

Mount Michael Benedictine 2009 Graduation Homily delivered by Abbot Michael Liebl OSB

Graduations often provide a stage for making optimistic projections about the future. These young men have just finished four years of a demanding secondary education. They are bright, they are well equipped for tomorrow's challenges and they are eager to forge ahead. Well maybe if you saw them straggling down to the breakfast line early in the morning, you wouldn't jump to that conclusion. But I assure you, they are capable. They are about to set out on a great new adventure, sailing off into a wider world where they hope and we hope they will make their mark. They assume and we assume that there will be a tomorrow to live for and a tomorrow to grow into. But lest we be shortsighted, let me draw your attention to some ominous clouds that loom on the horizon.

If you look on the internet, you will find a web site called Save the Planet. A moment of introspection about that designation ought to leave you bemused. The earth is a fairly substantial, more or less solid chunk of rock that has been orbiting the sun for about 4.5 billion years. By comparison, human beings have been around for about 200 thousand years. Best estimates are that the earth will be around for about another 5 billion years, until the sun explodes. When we sanctimonious human beings talk about saving the planet, what we really mean is saving ourselves, and maybe a few other forms of life which we enjoy. The earth will do just fine whether we are here or not, thank you very much. We should at least be honest and not couch our self interest in the apparently noble terms of "saving the planet." In typical myopic sanguinity, we assume that human beings will be around forever. So have you ever considered that question? What are the odds for the survival of the human species?

There are scenarios that do not bode well for the survival of human beings. We are all aware that humanity might one day be overtaken by a disease for which there is no known cure. Unless you have been living in a cave, you know that the threat of SARS, avian flu, swine flu, or some as yet unknown viral agent may one day be impossible to check. The demise of the dinosaurs is most plausibly explained by the collision of an asteroid with the earth. How long do we have before such an event might happen again?

In the book of Genesis, we read that God was so frustrated with the wickedness of human beings that God sent a flood to destroy every person but Noah and his family. Lately God really hasn't had to worry himself too much about destroying wicked human beings. We appear to be pretty much intent on our own self-destruction. Nations stockpile nuclear weapons that in a single stroke are capable of eliminating a significant fraction of human life. The nuclear winter which would ensue following an exchange of nuclear weapons would likely make the climate too inhospitable for the remainder to survive. We have created or stored chemical and biological agents which are capable of destroying all human life on earth. Even when we are not being particularly belligerent, we are threat to ourselves out of sheer self absorption. No one is quite sure how well our climate will continue to absorb all the emissions which our modern society pumps into the biosphere. What happens if the air is unfit to breathe and the water unfit to drink? How many of our current economic problems are the result of simple greed? How many children around the world die because we lack the political will to distribute available food? How many people around the world die from diseases because they do not have

access to adequate medical care, or do not have the resources to obtain available medicines? What kind of answer can we make to God for the ills in our world for which we ourselves are responsible?

So let us consider for a moment an almost unthinkable proposition. Would the earth and other species that now inhabit the earth be better off if we just went away? Can we make a case for the preservation of our own species? Humanity is a paradox. We are both the creators and the destroyers of beauty. A drive to survive is indelibly encoded into our hereditary makeup. We seem to be mired in some kind of genetic muddle, trapped between violent impulses governed by primeval survival and territorial instincts on one side, and rational judgments appropriate to sophisticated and cultured beings on the other side. We have the ability to love, to admire beauty, to contemplate the nature and the meaning of the universe. But it is uncertain if our aggressive tendencies so biologically ingrained, will ever be overcome. People naturally seem to form tight, close-knit groups with a tendency to place everyone else in the category of outsiders. This "us VS them" thinking leads to selfish behavior on a monumental scale. We have too many examples of dark moments in human history in which one group systematically attempts to eliminate another group, sometimes leading even to the death of millions of people. Is it possible to ever justify the incomprehensible magnitude of human suffering?

So seniors, what do you say? Will there be a tomorrow for you to live into? I think there should be. I believe there is a reason to want the human species to survive. And it is not simply selfishness on a grand scale. Recall for a moment about what you have learned that human beings can accomplish. Picture in your mind's eye the architectural masterpieces of the world like the pyramids of Giza, the great wall of China, the Taj Mahal in India, Macchu Pichu perched on a mountain top in Peru. Recall the literary masterpieces from Homer, from Shakespeare, from Dostoevsky, from Goethe. The probing philosophical systems of Confucius, of Plato, of Aristotle, of Thomas Aquinas and Averoes and Avicenna. From the discovery of fire to the kindling of nuclear blazes, scientists have created a world in which we can house ourselves, feed ourselves, entertain ourselves, explore new worlds. We have even put ourselves on the moon. Musicians of all styles and types create combinations of sounds that enchant and delight us, and at the same time reduce us to tears. Artists like Michelangelo, Leonardo, Monet, Van Gogh, and Dali allow us to see our world and to see ourselves in new and wondrous ways. In the words of the British philosopher Alan Watts, "Humankind is the instrument the universe uses to perceive its own magnificence." Seniors now you know why this graduation day is so important. How can human beings create such works of beauty? How can human beings fend off disease? How can human beings resist the impulse to violence? The answer is simple. It is education. We can save ourselves by education. You can save us if you use your education. Education rolls back the tide of fear. Education creates new opportunities. Education unlocks unsuspected secrets. Education allows us to see what binds us together, now what separates us. You are about to become graduates of Mount Michael. You have been given the privilege of an exceptional education. You have absorbed not only classroom lessons, but the lessons of living together and cooperating with one another. Use your talents to beat back all the forces which threaten our future. It is an enormous task. But we trust and we believe in you.

I have saved the most important for last. There is a final fundamental reason that we believe in your future and in ours. The more you learn, the more you will understand

that human beings need not be selfish and self serving. Today is mother's day. How many mothers throughout the ages have both figuratively and literally sacrificed themselves for the sake of their children. The impulse of a mother's love is to make life better for her child. Seniors be sure to thank your mothers today for all they have done for you. I know that you are all familiar with the story of Fr Damian de Veuster who cared for the lepers on the island of Molokai. He walked into midst of disease because he valued service to others more than he valued his own life. We can aspire to care for one another and to see that we gain more in cooperation than we do in strife. In his first inaugural address before our nation plunged itself into a fearsome civil war, Abraham Lincoln spoke about the better angels of our nature. There are better angels in our nature. That is why the God who created us never abandoned us. When we human beings proved incapable of avoiding our penchant for self destruction, God sent his only son to be a human being just like each and every one of us. Jesus Christ was God. But he was also fully human. So you see seniors, God has a stake in our future too. It is the ultimate reason to strive to persevere into the future. It has nothing to do with our own merits, or our abilities, or our skills. This is the most essential lesson of all that we hope that you learned here at Mount Michael. That God so loved the world that he sent his only Son that whoever believes in him might have eternal life.

I leave you with this Benedictine motto, "ut in omnibus glorificetur Dei," that in all things God may be glorified. I can assure you seniors, that if in everything you undertake and that if in everything you say, you remind yourself that you are doing it so that God may be glorified, you will not only be successes, you will also be on your way to becoming saints. So gentlemen, this is your final homework assignment. We need you to help save the world. It's a big task. But that is why we brought you here. You are the best and the brightest. Don't be afraid of a few mistakes along the way. You are young, you have vision, you have energy, you have an education, you have a purpose. Remember the final words of Jesus in the gospel today, "By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." We are counting on you. Good luck to you, and remember that for you Mount Michael is always home.