosperity as a key goal. And so, the head of this research project has concluded: "Students tend to see their lives as dependent upon affluence, and are not inclined to be reflective. Our data confirm the decline in interest in existential questions. . . . Obviously, we are seeing something very profound in our society. Despite the pronouncements that greed is dead, our data show that it is alive and well."

So, there it is: the real world. These students are crystal clear about what the real world is, and what it is not. It's about making money; it's about buying things. It's

not about religion, or ideals, or integrity. The real world, to them, has nothing to do with service to others, or social responsibility, or finding meaning in their work, or even wondering what life is all about. It's certainly not about God, or religion, or finding their place in the universe. It's about earning, and buying, and accumulating, and consuming, . . . as conspicuously as possible. All the other stuff is un-real.

Billy Joel has a song, "Angry Young Man." The singer says that he has outgrown idealism and social awareness. He no longer believes in causes, and he has renounced all activism on behalf of justice. He is convinced that taking moral stands has no impact on real life, and has decided to look out for his own survival.

Well, it's time to wrap this up. At the end of graduation addresses, speakers tell the graduates to "go forth." So . . .

Go forth into the world, and join generations of bright young Americans who have survived religious and moral education in church-related institutions, and did not let anything interfere with their way of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Work hard. Accumulate. Exploit. Enjoy. Invest. Buy. Consume. Get rich. Be happy. And feel good about yourselves.

As for those of you who believe that you are called to something higher than conspicuous consumption in a hedonistic, materialistic vacuum, we Loyola faculty and staff are especially proud of you, and wish you well. We even hope that you

become rich. We agree with the wise man who said: “I’ve been rich and I’ve been poor, and, believe me, rich is better.”

We are also delighted that you perceive, however dimly, that there is more to life than making a living.

And to each of you, whether disciples or religious consumers, congratulations on successfully finishing this chapter in your life. Best wishes in the next installment, and in all the rest of your story.

May the Lord be always with you. Godspeed.