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Advice to graduates

by Thomas Reese

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What do you say to graduates as they leave their universities and go out into the world? That was the problem I faced when I was invited to address the graduates of the Institute for Pastoral Studies and the Graduate School of Loyola University Chicago on Wednesday, May 7. I fear that I was not as encouraging as I would have liked because I see many challenges in their future. Here is what I said:

I have had to listen to a number of commencement addresses in my life, but the only one I remember was given by the comedian Bob Hope in 1971 at Santa Clara University. The country was in the middle of the Vietnam War, racial tensions were intense, and with the Cold War still very much alive, we were in danger of blowing up ourselves and the rest of the world.

What was his advice to the class of 1971 as they prepared to go out into the world: "Don't go."

You face similar challenges today: you are burdened with debt from your education, the job market is bad, Washington is gridlocked with partisan politics, there is strife in Ukraine and slaughter in Syria, South Sudan and the Central African Republic.

Oh, and don't forget global warming, although last winter may have pushed that from our attention. You and your children may have to live through the flooding of coastal cities, wars over water and food, and environmental refugees in the millions.

I wish I could be like Bob Hope and tell you, "Don't go," but you have no choice. This is the world into which you are graduating. Your generation will be measured by how you respond to these challenges.

We hope that you have been prepared for this world by your education here at Loyola University, where there is an emphasis not just on competence but also conscience and compassion. You need not only the

tools to survive and prosper in this world, but also the values to make good choices and open your heart to others, especially the marginalized and the poor.

Our new pope chose his name Francis because he wanted to be like St. Francis of Assisi who loved the poor.

These are the people whom no one cares about. Pope Francis notes that "it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points."

Pope Francis speaks of the poor and marginalized constantly. He will not let us forget them.

He asks us to serve, accompany and defend the poor.

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To serve, accompany and defend the poor--each of these words is important.

Serving the poor means helping those who are at their wits end: the unemployed, the disabled, the addicted, the single mother without education or a job. The people who have three strikes against them before they even get up to bat.

Matthew 25 says that we will be judged by whether we fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, clothed the naked, sheltered the homeless. And when individuals and charities are not enough to help these people, then it is the obligation of society to act through its governmental institutions to help.

But Pope Francis says that it is not enough to simply help the poor, we must defend the poor, we must be advocates for the poor. We must challenge any social, political, or economic system that leaves millions of people at the margins of life.

Archbishop Helder Camara once said, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

Pope Francis too has been called a Marxist by those who think that the Gospel should be judged by capitalism and the market and not vice versa.

Rather, Francis believes, "When society is organized in such a way that not everyone has the opportunity to work ... then there is something wrong with that society: it is not right! It goes against God himself."

Pope Francis decries what he calls the globalization of indifference that sustains a lifestyle which excludes others.

"We end up being incapable of feeling compassion at the outcry of the poor, weeping for other people's pain, and feeling a need to help them, as though all this were someone else's responsibility and not our own.

The culture of prosperity deadens us; we are thrilled if the market offers us something new to purchase; and in the meantime all those lives stunted for lack of opportunity seem a mere spectacle; they fail to move us."

Pope Francis wants both charity and justice and sees no conflict between them. We are called to both

serve and defend the poor.

But charity and justice are not enough for Pope Francis. We cannot be satisfied with writing a check or writing a letter to Congress. Pope Francis also calls us to accompany the poor.

That means not treating them as mere problems or statistics but as human beings. It means having eye contact with them; it means sitting down and listening to them. It means welcoming them into our neighborhoods and churches. It means knowing their names and being their friends.

In the Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius Loyola, after whom this university is named, challenges retreatants to imagine they are on their deathbed. At that point in your life, it does not matter how large your portfolio is or how much money you have in the bank.

As you look back, which will be more important to you, that you invented a product that made billions of dollars or that you did something that improved the lives of millions of people? Did you ease the burden of the afflicted or did you prosper by supporting the status quo?

As graduates of the class of 2014, you go out into a world you did not make, with all its wonders and challenges. You have benefited from those who went before you, but you and your children will also will suffer for the indifference and excesses of older generations, especially our inability to deal with long-range problems like the economy and climate change.

Now these problems are your problems, whether you want them or not.

As you go out into that world, you do not go alone. You go together as a generation that has been more inclusive, more connected, and better educated than any generation in history. So there is hope.

I also believe that the universe is on your side. Evolution is not simply about the survival of the fittest. It is about progress through cooperation. The next stage of evolution will be brought about through thoughtful love not mindless struggle.

Last Sunday's gospel was the story about the two disciples on their way to Emmaus. We, like them, do not recognize that the Lord walks with us. I urge you to listen to the voice of whatever you hold sacred and holy, so that you can walk in the world with love. Aim higher than you can dream, and leave the world a better place for your children than the world that you have found.

Good luck and God bless you.

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