Opinion
NCR Voices



Graduates of the Catholic University of America celebrate during the school's 132nd annual commencement ceremony May 15, 2021, at FedEx Field in Landover, Maryland. (CNS/Courtesy of the Catholic University of America)



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If it's May, that means it is time for colleges and universities to scramble to find a commencement speaker, a fruitless annual endeavor that serves only to distract from the students graduating, cause controversy or boredom (depending on the choice of speaker), and indicate any shifts in the phalanx of culture warrior avatars.

This year, the most interesting choice comes from Hillsdale College, a conservative Christian school in Michigan that was recently the subject of a New Yorker profile by the inimitable Emma Green. She focused on the school because of its growing prominence in the culture wars.

"[Florida Gov. Ron] DeSantis has said that he probably wouldn't hire someone from his alma mater, Yale. But 'if I get somebody from Hillsdale,' he said, 'I know they have the foundations necessary to be able to be helpful in pursuing conservative policies,' " Green wrote. "In January, DeSantis's chief of staff told National Review that the governor hoped to transform New College of Florida, a public liberal-arts school, into a 'Hillsdale of the South.' "

Hillsdale is the perfect fusion of conservative Christianity with an aggressive and unsophisticated Americanism of a kind we do not normally associate with higher education. Their ads on Fox News tout their online courses in which the Founding Fathers rank right up there with the apostles in terms of cultural authority. Mind you, I am a big fan of the founders, and of their handiwork, but wrapping the American founding in Christian theology is bad history and bad theology, just as ignoring the role of religion in shaping the worldview of the founders is also intellectually suspect.

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Before its current status as the ideal college for conservative culture warriors like DeSantis, Hillsdale was most known for its decision to withdraw from all federal tuition assistance programs. Their website states: "To maintain our independence in

every regard, Hillsdale does not accept one penny of state or federal taxpayer funding — even indirectly in the form of student grants and loans." High points for integrity but low points for attention to the common good.

So, of course this year's commencement speaker will be — drumroll, please — Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota. Pity he is not going to bring his dog-and-pony show with Canadian provocateur Jordan Peterson to the Hillsdale campus. Barron is increasingly willing to cozy up to wealthy conservative culture warriors, which is disturbing in anyone, but frightening in a bishop.



Bishop Robert Barron, then a Los Angeles auxiliary, speaks during the fall general assembly of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops Nov. 11, 2019, in Baltimore. Barron, who now heads the Diocese of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, will be this year's commencement speaker for Hillsdale College. (OSV News/CNS file, Bob Roller)

To be fair, Hillsdale gets a thumbs up for its recent decision to sever ties with a private academy in Florida after the school board forced the principal to resign for failing to alert parents their children would be exposed to Michelangelo’s statue

"David" in all his nude glory. "Of course, Hillsdale's K-12 art curriculum includes Michelangelo's 'David' and other works of art that depict the human form," said a spokesperson for the college. Lest you think Barron's appearance is an endorsement of Renaissance art, Davidgate happened months after the announcement about Barron being the commencement speaker.

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My alma mater gets the win for worst choice of graduation speaker by a prominent Catholic university. Catholic University of America graduates will get to listen to Arthur Brooks, who served as president of the American Enterprise Institute from 2009 until 2019.

In announcing the choice, CUA neglected to mention his tenure at AEI, which exists to defend the kind of neoliberal economic policies that have long been a reverse image of the kind of economy envisioned by Catholic social teaching. Instead, they describe Brooks as a "New York Times bestselling author, columnist at The Atlantic, Ph.D. social scientist, and 'happiness expert.' " Happiness expert?



Arthur Brooks, at an event in Phoenix, Arizona, in this 2017 photo (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore, CC BY-SA 3.0)

As luck would have it, as I started preparing this column, I received an email notification from the Napa Institute that in advance of its annual summer conference, the organization would be offering "a unique and intimate experience with Arthur Brooks to learn from his extensive research on happiness and how to apply these insights to your life through a Catholic lens." Are we to assume that some of the plutocrats at Napa Institute are unhappy? The email recounts Brooks'

recent visit with the Dalai Lama. I confess, every time I read about the Dalai Lama, I am reminded of an interview on Australian TV when the host told the Tibetan holy man a joke about himself: The Dalai Lama walks into a pizza shop and asks, "Can you make me one with everything?" Every time I watch that video I crack up.

Brooks' connection with Napa, if not with the Dalai Lama, makes sense of the CUA commencement address: The business school at CUA is named for Tim Busch, the founder of the Napa Institute, and his wife Steph. It appears my alma mater was "sold" to the Busch family at some point. The right-wing lurch at the school under its previous president John Garvey was appalling, and hosting a champion of neoliberalism as a commencement speaker just adds to the evidence that the school has lost its way.

Who needs all the distraction? Let's do away with the tradition of having a commencement speaker at all. I am all for tradition when it enriches our minds and ennobles our morals, but this tradition does none of that. Notre Dame's Laetare Medal achieves that ennobling of our moral sense but most Catholic universities are not Notre Dame and most speakers are not worthy of a Laetare Medal. Basta. Let one of the graduating students speak, or let there be a moment of silence.

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