

Coram Deo Academy
Upper School Awards Ceremony
And Commencement Address

Flower Mound, Texas
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Dr. David Naugle

“The Fragrance of Christ”

*“Put an altar of incense in your innermost heart.
Be a sweet aroma of Christ.”
Origen, Homilies on Exodus 9*

President Rodney Marshall, Upper School Director William Rector, distinguished college of faculty, staff, parents, family members and friends of the graduates, and most importantly the graduates themselves, for me to be with you today on this important occasion is a distinct privilege. To offer remarks that put the academic achievements we are celebrating this afternoon into a meaningful context and to provide a proper perspective on the priceless gift and lifelong task of Christian education which is the inheritance these graduates have received from Coram Deo Academy is also a significant responsibility. Know for sure that as I stand before you, I am in full sympathy with the mission and purpose of this school, and I am honored to be here and to share this address with you today.

In the last several years I have been hearing startling reports about the content of commencement addresses given by well-known personalities at prominent institutions. Most of these speeches consisted of personal advice for the eager graduates to consider carefully as they made the tricky transition from academic life to the so-called real world. Most notable in this regard is author Kurt Vonnegut’s graduation address at MIT a few years back that allegedly began in this manner: “Ladies and gentlemen of the class of 1997: Use sunscreen. If I could offer you only one tip for the future, sunscreen would be it.”

While suggesting that this piece of advice was supported scientifically — “the long term benefits,” Vonnegut states “have been proved by scientists” — he went on in this same speech to offer additional admonitions that were based merely on his own experience: “floss,” “sing,” “stretch,” “dance,” “get plenty of calcium,” “live in New York City at least once,” “read the directions,” “respect your elders,” and so on.

Now while it is quite likely that this speech is an urban legend, nonetheless, I, too, have a piece of advice in this vein that I would like to offer the graduating seniors of Coram Deo Academy and it is this. “Young men and women of the class of 2004: Wear perfume. Or if you are male, wear cologne.” Yes, that is it. If I could offer you only one tip for the future, wearing perfume or cologne would be it.

Right about now, I imagine that President Marshall is squirming in his seat and regretting to the “nth” that he invited me to be your commencement speaker! But make no mistake about it — there is a real stench in the world, and you can make it smell a lot better if you wear perfume or cologne!

But, of course, the perfume and cologne of which I speak is not literal, say, *Clinique Happy* for you gals, or, perhaps *Aqua De Geo* by Armani for you guys, though these are, indeed, quite pleasing to the nose and no doubt would make a fine graduation gift! No, the scent of which I truly speak, the aroma with which I suggest you adorn yourself is actually the fragrance of Christ!

After all, Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One to whom wise men presented gifts of frankincense and myrrh for His adornment at His birth. He is the Anointed One over whom a woman poured an alabaster vial of expensive perfume to prepare His body for burial at His death. Even the Apostle Paul, drawing on a theme from the Old Testament sacrificial system as well as his knowledge of Greek and Roman culture, describes Jesus in his letters in redolent terms. My favorite passage in this regard is 2 Corinthians 2: 14-17 which not only depicts Christ aromatically, but also presents Christians themselves as His designer fragrance in the world. Paul writes:

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the *sweet aroma* of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a *fragrance of Christ* to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an *aroma* from death to death, to the other an *aroma* from life to life. And who is adequate for these things? For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God (italics added, NASB).

In the Old Testament, burnt offerings properly sacrificed were a soothing aroma before the Lord. Indeed, fragrance itself, especially in the form of costly incense, when rightly offered to God, was an expression of worship and devotion well-pleasing to Him. Jesus Himself is that costly incense of worship and devotion offered perfectly to God. He is that burnt offering and soothing aroma properly sacrificed before the Lord. As Paul states in Ephesians 5:2, Christ “gave Himself up for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a *fragrant aroma*” (italics added, NASB).

Jesus is God’s aromatherapy so to speak. Being rightly related to Him as His loving, learning, and serving disciples, Christians are thus the world’s aromatherapy through whom the sweet, satisfying scent of the knowledge of Him is to be manifested in every place. As the Alexandrian Church father Origen once said, “Put an altar of incense in your innermost heart. Be a sweet aroma of Christ.”¹

So you see graduates, this has been, is, and will continue to be the essential purpose of your Christian education, namely to become the fragrance of Christ and to waft it abroad in all the world. Hence, I offer my advice once again to you on this commencement day, this day of conclusions and new beginnings, and say: “Young men and women of the class of 2004: Wear perfume, wear cologne, the cologne and the perfume of the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Surely the need for the savor of the Savior and His kingdom in our culture and throughout the world could hardly be greater than it is today. Sin has skunked the place up royally, as we detect readily in contemporary religious confusion and apostasy, in the moral and psychological breakdown of individuals, in the breakup of families, in the corruption of marriage and sexuality, in the treachery of politics, law, and government, in the oppression of the poor and needy, in injustice toward women and people of color, in the greed of business, in the superficiality of education, in the overreach of technology, in the

¹ Origen, *Homilies on Exodus 9* in *Fathers of the Church: A New Translation*, vol. 71 (Washington, D. C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1947), p. 342; quoted in *Ancient*

degradation of the arts, in the pollution of the environment, in the scandals in the Church, in radical terrorism, and in nations and civilizations at war.

This litany of putrefaction demonstrates that the life-giving shalom which God intended originally for humanity and the earth has been vandalized by the satanic powers, by human rebellion, and by physical disease and death. The whole world cries out desperately for help, for a remedy to its pervasive ills. In fact, whether it realizes it or not, the whole world actually cries out for the coming of the kingdom of God that nullifies this rank odor of sin and death and restores the entire cosmos to the life and loveliness of a new creation.

This has already been achieved in principle by Christ's crushing passion, His triumphant resurrection, His victorious ascension to the right hand of God, and by His gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church. This universal redemptive work will be complete when Christ returns again, transforming the whole world into a new Eden, festooned as a beautiful bride and illuminated by the glory of God.

Meanwhile, believers themselves as new creations in Christ are present-day harbingers of this future cosmic event, radiating amidst the stink of the fallen creation — that endless winter, as C. S. Lewis called it — with the redeeming fragrance of the knowledge of Jesus in every place.

This is precisely where Christian education enters the picture and makes its inimitable contribution. For as John Milton asserted in his classic essay "Of Education," "the end of learning is to repair the ruins of our first parents by regaining to know God aright, and out of that knowledge to love him, to imitate him, [and] to be like him." As the educational arm of the Church, therefore, Christian education serves the vital purpose of shaping students into their true nature as God's image with the mind and character of Christ, and sending them out into the world, like the scent of a 1000 flowers, to reverse the noxious effects of the fall inflicted upon all things until He comes.

So I earnestly believe that Christian education is a matter of consequence, of great and genuine consequence — for students, for families, for faculty and

administrators, for the church, for the culture, and indeed, for the whole world. It is distinctive as an academic enterprise because it is rooted in reality, in the reality of the infinite, personal, Trinitarian God who is there and whose gracious revelation about Himself and His work affirms that He is the Maker of heaven and earth, the just Judge of human sin, and the incarnate Redeemer of humanity and the earth. Since God created the universe by His word and wisdom and structured it by His law, all things both great and small are defined objectively in theistic terms, and disclose the glory and presence of God. Human beings as *imago Dei*, having been endowed with diverse mental powers, are capable of knowing the wondrous unity and diversity of world, and are commissioned to actualize its cultural potential embedded in the warp and woof of creation. Though sin has had catastrophic, comprehensive effects, the coming of the kingdom of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ has brought substantial healing to believing men and women in spiritual, intellectual, and moral ways.

Christian education is grounded and renewed on the basis of this biblical view of life. It means that God is the explanatory principle of the universe, that truth, goodness and beauty find their ultimate reference point in Him, that no area of study is truly comprehensible without Him. As St. Paul asserts in Colossians 2: 3, "In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Or as John Henry Cardinal Newman states in his monumental *The Idea of a University*, "Admit a God, and you introduce among the subjects of your knowledge, a fact encompassing, closing in upon, absorbing, every other fact conceivable."² This sacred perspective on things imparts a kind of sanctity to the study of all disciplines, seeing in each an avenue to God. The pursuit of knowledge, therefore, is a deep piety that should be undertaken as a glory to God.

This overarching biblical vision of reality has direct implications on Christian liberal arts education. In its highest and holiest sense, Christian liberal arts education is a theological concept because its primary aim is the cultivation and development of human beings who possess intrinsic value as the image and

likeness of God. Christian liberal arts education is concerned with persons as ends in themselves, and not with persons as a means to some other end, especially vocational and economic ones. By focusing on the acquisition of the tools of learning (*Trivium*) and by a mastery of the subjects of learning (*Quadrivium*), along with the cultivation of virtue in moral education and the care of the body in physical education, human beings are renovated by truth and approach the fullness of their powers in which the image of God comes to bright expression. When a person becomes fully alive through this educational process, alive to God, to self, to others, to creation as a whole, then God is glorified, as St. Irenaeus would say.

Make no mistake, however. Liberal arts education in a Christian context is no cakewalk. It's hard work, requires time and effort, discipline and sacrifice. It entails the rigorous reading of classic and contemporary books. It requires an active engagement in the great conversation about big questions and important ideas. It includes growth in one's capacity to communicate wisely, delightfully, and persuasively in oral and written formats. It involves learning to listen and understand. It demands silence and periods of contemplation. It includes frightening times of testing and evaluations of performance. It is a challenging, oftentimes up hill road, and the progress can seem incremental. In the end, however, it is well worth the time, effort, and money invested, for you are becoming slowly but surely the person God created and has recreated you to be.

Now this inherently valuable liberal arts education — which is an acquired illumination and wisdom, an inward endowment and disposition, a habit of heart and mind — like physical health itself, is not only an intrinsic good, but is also useful as a means to other ends, especially in preparing students like you to fulfill the various callings in life God has given to you. People are people *before* they are husbands and wives, mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, employers and employees, friends, citizens and saints. There is no question about your status as a human being. The only real question is whether or not you will be a

² John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, Rethinking the Western Tradition, ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), p. 29

well-developed, educated human being, with your faculties and gifts honed to their utmost capacity. The better person you are as such — spiritually, morally, intellectually and physically — the better person you will be carrying out your multiple roles in life. Growing into the person you are meant to be enables you to do better what you are meant to do as members of the church and the community, and as friends, workers, children, parents, spouses, and so on.

Cardinal Newman certainly believed in this utility of liberal education, stating that, “because it is a good in itself, [it] brings with it a power and a grace to every work and occupation which it undertakes, and enables us to be more useful, and to a greater number.” John Milton echoes this belief as well, defining a “complete and generous education” as one that “fits a ... [person] to perform justly, skillfully and magnanimously all the offices [of life] both private and public, of peace and [of] war”. What loftier vision could there be for a school to embrace than to shape its young charges in this manner, inspiring its “sons in their youth [to] be as grown up plants,” and its “daughters [to be] as corner pillars fashioned as for a palace,” to employ the language of Psalm 144: 12 (NASB).

And this is not all, for the whole process aims at a final end. As Aristotle pointed out millennia ago, every human activity is directed toward some particular goal. So the key question is at what final goal should Christian education be directed? While many these days think the final goals of a program of education are grades, college admission, credentials, prestige, money, or personal advancement, Christian education is motivated differently. It is motivated by love.

The basis for this unique educational objective is found in an episode in the gospels when a lawyer asks Jesus which commandment in the OT was the greatest of all. He responds with these well-known words. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ “This is the great and foremost commandment. “The second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” (Matt. 22: 27-29, NASB). Jesus not only responds to the lawyer’s question, but provides a bonus answer as well, stating that supreme love for God as the greatest commandment is complemented by

self-like love for neighbor as the second greatest commandment, and that together these two requirements from Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19 summarize the entire OT. God's whole purpose for humanity is revealed here and it means that everything people do ought to be aimed at fulfilling these two greatest commandments. Learning to love is the purpose of life. The purpose of life is learning to love. Christian education is certainly no exception. All studying, teaching, and learning, all administrating, leading and guiding — all the curricular and extra-curricular activities and, indeed, the total culture of a Christian school — ought to contribute to the fulfillment of this one overarching goal of fostering in students, and in all concerned, a richer, deeper, fuller love for God and love for others, the two greatest loves of all that are bound up together reciprocally.

This high calling and purpose for Christian education was not lost on earlier generations. Over seven hundred years ago, St. Bernard of Clairvaux taught that love trumps a variety of inferior motivations for Christian learning communities. "There are many," he writes, "who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge: that is curiosity. There are others who desire to know in order that they may themselves be known: that is vanity. Others seek knowledge in order to sell it: that is dishonorable. But there are some who seek knowledge in order to edify others: that is love."³ The primary goal, then, of Christian education ought to be unadulterated Christian charity and its greatest concern isn't really to produce successes, but rather to produce saints.

And saints all decked out in their educational gifts — of the mind and character of Christ, of faith, hope and love, of truth, goodness and beauty — are the divine fragrance in the world. They are called to be as aromatic as the exquisite archetypal bride in the Song of Songs whom Solomon describes as a "lovely orchard bearing precious fruit, with the rarest of perfumes: nard and saffron, calamus and cinnamon, and perfume from every other incense tree, as well as myrrh and aloes, and every other lovely spice" (Living Bible). How

³ Quoted in Mark Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 60.

delightful and alluring, how “pulse-revving”⁴ and powerful, how exceptional and memorable is this bride. Christian education is a key to fostering the same charms, strengths and distinctiveness in believers, in the Church as the bride of Christ, equipping her to fulfill her vocation effectively as the agency of the kingdom of God in changing lives and transforming the cultures of the world.

As Christians distribute the unguent of the kingdom worldwide, many whose olfactory capacities are rightly prepared will welcome this sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ in faith, resulting in the gift of life. Not everyone, however, will respond positively to this wholesome biblical fragrance that you wear and bear. To others, it will be an offensive smell of death and doom from which they will turn, not only their noses, but also their hearts.

To return, then, to the passage in 2 Corinthians from which we read earlier, we discover that “For we are a *fragrance of Christ* to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an *aroma* from death to death, to the other an *aroma* from life to life.” God’s truth either quickens or kills, for it is never proclaimed in vain. Invariably it has an effect, either for life or death. As a bee brings honey to some but a sting to others, so it is with the word of God.⁵

Consequently, God is calling all of you, whatever your vocation may be, to this kind of ministry of life and death. Your Christian education is designed to prepare you for this kind of monumental role in life in which the course and destiny of men, women, and children, communities, cultures, nations and civilizations are at stake for both time and eternity. What a task for educators! What a responsibility for students! What a responsibility for families! What a task for the church!

So, as 2 Corinthians 2: 16 continues: “And who is adequate for these things?” This assignment of spreading the life-giving or death-dealing perfume of Christ is of such magnitude and importance that it exceeds the mind’s ability to

⁴ Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of the Senses* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1991), p. 7.

grasp or perform. It is far beyond human understanding and power. So, in answering this question, Paul makes it clear that this is certainly not a work for hucksters who adulterate God's word or corrupt its ministry for fame or fortune or other forms of personal gain. "For we are not like many," Paul says, "peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God."

So, this kind of work of wafting the scent of the Savior abroad in the world, even into its nooks and crannies, is a work that is to be done (1) by godly people of sincerity and integrity, (2) by true believers who are sent by God and are doing His business, and (3) by sensitive Christians for whom God is the true spectator and witness of every word and deed, who have learned to do everything *Coram Deo*, in the sight and before the face of the living God.

There can be no greater educational purpose or vision for an *Alma Mater* than to teach her children to make it their ambition to be pleasing to God, that everything they think, say and do is to be thought, said, and done before an audience of One.

So, young men and women of the *Coram Deo* class of 2004: Wear perfume, wear cologne. Yes, that is it. If I could offer you only one tip for the future, wearing perfume or cologne would be it. Of course, by now you know that the scent of which I speak, the smell with which I suggest you adorn yourself, the fragrance that I propose you wear and share with the world is none other than the fragrance of Christ!

Students, may God bless you on this very special day of your graduation from high school. May God bless you and your families beyond which you can even ask or think.

"Now may our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who has loved us and given us eternal comfort in and good hope by grace, comfort and strengthen your hearts [by His Holy Spirit] in every good work and word." Amen. (2 Thess. 2: 16-17).

⁵ These comments are based on John Calvin, *Commentary on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, trans. John Pringle, vol. 20 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, reprint 2003), p. 160.

