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2016 Commencement Address: The Honorable Harry K. Thomas, Jr. '78

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Commencement Address - The Honorable Harry K. Thomas, Jr '78



Friday, May 27, 2016

Good morning. Some are probably thinking didn't Father mean Clarence Thomas. Nope! I'm younger, more handsome and with a better job than Justice Thomas. But seriously, thank you Father Boroughs and trustees for inviting me home. I am honored to say congratulations to the graduates of the Class of 2016 and your families.

A special shout out to Grace McMahon from your Uncle Jeffrey who teaches in Zimbabwe. And hello from the Harare International School's Aidan Kilpatrick who will join the class of 2020.

Graduates, please stand. Thank your parents, faculty, staff, friends and family for giving you the gift of a Holy Cross education. You are now members of a lifelong community of remarkable alumni, some famous, who've hit the world with splash and headlines, and others who've impacted the globe in more quiet, but no less substantial ways. How will you, Class of 2016, use this gift to influence our global community?

Now before we sit down, let's take the largest selfie Holy Cross has ever seen!

Graduates, you are the best, the most amazing, and among the luckiest alumni because you are educated by some of the best, because you are supported by amazing families and friends, and you have opportunities like few global citizens before you; and because you have the gift of a Holy Cross education.

Our own Jeff Reppucci has used his gift to work for Worcester! Father Markey has used his gift to teach and Edward P. Jones used his to write thought-provoking novels.

Like you, I am a Holy Cross graduate, and like you I have had wonderful opportunities. Let me tell you how I have chosen to use what I took from the gift of a Holy Cross education.

My gift led me to the Foreign Service of the United States, the world's finest diplomatic corps.

I have used my gift to protect America. I have used my gift to open markets for American businesses. I have used my gift to combat HIV-AIDs.

I have used my gift to defend democracy and human rights, to celebrate Pride Month, to learn Spanish, Hindi, Bengali and Tagalog and most importantly to listen and learn from others. My gift has taught me that there are rarely simple solutions but my gift has also taught me never to quit.

My gift has allowed me to meet Nelson Mandela, to dine with the Dalai Lama, converse with Micro-Finance founder Mohammed Yunus, go on stage with the Black Eyed Peas, laugh with Bruno Mars, fly to Afghanistan with Colin Powell, work side by side with Condoleezza Rice, and to brief Presidents' Bush and Obama in the Oval Office.

But my gift also had me working at the White House on 9/11, bringing bodies of our heroes' home from Iraq, witnessing the horrors of human trafficking and the gift even had me tell people that they were HIV positive.

My gift has also allowed me to fail.

In 1996, in Kashmir, human rights lawyer Jalil Andrabi appealed to me and others for help. I did not think he was in danger but security forces detained him. Weeks later his dead body was found floating in a river. My colleagues and I had to pay respects on his wife and young children. I told myself that I could not have done more to help him but I could have and should have.

Graduates, you can always do more to help and save others.

The gift box is not always easy to open but it is well worth it.

I am currently using my gift in Zimbabwe where Evan Mawarire, a little known pastor has used his gift of faith to stir the nation. When faced with the inability to pay school fees for his children, Mawarire was without hope. He then decided all that remained was the country he loved. He decided to drape himself in the Zimbabwean flag and started the "This Flag" campaign via social media to speak out against poverty, corruption, injustice and unemployment. He invited others to join.

Mawarire has utilized the "This Flag" campaign without resorting to insults or name calling and demanded that it be apolitical. He has used his gift of faith to stress that in a democracy all citizens have the right to express themselves without fear of reprisal. Mawarire said that Zimbabwe's dead freedom fighters "would demand that their blood be brought back" should they awaken to see what has happened to their nation since independence. He now faces threats but remains undeterred because of his faith in his nation, his people and his flag.

What are you going to do with your gift? Will you have the courage and faith of Evan Mwarire? Will you persevere during the hard times that are surely to come your way?

Many of my friends here today, especially those in the "Fraternity," owe their gift to Father Brooks' vision. Others to Father McFarland. I owe mine in large part to Dr. Blaise Nagy who showed us the beauty and importance of Latin and to Father Francis Hart who reminded us to compete hard but to respect the opponent.

Class of 2016, what are you going to do with your gift? Don't waste it! You have choices to make, decisions to amend, lives to change.

Ron Lawson has used his gift to help students study at Mount St. James and Mary McGranahan has used hers to make college affordable. Lori Stasukelis used her gift to help school children in rural Kenya.

At Holy Cross, thanks to the Montserrat program you have had the opportunity to exchange ideas and even argue with your fellow students while remaining friends. The easiest thing is to see what is wrong with the other person without noticing what is wrong with ourselves. We all have stories to tell, tears to shed, and laughter to share.

And that is what we do at Holy Cross. We talk, we explain, we listen. We respect opposing views.

We take risks. We innovate. We iterate. We fall down and we rise again.

What are you going to do with the gift of a Holy Cross education?

Our faith, our Jesuit training with its focus on respect for other religions, tolerance for differing opinions and support for universal education tells us to work to make the world better. And that is what we do in U.S. Embassy Harare and that is what the global community needs your help in doing.

Now some are shaking your heads. Why are we helping those overseas? What about those who "humanity has forgotten" in America? We need to help those at home. What about our veterans? What about our own?

And you are right. We do need to help those at home.

I believe that many of you will be able to use the gift that is your Jesuit education to build opportunities for our most vulnerable, and solutions to the most daunting challenges at home and abroad — following in the footsteps of the Jesuits themselves.

But what are you going to do with your gift? How are you going to engage the world? What will the selfie of your life reveal?

Our basketball team used their gift to show the world that we can compete with the best. Alexis Nicholas, Philippe Candido and HB Alumsin are using their gifts to innovate business.

Kathy Garrahan has used her gift to make life better for children in MetroWest and John Hopper has used his for corporate social responsibility.

Nina Riccio has used hers to be a professional and a mom because perhaps the best use of our gift is educating and raising our children.

The choices we make, how we engage the world with our gift define ourselves and the college we love so use this gift with wit, wisdom, and humility.

Class of 2016, do not leave your gift in the box. Every few years slowly unwrap it. Peek inside. Take it out. Use it to better our global community. But don't throw away the gift. Keep it with you wherever you go.

And when you are faced with hard choices. When life throws a wrench in your plans. When your faith is questioned.

Open it again. Reflect on your time on Mount St. James, pray and meditate, and then make your decision.

And you will have used your gift well. Now that would be a selfie worth taking.

May God Bless America, May God Bless you and your families and May God Bless the College we all love.