

THE RIVIER COLLEGE SEAL AS INSPIRATION IN LIFE

(Graduate Hooding Address, May 10, 2012)

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Tonight's celebration marks the beginning of our Commencement festivities and we are thrilled to celebrate the accomplishments of our graduating students. We recognize and applaud the dedication, effort, and sacrifice that have brought you to this day. Perhaps you're feeling a sense of relief, of completion, of accomplishment.

But what really does Commencement mean? Of course, one definition is to take a degree at a College or University, but the root of the word is "to commence," meaning to begin. So this weekend we are not celebrating just a completion, but rather a beginning, a beginning that will be different for each one of you. Some of you may continue on for even further study, while others will apply their degree to career advancement or initial employment. Or perhaps, your degree represents the beginning of something altogether different to you.

Consider for a moment the following scenario:

A working mother, she sits at the dining room table attempting to finish the writing she began so many weeks ago. Despite the many hours she has worked on it, the words don't seem to come. She's been busy of course...there never seems to be enough time for family, work, and forget about cleaning the house! She has an opening paragraph yes; an outline too; but it fails to convey the message she wishes. Frustrated, she throws it out and begins anew.

A student perhaps? Maybe you can relate. However in this instance, the story is not about a student but rather this professor standing humbly before you. Each year, I've watched my colleagues as they've taken their turns giving this address and I had grand ideas of what I would say when it was my turn. Naturally once I was asked, all of those ideas vanished from my mind...or at least the lingering thoughts didn't seem to gel the way I'd like. Last night I was ready to throw in the towel.

Now, I would feel more comfortable if I were presenting you with a mathematical challenge and leading you to discover the solution, but I figured that would not go over very tonight...and I didn't think Barbara K. would provide me with a chalkboard here in the sanctuary. Instead I'll present a challenge of a different sort still using a visual image as a guide.

The image I've chosen is the Rivier College seal, originally conceived by Sr. Madeleine of Jesus and designed by Sister Francois-Regis in 1933, and redesigned by Sr. Theresa Couture fifty years later. This seal appears on the mace that leads our College's processions and also appears on the diploma you will receive on Saturday. Featured on the seal are three symbols: a white dove, a book, and a fleur-de-lis. Each of these represents a part of Rivier College's mission and suggests a challenge to you graduates as you begin anew.

The white dove represents the Holy Spirit, reminding us that our talents are gifts to be used wisely. Each one of us has a mission to fulfill. Spiritual guidance will help us discover this mission and give us the strength to carry it out. The path to success is rarely direct and straight, but rather takes many unexpected turns. Our challenge is to find our path and to persevere in our journey. The dove can also represent peace. We should strive to promote peace within our world, our neighborhood, our workplace, and our family.

The second symbol, a book, represents truth, knowledge, and understanding. As graduate students, you have already demonstrated a desire for advanced knowledge. You have analyzed and synthesized information and developed your own conclusions. You've honed problem-solving skills, debated controversial questions, searched for answers, and substantiated your claims. Although your formal

education may be complete, I challenge you to continue your quest for truth, knowledge, and understanding. As you make decisions, may you delve beneath the rhetoric to determine whether statements are truly based on solid evidence. In this world where internet search engines cater the news to our own personal interests and popular culture, I encourage you to take the effort to explore all sides of issues of importance, to understand the views and culture of others, and to continue to ask questions. Your advanced degree brings you respect and but also responsibility. You may be asked to take on leadership roles. Recognize the importance of being true both to the facts and to your heart. Be honest and ask questions when you don't have the answers. Take the time to listen to others.

The third and final symbol is the fleur-de-lis, representing the French heritage of the college. The sisters of the Presentation of Mary who founded and still serve at Rivier College belong to an order that originated in France by Blessed Anne-Marie Rivier. Mother Rivier dedicated her life to serving the poor and afflicted, educating women and children, especially orphans, in rural France. Her example inspires us to consider how we can use our talents and skills to serve others and improve our world. Can one person really make a difference? Anne-Marie Rivier was a small, frail young woman, crippled throughout much of her childhood, yet she established a religious order in the midst of the French Revolution, at a time when religious men and women were being hunted down and imprisoned. Having been denied admittance to another order due to her poor health, Anne-Marie went on to establish her own schools and the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary. Today this order can be found practicing and continuing her work in eighteen different countries. Locally, the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary established this college during the Great Depression enabling the daughters of mill workers to obtain a college education. Despite the financial challenges of the time, the college flourished. By their example, Anne Marie Rivier and the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary show us that an individual or small group of individuals has the power to make a difference. So the fleur-de-lis is both a call to service and a symbol of courage.

So now I've managed to do exactly what I feared. I've fallen into the trap of attempting to give lofty advice in an address to graduates. I'm human and so are you. We each make mistakes and we also have successes. Perhaps, some of you will even be recognized for a grand achievement. While this talk does not reach the goals I had initially set and certainly is not Ted.com material, it is possible that someone here tonight will one day glance at his or her diploma or transcript or see a bird, a book, or a flower and think about how their knowledge, a quest for truth and justice, and the Holy Spirit can guide them in making a decision, completing a task, or determining a road to follow. You too have opportunities to influence others and make a difference. You will, and perhaps already have, encountered situations that force you to move beyond your comfort level and grow in ways you never imagined. I wish you well as you continue on your journey wherever it may lead. With your advanced degrees in hand, may you continue to grow in mind and spirit. Congratulations and Good Luck!

Cited Works

1. Drouart, Eric. Reflections on Anne-Marie Rivier and the Mission of Rivier College. Rivier Academic Journal, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring 2007.
2. Official Seal of Rivier College. Rivier College Archives. Last update September 30, 2011. Retrieved May 2, 2012, from http://www.rivier.edu/support_services/archive/default.aspx?id=963.

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