

The Alabaster Jar

- Baccalaureate Mass
- June 11, 2016
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Welcome to this Baccalaureate Mass on your Commencement Weekend from Seattle University. Thank you Fr. Mike Ryan, pastor of the cathedral and our pastor for leading us in worship today. With Fr. Ryan and me today is Fr. Pat O’Leary, the senior Jesuit at Seattle U, now 86 years old, who first came to teach at Seattle U 52 years ago. Fr. O’Leary joins us because we want to thank him in a special way for his service as he now goes to Spokane to carry on his priestly work there. Later in the Mass the choir will thank Fr. O’Leary with a very special song of blessing. Fr. O’Leary could you stand so we could all greet you.

I speak now to the graduating students. Thanks for coming to this Baccalaureate Mass. Perhaps you have come for the ceremony, the choir, the beauty of the Cathedral. Perhaps you have come in order to walk in procession in your academic regalia one time before you walk across the stage at commencement tomorrow. Perhaps you came in order to be with your classmates and friends from university before departing. Perhaps you came in order to be with your families and to say thanks to them. Perhaps you come to stop, to pray, to take stock of these years, to mark the milestone and to ask for a blessing on the road ahead. Perhaps you are not quite certain why you came. In any case you are here. Welcome.

There has been building up in me a desire to tell you, our students, what I most deeply believe and feel and think. I give about 250 talks a year and I tell people that I actually say something in five of them! Some students have picked up on this and have said to me, “Fr. Steve, we know all five of your talks by heart!” I tell them, “listen up, I’ve got six talks!” So here you might say is the sixth one. Let me approach it from the gospel story we just heard.

At this banquet Jesus speaks to Simon his host and to the woman at his feet. Simon speaks to Jesus. The one in the story who is silent is the woman, but she is the one who expresses more from her heart than anyone else, pouring out her love and her gratitude for mercy by pouring oil from her alabaster jar, anointing the feet of Jesus, wiping them with her hair and kissing them. She expresses more than anyone else and more from deep within herself. How I envy her so able to express herself and her truth and her love, from her heart and with her touch.

Let me pour some oil from my own alabaster jar, from deep within myself, from perhaps the only revelation from God I have received in my life. Let me lay it at your feet, our graduating students, as I believe it is a revelation also meant for you.

When I was 28 years old and had already been a Jesuit for 10 years I was making an eight-day retreat outside of Rome in Italy. The director of the retreat, Frederico, was helping me day by patient day to come to greater freedom as he found me a good, dutiful Jesuit, but a rigid one. One day I was led by him to a point where for the first time in my Jesuit life I realized that I had believed I had to be a Jesuit, that God held it over me as an obligation, a vocation from him I had better follow. I suddenly saw the alternative to this way of living in marriage and family and

career. I blurted out for the first time, “Well then I don’t know whether I want to be a Jesuit!” I almost yelled it out and with bitter tears. In that moment I received the revelation. I heard Christ say to me, “Steve, I don’t really care if you become a Jesuit. You can be whatever you want to be. You choose whatever you want to be and I will love you in that!” There it is, there is the oil from my alabaster jar. “Choose to be whatever you really want to be in freedom and God will love you in that.” Like that woman at Jesus’ feet, I wept for a very long time washing, as it were, his feet with my tears, and then in my first full freedom in 10 years the words came rushing out, “Well, if you will love me in whatever I choose in my freedom, and if I don’t have to be any one thing, don’t have to be a Jesuit, then what I most truly and freely and deeply want to be is in fact to be a Jesuit!” For the first time in full freedom I chose it and that is where Christ has loved me and where God’s grace and blessing have flowed in me all these years. God’s grace flows in our deepest freedom.

I lay this very personal story before your feet on this weekend of your graduation, this one and only real revelation in my life from God—but who needs more than one when it is like that—this sixth talk of mine in which I say something, probably the only thing I really have to say or to contribute to others in all that I say. I tell you this because I want to say to you, confirm in you, that where God works most freely in your life with God’s grace and love and mercy is in your deepest chosen freedom. I don’t just believe this; I know this; I have been given to know it. It’s the full oil of my alabaster jar.

I respect and I wonder where each of you are in coming into and knowing your own deepest and truest freedom, freedom to choose what kind of person you will be, what you will do with your life, and with whom and for whom you will live it. I am not sure where your faith is—and maybe you are not sure either—but I believe that your road to faith is through freedom, because it is in your freedom that God loves you. Where else could God be present to you except in who you really are, in your identity, in your gender, in your race, in your culture, in who your family has helped you to become, and who I hope your university has also helped you to own, to take pride in, to love, and from which to serve others.

For 470 years Jesuit education has stood by this first and most important principle of accepting students as they are, starting with them as they are, not imposing anything on them, but helping them by our way of education to come to their own true and deep freedom so that they can shape their lives on their own terms in that freedom. At Jesuit universities we get accused at times for allowing students too much freedom or of not teaching them enough about God. We accept that criticism fundamentally because we believe that God is the one who teaches our students, teaches them in the place of their freedom, the place from which the silent but most expressive woman had no fear to come among those men at dinner, to break that time’s social norms, to pour out her love and gratitude for mercy, to touch and to kiss. She was the free one who loved much and to whom Jesus said, “Your faith has saved you, go in peace.”

So too may you go forth in peace knowing that God will love you in your deepest freedom and that from there will come your own faith, by which to live your lives. And know our prayers for you.