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2005 Commencement Address: Tim Russert

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2005 Commencement Address

Tim Russert, managing editor and moderator of NBC's Meet the Press

"Come on, sun!"

Before all else, Class of 2005, Congratulations! You have finally made it!

I'm often asked my favorite Meet the Press story in its 57-year tradition - it involves a gentleman who ran for president by the name of Ross Perot. We had a very robust, feisty interview one time - he was going to get under the hood and show me how to balance the budget and didn't have his facts or his charts quite right. I went to the airplane to get on the shuttle, and the flight attendant ran down the aisle, and she said, "That interview with Ross Perot was unbelievable. What do you think of him?" I said, "Ma'am I never comment about my guests or their performance on Meet the Press, but as a viewer, as a voter, as a flight attendant, I'm endlessly curious - What do you think of Ross Perot?" She paused and said, "He strikes me as the kind of guy that would never return his tray table to the upright position."

Barbara Bush, the revered first lady for President Bush 41, was approached by White House Chief of Staff John Sununu, the former governor of New Hampshire. He said, "Barbara, I need your wisdom, your guidance, your help, your counsel - Why is it that everybody here in Washington and the White House seems to take such an instant dislike to me?" She looked at him and said, "Because it saves time, John." He resigned six weeks later.

Now, before you can move on to the next phase of your lives, you must undergo the last grueling hurdle in your career here at the College of the Holy Cross: The Commencement Address.

Let me be honest with you about my experiences with commencement addresses. I've been through several of my own, and I've sat through dozens of others. And I can't recall a single word or phrase from any of those informed, inspirational and seemingly interminable speeches.

In preparing for today, I had thought about presenting a scholarly treatise on campaign finance reform - but I thought better of it.

I guess I'm like that noted philosopher ...Yogi Berra ... I get it eventually ... After Yogi had flunked his math exam ... his teacher came down the aisle, shook him and said, "Yogi, don't you know anything?" Yogi looked up and said, "I don't even suspect anything." This is the same Yogi who, when asked whether he wanted his pizza cut into six or eight slices, said, "six - I can't eat eight."

This is the second most humbling day of my life. The first was in 1985. I was granted an extraordinary opportunity - a private audience with the Holy Father - the late great John Paul II.

I'll never forget it. The door opened - and there was the Pope - dressed in white. He walked into the room, which at that time seemed as large as Fitton Field. I was there to convince His Holiness it was in his interest to appear on the Today program. But my thoughts quickly turned away from Bryant Gumbel's career and NBC's ratings toward the prospect of salvation. As the Vicar of Christ approached me, you heard this tough, no-nonsense, hard-hitting moderator of Meet the Press begin our conversation by saying, "Bless me Father!" He said, "You are the man called Timothy from NBC." I said, "I am your guy." He said, "They tell me you are a very important man."

I said, "Your Holiness, with all due and deep respect, there are only two of us in this room - I'm a most distant second." He put his hands on my shoulders ... looked me in the eyes ... smiled broadly and said ... "Right."

It's not often you have a chance to meet and talk with people of the same background and the same values ...

So let me skip the temptation of that campaign finance reform lecture and, instead, just take a few minutes and have a conversation with the Class of 2005. As Mary Beth said, like each of you, my life changed forever on September 11, 2001, at 8:46 a.m.

The English language does not yet include the words we need to express our sorrow for what happened on that day when most of you were just freshmen. Only in our hearts can we give full and complete expression of our grief and shocking sense of personal loss ... and the agony of seeing our nation so violated ... and yet we learned much about ourselves that day ... about the fragility of life ... and our deep love for our country and for our real heroes ...

I decided to write a book about my hero ... my dad, Big Russ. He was a truck driver and a sanitation man. ... He worked two full-time jobs for 30 years ... and he never complained ... and that was after he nearly died when his B-24 Liberator went down in World War II ... that is the story of his generation ... He never graduated from high school ... but he taught me more by the quiet eloquence of his hard work ... his basic decency ... his intense loyalty ... he taught me the true lessons of life.

The response to the book was extraordinary. I received tens of thousands of letters and e-mails from daughters and sons who wanted to share their stories and their lessons about their dad. In fact, I'm using those letters as the basis for a second book - Dad: Lessons and Letters from Daughters and Sons ... if any of the graduates or their parents want to tell me about your dad, go to tobigrussandme.com and write your heart out ...

As a young boy I remember sitting with my Mom and Dad and watching John Kennedy, the first Catholic president, conclude his Inaugural Address:

"With history the final judge of our deeds, let us go forth to lead the land we love, asking His blessing and His help, but knowing that

here on Earth God's work must truly be our own."

What is God's work here on Earth?

Understanding that, I believe, is the key to a meaningful life - the essence of our earthly existence. College of the Holy Cross endeavors to educate a new generation of leaders for the new millennium - men and women who will be capable of shaping a new century with vision, justice and charity - with a strong sense of calling, and concern for all of the human family.

I am the first person in my family to have the chance to go to college.

As Father (McFarland) mentioned, it was Sister Lucille in seventh grade who changed my life. She summoned me to the front of the room with one of these - (her index finger calling me forward) and said, "Timothy, we need to find an alternative vehicle to channel your excessive energy. She started a school newspaper and made me the editor. It changed me forever - I fell in love with writing and reporting, and, because of my work on that paper, I was admitted to Canisius Jesuit High School where Fr. John Strum, the prefect of discipline, put me against the walls for some perceived indiscretion. I said, "Father, don't you believe in mercy?" He said, "Russert, mercy is for God. I deliver justice." Accountability has been with me forever.

And, then, I attended John Carroll University - a Jesuit school - where I received a superb education.

And so, too, with you. You chose a school that was different, and you made the choice deliberately.

The education you've received at the College of the Holy Cross isn't meant to be the same as you could have received at a score of colleges - public or private - in this area or across this country.

You've been given an education that says it's not enough to have a skill. Not enough to have read all the books or know all the facts. Values really do matter.

College of the Holy Cross ... A Catholic university founded by the Jesuits.

Its only justification for existing is because it has a special mission - training young men and women to help shape and influence the moral tone and fiber of our nation and our society. And that now means you have a special obligation and responsibility. You have been blessed with extraordinary opportunities, and as St. Luke tells us, "to whom much is given - much indeed is now expected."

Graduating from College of the Holy Cross has given you incredible advantages over others in your

generation. Yes - I, too, have heard the sometimes smug remarks about Catholic colleges.

You think you've had it bad. You should try being a Buffalo Bills fan in Washington, D.C.! I actually took Meet the Press to a Super Bowl a few years back. At the end of the program, I looked into the camera and said, "Now it's in God's hands. And God is good. And God is just. Please God, One time. Go Bills!"

My colleague, Tom Brokaw, jumped up and said, "You Irish Catholics from South Buffalo are shameless. You can't pray on the public air waves."

I said, "You'll see the power of prayer, Brokaw."

Well, the Dallas Cowboys slipped by the Bills 52-10. The first person I saw back at the hotel was Brokaw who yelled across the room, "Hey, Russert, I guess God is a Southern Baptist."

You have something others would give anything for!

You believe in your God, in your country, in your family, in Holy Cross, in yourselves and in your values.

Remember the message our parents and grandparents and teachers repeated and repeated - and have tried so hard to instill in us. A belief if you worked hard and played fair, things really would turn out all right.

And, after working for senators and governors and meeting Popes and interviewing Presidents - I know they are right. It sure seems funny - the older I get the smarter my mother and father seem to get.

The values you have been taught, the struggles you survived, the diploma you have received, have prepared you to compete with anybody, anywhere.

People with backgrounds like yours and mine can and will make a difference. In Albania, a young girl lost her father at age 8 - left home for India as a teenager - in her own words - "To care for the unwanted, the lepers, people with AIDS, believing works of love are works of peace." She became a living Saint - Mother Teresa.

In Poland, it was a young electrician named Lech Walesa, the son of a carpenter, who transformed a nation from communism to democracy.

In South Africa, Nelson Mandela ... a brave black man who worked his way through law school as a police officer, spending 28 years in prison to prove one central point - we are all created equal.

And on September 11, at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon and the field in Shanksville, Pa., it was our brother and sister police, fire and rescue workers who properly redefined modern day heroism.

All these men and women have one thing in common with you - like the past, the future leaders of this country and this world will not be born to the blood of kings and queens, but to the blood of immigrants and pioneers.

It is now your turn. You will have the opportunity to be doctors, nurses, lawyers, bankers, accountants, social workers, Jesuits, journalists, military officers, entrepreneurs, businesspeople, teachers and more. And in those vital professions, your contributions can and will be enormous. You can help save lives, provide prosperity, record history, prevent disease, train young minds.

And, remember, it was your parents and grandparents who defended this country ... who built this country ... who brought you into this world and a chance to live the American dream. Will your generation do as much for your children? You know you must. Every generation is tested ... every generation is given the opportunity to become the "greatest generation."

And, so, too, with the College of the Holy Cross graduates of 2005. You were born and educated to be players in this extraordinary blessing called life.

Work and live in comfort. Enjoy yourself.

You've earned it - and that is the American

way. But please do this world one small

favor.

Remember the people struggling alongside you and below you. The people who haven't had the same opportunity, the same blessings, the same College of the Holy Cross education.

Eight children a day shot dead in the streets of America ... 25 percent of our eighth graders never graduating from high school. Thirty-five million adults in our country without a high school education.

If we are serious about continuing as the world's premier military, and economic and moral force in the world, we have no choice. We need all of our children contributing and prospering.

Unless we instill in our young the most basic social skills and cultural and moral values ... we will be a very different society. We must motivate, inspire - yes, insist - our children respect one another ... "love thy neighbor as thyself."

We must teach our children they are never, never entitled, but they are always, always loved.

No matter what profession you choose, you must try, even in the smallest ways, to improve the quality of life of all the children in our country.

No one has shown that generous spirit of service more than the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. No matter what your political philosophy, reach down, find a child you can pull up - some are sick, some are lonely, some are uneducated. Most have little control over their fate. Give them a hand. Give them a chance. Give them their dignity.

Father's right. The best speech I ever heard was all of 16 words: "No exercise is better for the human heart than reaching down to lift up another person."

That is your charge. That is your challenge. That is your opportunity.

That's what I believe it means to be member of the Class of 2005 of College of the Holy Cross. For the good of all of us, please build a future we can be proud of.

You can do it.

But please, get busy ... you only have 2,300 weeks before you'll be eligible for Social Security!

Have a wonderful life.

Take care of one

another. Be careful

tonight.

And for the rest of your life ... "work hard, laugh often, and keep your honor."

And, as Notre Dame found out in January, "Go Crusaders"!