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1984 Commencement Address: Mario Cuomo, Governor of New York

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1984 Commencement Address

Governor Mario Cuomo, New York

Bishop Harrington, Bishop Flanagan, Fr. Brooks, distinguished honorees, members of the faculty and of the staff, distinguished guests on the dais, friends and loved ones of the graduates, and graduates of the Class of 1984. Before all else, congratulations to you. You ought to be proud. Yours is a grand achievement today. This is your day, a time for celebrating the culmination of your hard work, for rejoicing with your family and friends, with the people who have sustained you and supported you and, when necessary, put up with you.

All of this pent up joy makes today a wonderful time for a party and a terrible time for a speech, especially a long one by a politician. I know that from experience. In the course of my own lifetime, I've gone through or sat through more graduations than I care to count. The speakers at those events were, I am sure, witty, brilliant, learned - only the truth is, I cannot remember a single word of a single one of all those many speeches I heard. So when I was first asked to give this graduation speech - rather than just listen to it - I was intimidated indeed.

I was so daunted by the prospect that I thought back to a time that I went to Fr. John Flynn, the president of St. John's University, on the occasion when I had been asked to give my first commencement address. And I went to him for counsel and for consolation, and this is what Fr. Flynn told me, the God's honest truth. He gave me this advice. He said, "Remember, Mario, a commencement speaker should think of themselves as the body at an old-fashioned Irish wake - they need you in order to have the party but nobody expects you to say a great deal."

Now Fr. Flynn was a Vincentian, not a Jesuit, but he had a cousin who taught at Fordham. I know I can remember that because of the distinctive way Fr. Flynn used to refer to his cousin. He would say to us, "My cousin," he used to say, "left the church and joined the Jesuits."

But despite their occasional rivalry with the Jesuits, the Vincentian fathers instilled in us a deep respect for the learning and scholarship of the Society of Jesus, for its rigorous intellectual standards, even while warning us of a certain penchant for the esoteric. As a matter of fact, the Vincentians had such admiration for the Jesuits that when I was studying rhetoric at St. John's, our Vincentian teacher used to insist that we learn to deliver what he called a proper Jesuit speech. That is, a speech argued with impeccable logic and elegant grammar and impassioned language and totally devoid of facts. I used to argue some cases that way.

With that excuse, then, that any fault in language or logic in what I'm about to say is the result of not having been benefited by a Jesuit education, let me offer you a few thoughts on the world that you're about to go out to face and the education that you take with you. And remembering that I can't reasonably expect you to remember a whole lot of what I said - I would ask you perhaps to focus on one thing that I will remind you of and that is that most of you call yourselves Christians.

The world, as you may have noticed, has its painful aspects. It is a place right now where the great powers are so alienated from one another that they can't even play together in the Olympics. Our planet bristles with bombs and missiles ready to pour out their destructiveness in a nuclear Armageddon, and we continue the build up of arms while children by the thousands die of hunger in Africa and Asia, while millions of refugees scour the earth for some scrap of hope of dignity, while old people literally freeze to death in the streets and doorways of our great cities. For many, this world of ours in the last decades of the 20th century is a threatened place, bleeding and broken, in pain. Not for all, however. For some inscrutable reason there are those of us who always seem in this great game of life to fall on the safe squares. To escape the real tragedies. And many of you, I'm sure, will be among the lucky players.

After all, you're now graduates of one of the finest private colleges in the richest nation on earth and the diploma that you've received today is more than just a testament to your learning, intellect and industry. It's a passport to professional schools, to careers in industry or the law, to all of the good things that America offers her children. In all likelihood most of you will never face deprivation. And it may occur to you that there's no reason why you have to immerse yourself in the world's miseries. The wars we fear may after all never happen. The truth is that probably you will never be forced to concern yourselves with a little girl riddled with rickets and dysentery, dying on the dirt floor of a hut in a village whose name you can't even pronounce.

Probably you'll never have to look into the face of an old man uneducated, ill, alone, in the winter, huddled on a heating grate in the midst of New York City's magnificence, or Detroit's or Chicago's. Where you will probably live, you'll probably never see any of that. There are suburbs and neighborhoods where you can enjoy what you've learned and absorb yourself in the ordinary work and triumphs and tragedies of your lives, and that sounds pretty good. Who could blame you if you did? The education the College of the Holy Cross has given you allows you to do that. It allows you to. But it doesn't encourage you to.

That's because the education you've received here is not meant to be the same as you could have received at a score of secular colleges and universities, public and private, across this country. You chose a school that was different and you made the choice deliberately. Holy Cross is a Catholic school and because of that you've been given an education with a difference. You've been given an education that says it's not enough to have a skill; not enough to have read all the good books, even all the great books; not enough to know all the important facts or mouth all the nice humanitarian sentiments that liberal arts graduates are supposed to

memorize. The very name of this college tells you what it thinks is required, even if you're tempted to forget it. This place was justified because it had something special to say and what it had to say is that you are supposed to love openly, freely, absolutely, with all of your heart and all of your will, not because it's a nice thing to do and it will help you to keep your sanity, but because your souls are at stake, because without that love we will perish as individuals, as a nation, even as a world.

Sticky stuff, this talk of love. Almost sanctimonious. Maybe. But it's what Catholicism is made of when Catholicism is more than just a label, more than just a word that you use to fill in a blank on an application. I say this to you both as a Christian, a Catholic and as a politician - and I know that at times in the past and maybe even today, it's been claimed that the terms Catholic and politician don't mix, but I don't believe that. I believe that at the very heart of our Catholic tradition is an insistence on community,

on reaching salvation by embracing the world, restoring it, rebuilding it, changing it. As Catholics, we know the world can never be perfect, but we know, too, that our salvation is intimately tied to our willingness to work towards its transformation. And we know that that work includes all the labor of human minds and human hands in our private lives and in our homes, in work places, in factories, in politics and in public office. Sticky stuff - maybe.

Recently in New York City I was invited to speak about this Catholic sense of social commitment before the congregation of a Protestant cathedral. I told the audience there that I hadn't entered politics in spite of religion but because of it. I said that I had left the practice of the law after 20 years and entered politics because the faith I try to hold - and it's not easy - challenged me to do so. Politics, to me, embodies the concept of stewardship. The commitment of each to the welfare of all, a commitment embodied in what we do as individuals but also in what we do together for each other, as a community, as a government, as a family. The concept of stewardship of the common good has always been, I believe, a part of our government. It was written into our constitution and much of our history has been taken up in the struggle to expand it, to include those left out: the immigrants, the blacks, the women, the disabled.

As a matter of fact, for 50 years, from the time that Franklin Roosevelt lifted himself out of his wheelchair to raise this nation from its knees until 1980, we seem to have agreed that it was not only moral but practical to have a government that was committed to compassion. It was right, we believed for those 50 years, that government help those with talents to go as far as they could on their own merits. And it was equally right to help those who couldn't help themselves: the child born blind, the young mother struggling to feed her children, the steelworker who, after 20 years in the mill, finds himself on an unemployment line and doesn't understand it. Only after 50 years of profiting from this philosophy, this belief began to be regarded as unfashionable, maybe even ineffectual.

Many of us who have been raised up from poverty to the middle class and even beyond to affluence, by virtue of this philosophy - when finally we grew comfortable, we began to forget where we came from.

Forget how government helped us gain an education, how government helped us to own a house, how government kept our people secure in their old age and how government gave for us the promise of America in reality. A promise that our immigrant ancestors could only dream of. Our government began to adopt an attitude that reflected this amnesia, an attitude that says, it's alright to forget because we can no longer afford to help the weak. And even if we could, we shouldn't, because in the process we will only drain away the ambition and motivation of the strong. If they had said that 50 years ago, a lot of you would not be here today.

Compassion, we're told by some today, is not the business of government. Government must be directed by the realism of Darwin, not the moral idealism of the Sermon on the Mount. Indeed there is a powerful move toward a whole new ethic in this society, one that says God helps those whom God has helped. And if God has left you out, who are we to presume on his will? It's a move that is growing frighteningly close to success. We now have a policy of governmental euthanasia toward the old industrial areas of this country, areas like the northeast, which for a century bore the burden of America's immigrants. We have more and more money for bombs and less for babies. Less to feed the hungry. Less to educate the young. Less to train people for work. More and more poor people. Did you know that more people are poor now than at any time since the Depression - a growing mass of those born to live and die outside the abundance and privilege that so many of us take for granted.

And as you leave Holy Cross the national preeminence of this Darwinian view presents you with a choice - either you can swim with the tide and accept the notion that your sole responsibility is your own success. And you can do that, and some of you will. Or you can resist. You can resist by affirming with your lives the idea that we are our brothers' keepers, all of us as a people, as a people participating in government; that we have a responsibility to our brothers and sisters, and that responsibility does not end when they are out of the individual reach of our hand or our charity or our love.

This belief that we have a collective responsibility to love and to express that love through our government is not an easy thing. It can haunt you - disturbing your sleep and giving you that sense of guilt and unworthiness that the modern age is so eager to deny. And it can accuse you from the faces of the starving and the dispossessed and the wounded, faces that stare back at us from the front pages of our newspapers, images from across the world that blink momentarily on our television screens. "I was homeless," it says, "and you gave me theories of supply and demand. I was imprisoned and silenced for justice's sake and you washed the hands of my torturers. I asked you for bread and you built the world's most sophisticated nuclear arsenal." Yet if we are to claim Christ's name - and we don't have to - but if we are to claim it, if we are to dare to call ourselves Christians, what choice do we really have but to hear that voice and to answer its challenge.

Teilhard de Chardin in just a few magnificent sentences captured every- thing I've tried to say so falteringly here. Talking about our obligations to involve ourselves in the things of this world, he wrote, "Jerusalem, lift up your head. Look at the immense crowds of those who build and those who love. All over the world they toil, in laboratories, in studies, in factories, in the vast social crucible. Open your arms and your heart, like Christ your Lord, and welcome the waters, the flood and the sweat of humanity, accept it all and be part of it all, for without becoming part of it you must whither or be dispersed wildly in sterile shoots."

Those are beautiful words. I regret that more of my own generation have not read them or remembered them or been moved by them. But very honestly, standing here looking out at you, sensing your freshness and expectations and faith and strength, I feel better. I believe in all candor that you understand better than those who have gone before you what de Chardin had in mind. I believe you're smarter than we were. I believe that you're smart enough to learn from our mistakes. I believe that you will actively participate in government more than we did. I believe you will take what we pass on to you and make it something better than we've ever known: a nation truly at peace, an environment restored and preserved, a world struggling to realize the dignity of all of its children. Class of 1984, despite the prevailing philosophies of the moment, despite what the pessimists say, you make me want to live long enough to see and be part of the city that you will build. A city of God and a city of humanity. You will succeed; I'm sure of it.

In love and by love. And in large measure you will succeed thanks to this marvelous institution, the College of the Holy Cross. Thank you for having me and God bless you.