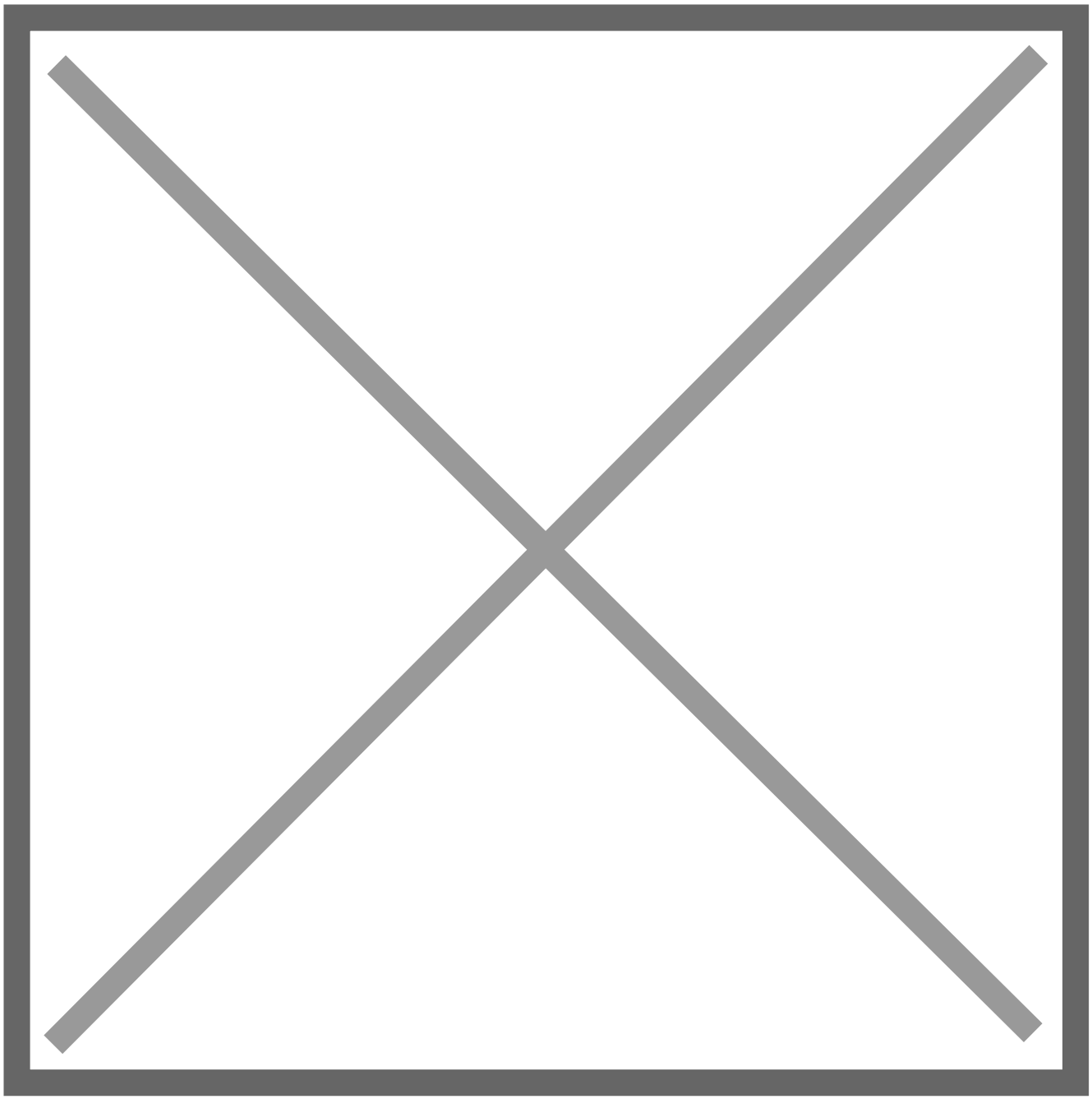
News



A member of the St. John's University class of 2026 smiles as he participates in commencement ceremonies May 17, 2026, at the Vincentian school's campus in the Jamaica section of the New York borough of Queens. (OSV News/Gregory A. Shemitz)



by OSV News

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May 27, 2026
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From Pope Leo XIV and the highest ranking woman at the Vatican to an ambassador and governor, the 2026 graduates at U.S. Catholic colleges and universities heard faith-filled words of encouragement, challenge and inspiration to take with them into the world beyond campus.

Taking prominence among those with words of wisdom for graduates was none other than Leo, who had a message May 19 for the class of 2026 at Villanova University, just outside Philadelphia.

"The world beyond Villanova is waiting for you, sometimes with open arms, and sometimes with truly dangerous intent. You will have the challenge and the opportunity to make a big difference, if you carry with you those Augustinian values of Veritas, Unitas, Caritas," said the pope, a member of Villanova's class of 1977.

"This being the 250th anniversary of the United States of America," he continued, "I would invite you to recall in a special way the guiding principles of the foundations of our nation: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all (people) are created equal; that they are endowed by our Creator with certain inalienable rights, and among those are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of happiness.'"

"May the graduates of 2026 always be faithful to the guiding light that has been so important for these 250 years. Congratulations, and please know that I send all of you my apostolic blessing," he said in a message read by Villanova's president, Augustinian Fr. Peter Donohue.

Villanova's commencement speaker, NBC's "Today" show co-anchor Craig Melvin, also highlighted the Augustinian values of "Veritas, Unitas, Caritas," Latin for "truth, unity, love," urging the graduates to keep these at the forefront of their path ahead.

He quoted St. Augustine: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you."

"You are restless today. I was restless when I sat where you are too, and you should be," Melvin said. "You spent four years being formed, being challenged, being fed, being loved and now you gotta leave. You will be restless tomorrow. You will be restless at 35 when you have that corner office or baby on your hip, or both."

"Do not be afraid of that restlessness," he said, because it will be "the engine of every good thing that you will ever do, driving "you toward Veritas when the lie is easier, toward Unitas when standing apart would be simpler, toward Caritas when indifference would be safer."

More than 2,100 undergraduate degrees were conferred on St. John's University students May 17 as more than 12,000 guests gathered on the Great Lawn of the campus in the New York borough of Queens for the school's 156th undergraduate commencement exercise.

Boston Archbishop Richard Henning, the commencement speaker, challenged the graduates to pursue a meaningful life and to remain faithful in the face of difficulties.

"To become the person you were made to be involves passing through fire and dark clouds," Henning said. "Real, life-changing faith involves taking risks. Risk heartbreak by getting married and starting families. Risk it by committing yourself to the work of lifelong friendships. Risk it by giving of your time, talent and sweat when there is no earthly reward for your efforts."

"When Christ chose his fishermen apostles, he got into their boat and told them to put out into the deep," he said. "It is over the deep waters, waters way over your head, that you will experience the power of God lifting you up."

Sr. Raffaella Petrini, president of the office governing Vatican City State, encouraged graduates at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana May 17 to become "leaders of hope" in a divided world. "Your credibility will be the foundation of your leadership, based on the consistency between your words and your actions," said the Franciscan Sister of the Eucharist.

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"Remember Pope Leo's message: ultimately it is only love that can grant consistency and stability to your life," she said. "First and foremost, it is the fundamental, personal experience of God's love and then, by extension, the sacred experience of mutual love and human fraternity that compel us toward self-giving."

"Christians must fully engage with life and the history of humanity," Petrini said, urging the graduates "not to be afraid of taking risks." Christians "can overcome sloth and indifference with bravery. They are willing to seek the good and look to the future knowing that our best days are always yet to come," she said.

"I pray that you will 'march on' and contribute to the common good, that you will move forward 'strong of heart' and remain 'true' to your faith, with kindness and courage," she said.

In Ohio on May 17, John Carroll University's commencement speaker, political journalist Chuck Todd, former host of NBC's "Meet the Press," reflected on the promise and limitations of emerging technology.

Addressing the uncertainty surrounding technological and societal shifts, he said, "Disruption favors the young. In moments like this, you actually have the advantage. ... Now your generation's challenges are different, but difficult generations often produce resilient people, and your generation has already experienced more disruption before age 22 than many generations experience in a lifetime."

"AI is going to create extraordinary opportunities. It's also going to put a premium on exactly what this education gave you," Todd continued. "A machine can process, but it cannot discern. It can generate answers. It cannot decide which questions are worth asking. It can simulate empathy. It cannot actually feel the weight of a moral choice. That's what a Jesuit education trains, not just critical thinking — moral reasoning."

Brian Burch, U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, addressed graduates at Thomas Aquinas College's California campus in Santa Paula May 16. The college also had a commencement ceremony on its Northfield, Massachusetts, campus May 23.

"Become peacemakers in an age of confusion," he said. "As you step into the world, I want to speak with you about ... the deep, ordered peace that St. Augustine described as 'tranquillitas ordinis' — the tranquility of order."

"Peace is not indifference disguised as sophistication. Peace requires vigilance because the human heart is never morally neutral," Burch said. "Peace requires moral clarity. Evil does not prevail merely because of violent people. It prevails when good people become distracted, indifferent, or lack courage."

"For Augustine, peace was never simply a feeling," Burch continued. "It was the work of rightly ordered love — and love, if it is real, always moves outward. It is fruitful. It sacrifices. It builds. It acts."

As the nation celebrates its 250th anniversary, "this pursuit of peace, rightly understood, is worth reflecting on," he added, telling the graduates that their formation at Thomas Aquinas College has equipped them "to become both examples and advocates of genuine peace."

"Begin with the interior order of your own heart," he advised. "You have been formed to think critically and charitably. Use that formation to promote justice that respects the full dignity of every person."

In Washington, Msgr. James Shea, president of the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota, addressed graduates at his alma mater — The Catholic University of America.

In his commencement address May 16, he challenged graduates to confront mediocrity in their own lives.

"Every single examined life is haunted by mediocrity, the gap between who we were made to be and who we are," said Shea. "Talent, deep learning, wealth and honors will not help overcome mediocrity. The only path is the secret to Christian perfection and holiness — stability (both within and without), constancy, fidelity and steadfastness."

Republican Gov. Ron DeSantis praised Ave Maria University in Florida for "doing something that we all must do," which is "not to try to conform our faith to the spirit of the age, but to pursue truth regardless of where those currents are going."

"We share a faith that is over 2,000 years old," Florida's Catholic governor told graduates May 9. "It represents a fixed reality of who God is and what God has done, above all that life, death, and resurrection of Christ."

He emphasized the importance of upholding traditional American founding principles, civic virtue and individual liberty in civic life.

DeSantis reminded the graduates of Ben Franklin's answer 250 years ago when he was asked: "Did you give us a republic or a monarchy?" "His answer was 'a republic if you can keep it,'" DeSantis said.

"Can we keep it? Can we preserve it? Can we make the republic better?" the governor asked. "With faithful and civic minded graduates like we honor today, who have a great foundation and are wearing the full armor of God, the answer to Franklin's question is yes, we can keep the republic, and yes, we will keep the republic."

In Ohio, the Franciscan University of Steubenville graduated its largest class in the school's history May 9, it said. The 928 members of the class of 2026 were charged to live the Catholic faith boldly, pursue truth and bear lasting fruit.

At the baccalaureate Mass May 8, Jesuit Fr. Robert Spitzer in his homily reflected on Christ's command in John 15 to "love one another as I have loved you," urging graduates to remain faithful to the sacramental life, prayer, moral teaching, and the mercy of confession.

"Trust in him," said the priest, a former president of Gonzaga University and co-founder with Timothy Busch of the Magis Center and the Napa Institute. "Follow that fourfold path and know in your faith that every cross will be transcended. And every one of the things that we do for one another will be turned into the eternal still point of the perfect love relationship in heaven."

As commencement speaker, Busch urged graduates on May 9 to bring their faith into every aspect of their lives and work, as lay Catholics are called to evangelize the world.

"I do not hide the fact that I'm Catholic, and it has never hindered me in the secular world," he said.

Busch, also the founder of the Busch Firm, challenged the graduates to be leaders in defending life, engaging emerging technologies, and shaping history through prayer and courage.