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## 2009 Commencement Address: Sen. Robert P. Casey, Jr. '82 (D-Pennsylvania)

Robert P. Casey Jr.

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# 2009 Principal Address

Sen. Robert P. Casey Jr. '82 (D-Pennsylvania)  
May 22, 2009



Bishop Mc Manus, Father McFarland, my friend for 30 years Board Chair Kevin Condron, Dean Austin, Father Brooks, board members, faculty, staff, parents and family, and class of 2009 graduates.

Congratulations and best wishes to all the graduates. This is your day. While in his 80's, Thomas Jefferson once said, "I like the dreams of the future better than the history of the past." Today we celebrate that future, your future.

I am profoundly honored to have been invited to speak at this Commencement. As a student at Holy Cross, my faith was nurtured and my commitment to service was inspired by the Jesuits and the lay faculty. The classmate I fell in love with, Terese Foppiano, is the woman I have been married to for 24 years. Holy Cross wasn't simply a chapter in my life. It was a determinative experience for me academically, spiritually and socially. Like many Jesuit- educated students, I participated in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola and was deeply moved by the story of the road to Emmaus in Luke's gospel (24:13-35) and the verse where two apostles say to each other "was not our heart burning within us while he was speaking on the road and explaining to us the Scriptures?" That retreat and those verses from scripture helped me to understand the gift of faith. This college, this community of faith, made that experience possible.

I remember today my father from the class of '53 and his life of service and sacrifice, faith and family, compassion and courage. My sister Erin, my brothers Chris and Pat, as well as my niece Casey McGrath are all graduates. Every year my roommates Dave McElroy and Bob Cunningham, and several other of our classmates, get together with our families, to tell the same old stories.

We live in a time of economic distress for many families who've lost their jobs, their homes, their hopes and their dreams. May of 2009 is also a time of danger and uncertainty around the world with young American men and women in uniform fighting in two wars and other places around the globe. We pray for them and for ourselves that we may be worthy of their valor.

Today I want to speak directly to our graduates, not about policy but about service. Every graduate here was given gifts of intellect and talent that have been enhanced by your hard work and by the academic rigor of the curriculum. Each graduate had the opportunity to benefit spiritually as well, from Jesuits who would "enkindle faith in your hearts" as the late Fr. Robert Manning said in his homily at the baccalaureate mass to the class of '82.

I am forever grateful that several people here at Holy Cross introduced me to the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. After graduation, my assignment was to teach 5th grade and coach 8th grade basketball at the Gesu Catholic School in the inner city of North Philadelphia. I taught 35 5th graders all subjects in one classroom.

Twenty six years later, I have specific memories of almost every child. The image of one child I'll never forget was that of Arkecia Morris. She was a beautiful little girl in an immaculate school uniform, a radiant smile and her hair in perfect pig tails. She was a diligent student who always completed her homework.

In 2005, during my campaign for the Senate, I was told that there was a young woman who stopped by our campaign office and she informed one of our staff that she thought that I may have been one of her teachers. I asked for her name and the staff person said he didn't know her last name, but her first name was Arkecia. Immediately, a picture of that beautiful 5th grade child came to mind. Now, 22 years later, Arkecia was about 33 years old and I was so happy to see her again. In the intervening years, she had lived through many difficult days. Yet, despite a life of struggle and pain she now worked as a foster parent for several children who had been horrifically abused. I once asked her how she did such difficult work. I told her I could not do the daily work she did with children so hurt, so broken. Without a moment's hesitation, Arkecia looked at me, smiled, and said, "Sometimes our burdens can become our blessings." I was so moved and inspired by what she said. Hers had been a life of heavy burdens and yet she had the desire to care for, and to embrace children who had been the victims of beatings and withering abuse. She taught me so much that day about what it means to be a person "for others."

Every graduate here today has the ability and opportunity to serve. All of us have an abiding obligation to serve. We are summoned by the words from the New Testament, "To whom much has been given, much is expected." Whether it is service in the military or the ministry, public office or community service, volunteering to help the poor – whatever type of service you choose – please make a commitment and remain ever steadfast in fulfilling that commitment. Your labor will bring healing and hope to "the least, the last and the lost;" your faith will fortify you as you bring the bright, light of compassion to the darkness that engulfs so many lives. And, touched by the quiet strength of people like Arkecia, your conscience will move you to not only count your blessings, but use your blessings to help lift the many burdens of our sisters and our brothers.

"Was not our heart burning within us when he was speaking on the road and explaining to us the Scriptures?" For our graduates, we pray that as the road ahead rises to meet you, may the fire of your faith, "enkindled in your hearts," burn ever brightly as you comfort the sorrowful, protect the vulnerable, and give voice to the voiceless. May God bless you and those you love this day and always.



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