A Pilgrim on the Road of Life

Associate Justice Clarence Thomas

It is an honor to be with these students. What a wonderful group. I looked around and I saw these statues and icons, the pictures of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, and I realized I was in a Catholic school. It encouraged me to put “JMJ” at the top of my speech.

I am deeply humbled to receive the Pro Deo Et Patria award. When I think of St. Pancras, whose feast we celebrate today, and our fallen soldiers and warriors across the world, I cannot claim to merit this wonderful award. They gave the last full measure for God and for country. My contributions pale next to their ultimate sacrifices. Nevertheless, I am deeply, deeply honored, and I will treasure it. I love being here with my bride, Virginia, who’s a gift from God and my best friend in the whole world.

You know, I find commencements uplifting and a time to celebrate a milestone in so many young lives. To paraphrase Sir Winston Churchill: it is not the end or the beginning of the end. It is the end of the beginning of your education and your young lives.
Lives hopefully spent in the pursuit of truth and wisdom.

This past week, I asked my four law clerks who spoke at their respective college graduations. They each had some vague recollections of the speaker, but could not recall what was said. I am under no illusions whatsoever that either I or what I say here will be long-remembered. On their unanimous advice, I will be brief.

Thank God that you live in this country and for his boundless love and grace that elevates us above our choices, our circumstances, and ourselves.

In 1971, when I sat where you are, I was approaching my 23rd birthday. I was in the process of accumulating many regrets, such as failing to return home to visit my grandparents often enough, too often being influenced by my contemporaries who knew no more about life than I did, and the biggest, remaining outside the Church from which I had fallen away.

To begin, I humbly ask each of you to take the time today, this day, to thank the people who made it possible for you to make it this far: your parents, your guardians, your teachers, your priests, the nuns, the coaches. You know who they are. Thank all of those who make it possible for us to live in peace in this country. Thank God that you live in this country and for his boundless love and grace that elevates us above our choices, our circumstances, and ourselves.

At graduation ceremonies, many people will tell you to go out and conquer the world and climb mountains and do great things. The truth is, we are fortunate if we can conquer ourselves. I saw a saying some years ago that makes so much sense. If you want to know what’s down the road, ask the person who’s coming back. On the road of life, then, the person next to you is a fellow traveler. Those of us with gray hair and wrinkles are coming back. In a sense, we are meeting you along the way along the path of life that we long ago traveled.

I was one of those headstrong youths. Like most young people, I’ve had bad judgment from time to time. There’s a story of a young man who, like me, had bad judgment. At the request of his mother, he went to visit a wise older man who lived nearby. The young man told him that he too wanted to have good judgment. The wise man said, “Son, good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from having had bad judgement.”

Even as I had the bad judgment of youth, something kept me from going too far and helped me to learn from those experiences. I spent 25 years of my life in the wilderness away from the Church, and yet, the clarion call of Sunday Church
bells never went away. Something restrained me.

In those days of the 1960s and ‘70s, this inner restraint was called a “hangup” or an “inhibition.” In fact, it was a conscience. A Catholic conscience that had been formed in a world much like this wonderful, wonderful college. This is a decidedly Catholic college, and I am decidedly and unapologetically Catholic.

It is this faith that has been the guiding beacon during some difficult and seemingly hopeless times, even when I had turned my heart against it and turned my back on it. I have no doubt that this faith will do the same for each of you if you let it, and perhaps even if you don’t. It is not a tether, but rather it is a guide: the way, the truth, and the life.

My first encounter with a Catholic institution was in September of 1955 when I entered second grade at St. Benedict Grammar School in my hometown of Savannah, Georgia. In those days, we lined up in the schoolyard by grade and, after reciting the Pledge of Allegiance in unison, we filed into our respective classrooms two by two.

The first subject was always religion, using the Baltimore Catechism. I can still remember Sister Mary de la Rosa asking us as a class, “Why did God create you?” In unison, with the innocent voices of seven-year-olds, we responded, “God created us to know, love, and serve him in this life and to be happy with him in the next.”

A lifetime has passed since those days of innocence and hopefulness, but, as I near my 70th birthday, I think often of what Sister Mary de la Rosa taught us that September. Much has happened since those days. I have read much, learned much, and experienced a lifetime of ups and downs. I have studied theology, philosophy, history, and law, yet I have not come across a better statement of our purpose in life than what she taught us over six decades ago.

This could well be the result of the many flaws and deficiencies of my abilities and my life. From time
to time, I’m asked why I came back to the Church after a quarter of a century away. Often a cynical, if not bitter soul, I usually respond that life happened and that I ran away as a confused, bitter 19-year-old ex-seminarian and crawled back as a middle-aged man, humbled by the realities of life and better able to appreciate God’s gift of faith.

That reminds me of my encounters, as that bitter young man, with my grandfather. He was a devout Catholic, a convert, and only had nine months of education. He and my grandmother raised my brother and me. I had been an altar boy and thought I had a vocation, hence my four years in the seminary. Much was happening in the world involving matters of race relations. I somehow got swept up in it and away in the swirling cauldron of then-current events.

I was so certain that I was right about the end of the world as we knew it. About the impending revolution, seemingly. I was certain about everything. You know, it’s funny now just how certain we think we are about so much when we have two decades of life under our belts.

At the end of our confrontations, which had to be exasperating to my wonderful grandfather, he would often simply say, before walking away, “You just live long enough, you’ll see.” I wish he were here now so I could confess to him that at 70, I now see what I did not see at 20, as he knew I would and as you all will.

In a sense, I’m coming back to you as my grandfather and Sister Mary de la Rosa came to me, not to lecture you or exalt myself, but rather as a pilgrim who wants nothing more than for your pilgrimage to be more fruitful, more beneficial, and more Christ-centered than mine was.

My bride and I attended a judicial conference last week. Among the topics were brain mapping and artificial intelligence. Each day one reads about cloning or some other science-fictional endeavor. In a generation, we have gone from virtually no one with a cellphone to today, virtually no one without a cellphone.

The world that you all will live in most certainly will have challenges that are unimaginable to those of us who grew up during a different era. That is, perhaps, much like what my grandparents or Sister Mary de la Rosa would think of today’s world: unimaginable.

In an increasingly secular and nihilistic world, you will be faced with man-made panaceas. I think each generation pinballs between its own panaceas. For us, we have had integration, we’ve had quotas and mandatory school busing to solve racial problems. Urban renewal and housing projects to solve urban problems. Psychedelic drugs were to be mind-expanding, and we went from global cooling to global warming to climate change.

I doubt that the world of your lives will be less cluttered with changes, conflicts, and man-made solutions. Nor do I doubt that it will be fraught with its share of confusions and complications. Neither I nor anyone in this room knows exactly what will confront you or exactly what the world will look like for you all. But those who raised and nurtured us did not know that we would live in the world that we live in today. The world of self-
driving cars, robots, and remotely controlled drones was for them and for us a world of fantasy and cartoons, like The Jetsons.

A few months ago, my wife and I were talking with one of our favorite priests, Father Scalia. One of the things that had mystified me during my tenure on the court, which now approaches 30 years, was the fact that his father, Justice Scalia, and I were from very different backgrounds, but we agreed on so much and trusted each other implicitly. We saw so much the same way. Before I arrived at the court in 1991, I had never met him, so we had no prior relationship. He was from New Jersey and New York, and I from South Georgia. He was from a household of educated parents, and mine was almost functionally illiterate. We did not share the same race.

I told Father Scalia about this, and he provided what should have been obvious all along. “Your Catholic formation was your bond,” he said. There it was, our mutual formation of moral character. Since that day, I have thought often about his observation. Those who nurtured us did not know what we would confront, but they knew that we needed to learn the truth to deal with what we would confront. They passed on, among other things, our Catholic faith.

It seems that in this increasingly secular world, man sees himself as the master of the universe. There seems to be this notion that if we put our resources and our minds to it, we can do just about anything and solve just about any problem. With more research, the most challenging and awful diseases can be understood and cured. Didn’t we, after all, cure polio and tuberculosis, which were terrifying during my youth? And man is powerful enough to destroy the Earth and change the climate. Who needs God? Who cares about the Church? The life without God, without faith—I’ve tasted the elixir of that life. I have stared into that abyss.

Some time ago, one of our parish priests gave a most interesting homily that made the point better than I could ever hope to. He told a story that may well be apocryphal. I’m not sure, but it still makes the point, and many of you may have already heard it.

The story goes, a young student in France boarded a train and took a seat across from an elderly gentleman who appeared to be dozing. When the train lurched, a rosary fell from the gentleman’s hand. The young man retrieved it and handed it back to him. He couldn’t resist asking the gentleman if he still believed in such things as praying the rosary. The gentleman admitted that, indeed, he still believed.

Surprised, the young student told the gentleman that his
I assure you that there are things today that you think are important, that are critical, that are indispensable. Many of these same things you will one day think are trivial and disposable. There will be those who will confidently tell you that there is a new, more modern, fun-filled, thrilling way to live life without the constraints of conscience or faith. They will suggest that the old-fashioned ways are passé in the era of smart phones, iPads, and iCloud. They will say that we are smarter with the Internet and artificial intelligence, but these technological conveniences are not transcendent, not divine, and not God.

professors at the university did not believe in such superstition. He then went on to enlighten the elderly gentleman about the more modern and sophisticated view of the world and explained that enlightened people did not believe in such nonsense as praying the rosary.

As the older gentleman prepared to leave the train at his stop, the young man offered to send him materials to further enlighten him. The older man kindly accepted the offer and gave the young man his business card as he departed. As the train pulled away, the young man read the card out loud to himself: “Louis Pasteur, Director of the Institute of Scientific Research, Paris.”

Perhaps Louis Pasteur, through his path-breaking work and his life experience, knew something the young man had yet to learn. It seems that often the more we know and the more we learn, the more we doubt how well we know what we think we know. We realize what our human limitations are. In a sense, we realize just how minuscule we are in the scheme of things, especially without God.

In the epilogue of his history of Christianity, Paul Johnson observes, and I quote at length, “Man is imperfect with God. Without God, what is he? As Francis Bacon put it, ‘They that deny God, destroy man’s nobility: for certainly man is of kin to the beast by his body; and, if he be not kin to God by his spirit, he is a base and ignoble creature.’ We are less base and ignoble by virtue of divine example and by the desire...
for the form of apotheosis which Christianity offers.”

In everyday terms, because we are created in the image and likeness of God, we are required to demand more of ourselves than our base instincts. To know, love, and serve God requires that we obey His commandments and the laws of the Church. This world will tug at you and attempt to divert you. Somehow, you must stay the course. God will provide a way, give you the strength and grace to endure and overcome your failures.

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When I met my wife in 1986, she asked me what helped to sustain me through the many, many battles that I fought in those days in Washington. I showed her my folded copy of St. Francis of Assisi’s letter to rulers of people. It read in part, and I give you this advice, “Keep a clear eye toward life’s end. Do not forget your purpose and destiny as God’s creature. Whatever you are in His sight is what you are and nothing more. Remember that when you leave this Earth, you can take with you nothing that you have received but only what you have given: a full heart enriched by honest service, love, sacrifice, and courage. Embrace the God of us all and His Word wherever it surfaces.”

In the early 1990s, shortly after I arrived at the court, I frequently drove past a small, cinder block church in Northern Virginia. It had a simple, inexpensive sign out front with a quote from Second Corinthians, “For we walk by faith, not by sight.” Simple, yet profound. Yes, Google Maps may get you from one place to another, but only God will show you the way to that peace which surpasses understanding. To paraphrase Mother Teresa, in the final analysis, it is not between you and the things of the world, it is always between you and God.

I congratulate each of you on this milestone in your formation, your Catholic formation. May God continue to bless and guide each of you throughout your lives, and I pray that you know, love, and serve Him in this life so that you can be happy with Him in the next. God bless you.
The Market Is Up!  
Avoid Capital Gains Tax

Christendom College celebrated its 40th Anniversary with a gala dinner dance on April 14, hosting 500 guests at the historic Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C. Special guests included Francis Cardinal Arinze, His Imperial and Royal Highness Lim of Habsburg-Lorraine, Arlington Bishop Michael Burbidge, radio personality Patrick Madrid, and Senator Rick Santorum, who presented a special message from Vice President Mike Pence.

The continued favorable treatment of charitable giving in the recent Tax Cut & Jobs Act underscores the value and importance of supporting Christendom through your IRA.

Although an IRA rollover or qualified charitable distribution (QCD) is not technically a charitable deduction, it remains an attractive tax-planning strategy similar to charitable deductions claimed by itemizers in the past.

Because your QCD still qualifies to fulfill part or all of your required minimum distribution (RMD), a direct transfer from an IRA to Christendom may reduce your taxable income and will strengthen the college’s mission of excellence in Catholic higher education. For individuals over 70½, the QCD from your IRA is like a non-itemized charitable deduction.

John Ciskanik  
Executive Director  
Office of Planned Giving  
540-551-9160  
ciskanik@christendom.edu

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