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2010 Principal Address

Mark Shriver ’86
May 28, 2010

Bishop McManus, Father McFarland, Senior Vice President Vellaccio, Dean Austin, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, staff, parents and family, and graduates. I am honored to be here in Worcester to celebrate the commencement of the Holy Cross Class of 2010.

To the graduates, I extend my heartfelt congratulations on a job well done! To your family and friends, without whom you would not be here today, I say thank you. Their unwavering love, support, and sacrifice has allowed you to succeed, so, graduates, please stand up, turn around, and join me in a big round of applause for your family and friends, who made today possible. Thank you!

Let me also say how honored I am to be here with Father William A. Barry, Reverend Sally Bingham, and Dr. Sidney Callahan. As I am sure you all agree, they have truly earned their honorary degrees!

I come from a large Irish Catholic family that is as competitive as it is big. When I received Father McFarland’s call asking me to speak today, I said yes, and after hanging up the phone, my first reaction was: which sibling should I call first?! So, I called my oldest brother, Bobby, and said, “Bobby, you can’t believe it! Father McFarland called and asked me to give the commencement speech at Holy Cross.”

Bobby immediately interrupted me and said, “Father McFarland called me a week ago and asked me to give that speech. He wanted me to talk about my work with Bono to eradicate malaria and AIDS in Africa and about creating product RED. I cannot do it - - I have to be in Africa with Bono. Talk to you later.”

I was a little discouraged but decided to call my brother, Timothy. After telling him about the call, Timmy said, “Father McFarland called me a few days ago and asked me to give the speech. He wanted me to talk about Special Olympics and the World Games in Shanghai with President Hu and 95,000 Chinese spectators. Unfortunately, I cannot be there because I have to be in Beijing - - tell him I said hi.”

I was a bit confused, so I called my sister, Maria, and said, “I have been asked to give the graduation speech at Holy Cross. Timmy and Bobby claim they were asked. Do you think they are telling the truth?” There was a pause and Maria said, “There is a message here for Arnold to call Father McFarland.”

I am, though, very honored to be here with the most important member of my family, my wife, Jeanne, who graduated from Holy Cross in 1987. Her three brothers, all Holy Cross graduates, are here as well. So the best of the big Shriver clan is here!

When I asked my kids what I should say today, our 12 year old daughter, Molly, said, “I want to go to Holy Cross - - don’t embarrass the family.”

Our 10 year old, Tommy, blurted out, “Holy Cross is in Massachusetts - - give a shout-out to Rajon Rondo!”

And our 5 year old, Emma, asked if I wanted to have a tea party.

After receiving all that good advice, I thought about calling my closest friends. I lived with nine guys my senior year, all of whom are here, except one - - Billy Byrne, who is now a Catholic priest and is presiding over a wedding this afternoon in Washington, DC.

After telling my oldest friend in that crowd about today’s event, he said, “Look, you are a 15-minute interruption in their celebration. If you’re smart, you’ll make it a 10-minute interruption.”

With that in mind, I will keep this under 10 minutes - - I promise!

Just as I accepted the invitation to be here today with you all, I ask you to think about invitations that you have received over the past four years, starting with that acceptance letter inviting you to enroll at Holy Cross and become a part of this unique community. The invitation to your first off-campus party, to a Blind Date Ball, to join friends for spring break, to spend junior year abroad, or to make the Spiritual Exercises. Simple, everyday invitations, like to accept a friend on Facebook or grab dinner at Kimball. Challenging invitations, like whether to go after a job in New York or spend the next year working with the JVC.

In countless ways, your experience at Holy Cross has been defined by your response to those invitations, large and small.

But I want to suggest to each of you that when you accepted the invitation to study at Holy Cross, you accepted an invitation to live your life differently than had you enrolled in any other college in this country.
Just think of the name of this college: Holy Cross.

You enrolled in a place that sees the Cross, the painful crucifixion of Jesus Christ, as a Holy and redeeming moment. A place whose very identity is shaped by the image of a very human, frail, broken, and persecuted Christ. A Christ who said yes to the invitation to sacrifice his humanity to reconcile the world.

Many universities and colleges talk about their students’ experience as a search for proof, the quest for truth. A number of years ago, the President of Harvard wrote that the special mission of the University is the discovery and transmission of knowledge, not to improve society in specific ways.

Right there is the heart of why Holy Cross is different. I know that this college on a hill has taught you that you cannot be morally-neutral; that the contemplative must be matched with equal parts action; that there is no way that you can claim that the morally good life, is not the ultimate purpose of the informed life.

Over and over again, you will be face-to-face with circumstances in which the good life is not being lived, in which freedom and opportunity for others is being denied or compromised. Individualism and consumerism will invite you to look their way, to focus exclusively on your needs and desires.

Will you accept that invitation? Or will you accept Christ’s invitation to right the wrongs around you and to heal the wounds you see?

I hope you will accept the invitation to make gentle the ways of the world in whatever way God invites you. You can say yes to the invitation to help people like Dr. Thomas Flynn did.

A 1951 graduate of Holy Cross, Dr. Flynn was a Navy ROTC graduate who fought in the Korean War, went to Georgetown Medical School, and for 40-plus years has been a Pediatrician. From 2002 to 2006, Dr. Flynn was the President of the CRUDEM Foundation which runs a hospital in Milot, a rural area of Haiti.

The hospital started with eight beds and one operating room and has grown to 65 beds and two operating rooms. After the recent earthquake, the hospital expanded to 420 beds and five operating rooms, including operating rooms in a military tent and local schools. At 80 years of age, Dr. Flynn went to Milot where he coordinated the tent hospitals, the non-governmental organizations, and volunteers in an effort to provide the best medical care possible, under dire circumstances.

Dr. Flynn accepted the invitation!

You can accept the invitation to help poor women and children all over the world gain access to primary healthcare like Elizabeth Sheehan did. A 1981 Holy Cross graduate, Elizabeth worked as a physician assistant in U.S. emergency rooms; she trained paramedics in the mine fields of Cambodia, and taught triage to nurses working in the overcrowded emergency rooms in Mozambique. She realized that the need for access to primary medical care and the green building movement that was pioneering new uses for recycled materials, presented a unique opportunity: one could repurpose 8-by-20 foot metal shipping containers to be portable standardized primary healthcare clinics where local medical personnel could diagnose and treat primary healthcare illnesses and supply the necessary medicines to save lives.

Elizabeth Sheehan accepted the invitation!

You can accept the invitation to turn tragedy into helping young cancer patients like David Perini did. After graduating from Holy Cross in 1959, David went to work for his family company and turned it into a multi-billion dollar business. But his greatest achievement was creating the David B. Perini, Jr. Quality of Life Clinic at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, named in honor of his son who died of cancer at the age of 26. The center helps adolescent survivors of cancer manage the long-term effects of treatment and the risk of second cancers, in addition to providing physical therapy and mental health services.

David will tell you that the Clinic that his wife, Eileen, and he started is the most important accomplishment of his life.

David Perini accepted the invitation!

You can accept the invitation to help troubled young kids, like Eddie Jenkins did. A 1972 Holy Cross graduate, Eddie played in the NFL, including on the undefeated 1972 Super Bowl Champion Miami Dolphins. After retiring, Eddie ran a youth basketball program at the Roxbury YMCA called, “No Books, No Balls.” If the kids don’t study and make their grades, they can’t play basketball. Eddie was also one of the founders of the One Thousand Black Men mentoring program, which takes gang members off the street and educates them. He was chairman of Urban Edge, the largest non-profit housing corporation in New England, which develops affordable housing in parts of Roxbury and Jamaica Plains.

Eddie Jenkins accepted the invitation!

And if you are being invited to join the clergy, you can accept the invitation like my roommate Bill Byrne did…

Eating good food, dating issues and prom night - and that’s all before spending any time with your spouse!

Or going to a job!

And, if you are lucky, you will be able to help your parents as they grow older - - medical care, selling your childhood home, moving boxes, play-dates for your kids with grandma and grandpa, and Sunday dinners.

Accepting the invitation to family life means putting down your blackberry to play with your kids, coming home to have dinner with your family, and loving your spouse.

One of my Holy Cross roommates matter of factly told me the other day that he has turned down promotions at work because he knows that it will pull him away from spending time with his wife and three children. Individualism and consumerism might tell him he is wrong, but he accepted the invitation!
The Pulitzer Prize winning author Anna Quindlen encouraged the graduates of Villanova University at their graduation with these words: “So here’s what I wanted to tell you today: Get a life. A real life, not a maniac pursuit of the next promotion, the bigger paycheck, the larger house.”

She is correct, but I propose that you really can’t “get a life” if it’s just you trying to do it on your own - - you have to accept the invitation from God to make God the central part of your being.

Mother Theresa once said that she was nothing more than a pencil in God’s hands.

Mother Theresa wasn’t in charge - - she wasn’t trying to get a life for herself, by herself. She accepted the invitation to let go, to be nothing more than a pencil in God’s hand, in order to truly get a life.

I initially accepted the invitation to speak here because it is such an honor and it felt good for my ego. But when I started to write this speech, I struggled: should I talk about what I have learned working with juvenile delinquents in Baltimore city or poor kids in rural America? What lessons could I glean from my private sector work or as a member of the Maryland legislature? Or should I talk about my heroes - - my mother who started Special Olympics and gave the commencement address here 31 years ago and died just 10 months ago? Or my dad who started the Peace Corps, Head Start, Legal Services, and other programs and received an honorary degree from Holy Cross 24 years ago and who today, at 94, struggles with Alzheimer’s but who continues to be my role model?

Then one evening, Jeanne and I met Dr. Flynn and his humility and dedication impressed us. When he told us he went to Holy Cross, Jeanne and I were so proud.

At dinner that night, I realized I wanted to share with you all the stories of unsung heroes who have accepted Christ’s invitation to serve, people doing work similar to my heroes - - my mom and dad - - but who will probably never get the chance to speak at a graduation or get an honorary degree.

And then I realized Holy Cross was at it again!

The invitation to be here made me feel like a big shot, an important person. This is a once in a lifetime invitation - - to speak at your alma mater, a place you love and respect, a place where I made friends for a lifetime and met my wife.

Surely this was my chance to speak about my thoughts, to sharemy pearls of wisdom. But those very thoughts conflicted with what Holy Cross taught me.

Indeed, by extending the invitation, Holy Cross was once again teaching me that what I am trying to do in my life - - to serve poor kids and their families - - is what matters, not my own ego, my own self-gratification.

By asking me to stand in front of you - - a man who is not a high-ranking legal or political potentate, who is not a business tycoon or a best-selling author - - by inviting me to speak - - someone who is striving to be a pencil in God’s hand - - Holy Cross has taught me - - and I hope all of you - - that what is truly important in life is to accept Jesus’ invitation to serve each other.

There is an old saying in my family, made popular by President Kennedy, a passage from Luke: “to whom much is given, much is required,” which speaks of obligation.

I much prefer St. Francis’s invitation: “It is in giving that we receive.”

Giving brings lessons in love, compassion, humility, resilience, and joy that aren’t available in any schoolbook, even those here at Holy Cross.

I challenge each of you to accept the invitation to be a “woman for others” or a “man for others” in the Jesuit tradition, throughout your lives.

When you accept that invitation, you might be ridiculed or ostracized, you surely won’t have the biggest bank account or the biggest house, but you will be fulfilling the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. when he said:

“Everybody can be great because anybody can serve. You don’t have to have a college degree to serve. You don’t have to make your subject and your verb agree to serve... You don’t have to know the second theory of thermodynamics in physics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love.”

Good luck in your pursuit of greatness!!