

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS
SAINT TIKHON'S ORTHODOX THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Rt. Rev. Thomas Joseph

May 27, 2017

Your Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon

Your Eminence, Archbishop Michael,

Very Reverend Fathers and Matushki,

Distinguished Members of the Administration, Faculty, Staff,

Board of Trustees and Alumni of our Seminary,

Pilgrims to our Monastery and friends of our Seminary,

Beloved Seminarians and families,

And, especially today Honored Graduates of the Class of 2017, to whom I offer you my warmest congratulations on your hard work, accomplishments and perseverance. I would be remiss if I did not commend the faculty, staff, and administration of Saint Tikhon's Seminary for their hard work and dedication in preparing these graduates for their work in service to the Church.

As we graduate the 75th class at Saint Tikhon's seminary, we are profoundly grateful for the "cloud of witnesses" that has marked the life of the seminary here. We stand on their shoulders, ask for their holy prayers, and strive to emulate their lives in service to God's people and His Church. These are broad shoulders upon which we stand- Saint Tikhon of Zadonsk, Saint Raphael of Brooklyn, Saint Nikolai Velimorovich, Saint Alexis Toth, and Saint Alexander Hotiwisky.

I am humbled by the privilege of addressing you on this most auspicious occasion at Saint Tikhon's Seminary. As I reflected on this moment in the life of the Church, I thought about the hopes and dreams of your predecessors as they prepared for priestly ordination and service in the

Lord's vineyard. I am sure they were concerned as you are today with their ordination, their first assignments, and how they would manage their new lives in service to the Lord and His Church. I would kindly ask you to put those cares aside for a moment and reflect with me on the one thing necessary-the words of our Lord Jesus Christ on the night before He suffered. He told His disciples, "You are my friends, if you do whatsoever I command you. Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knows not what his lord does: but I have called you friends." (John 15:15)

This is the one thing necessary and the only thing with which you should concern yourself. You have spent the last four years studying and praying, soaking in the words and teachings of the Master just as the apostles did during their three year sojourn with the Lord Jesus during His public ministry. He has called you friend inasmuch as you do what He has commanded you-bear fruit that ripens and grows in relation to your friendship with Christ.

During your time at the seminary, you have acquired a great deal of knowledge. Saint Paul warns us that "knowledge puffs up while love edifies." (1Cor 1:1) In a few moments, you will receive degrees acknowledging your academic accomplishments but that will not serve you well if you have not borne fruit-the fruit of the Spirit that testifies to your friendship with Christ. Your true concern, your true vocation lies in this. We do not confer degrees upon you to be academics but spiritual physicians in the spiritual hospitals of our parishes and churches. In that sense, your formation and training has just begun and will be ongoing throughout your life and your ministry. We do not need academicians and administrators as much as we need holy men who guard their friendship with Christ as the pearl of great price so that they may share that with the people whom they serve. Friendship with Christ is conferred upon each of you but it must be jealously guarded, faithfully nurtured, and singularly prized by your own prayer life and ascetic

struggle. All you do, preaching, teaching, ministering to the sick, and administering the holy Mysteries must flow from your prayer and your asceticism. Book knowledge will not help you in this regard unless it is undergirded by a deep spiritual life. Otherwise, you will be nothing more than a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. (1Cor. 13:1)

Saint Gregory the Theologian puts this more eloquently when he writes about what is required of a priest, “One must be purified before purifying others, be instructed before instructing, become light in order to enlighten, draw near to God before approaching others, be sanctified in order to sanctify” (Oration 2,71). Our dearly beloved Archbishop Michael reminds us of this in his Rector’s message. I recall those words of Saint Gregory because they are worthy of emphasis. In fact, you may want to place them somewhere in your home where you will see it and be reminded of it every day.

In quoting Saint Gregory, there is another point I would like to make that is particularly relevant on this occasion. The Orthodox Church attributes the term theologian to Saint Gregory not because he had an advanced academic degree but because he is a God-seer. In the words of Metropolitan Hierotheos Vlachos, “According to Saint Gregory Palamas, theologians are the God-seers; those who have followed the ‘method’ of the Church and have attained to perfect faith, to the illumination of the nous and to divinisation (theosis). Theology is the fruit of man's cure and the path which leads to cure and the acquisition of the knowledge of God.” True theology is the fruit of the synergy between man and God within the spiritual hospital, the Orthodox Church. The “method” is handed down to us by the holy fathers and is particular, exacting, and time-tested. The “method” bears fruit unto eternal life as attested to in the lives of the many saints who have trod this path. It is your path and your one concern as you embark upon your life of service and ministry in God’s holy Church.

None of us knows what lies ahead. We do know that we will encounter crosses in our lives. Friendship with Christ necessarily guarantees as much. However, Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov reminds us in the midst of these struggles, “Know for certain that the troubles which befall you come not of themselves but by God's permission; so take all possible care to bear them with patience and perseverance...” (*The Arena*, p. 125) It should come as no great surprise that we will be called upon to be humble with the proud, comforting with the sorrowful, and merciful to all. We must judge no one lest we ourselves be judged. This is a tall order and frankly impossible in the absence of a personal spiritual life. Christ reminded His disciples and reminds each of us that we are sent “as sheep among wolves”. Before we look for the wolves in others, let us take care of the wolves prowling in our own hearts. Elder Cleopa once noted that “It’s a fact that temptations always correspond to weaknesses in human nature. God gives harsher temptations to those who are strong in the faith so that they can progress in sanctity and become worthy of greater crowns. To those who are weak in the faith and in patience, Divine Providence gives easier temptations, so that they can overcome them and not despair.”

Perhaps more common, more subtle but just as lethal is what Saint Ignatius Brianchaninov calls the sin of insensibility. It is a sin or more precisely, a state of being, that is very dangerous for those of us engaged in ministry, especially priestly ministry. Saint Ignatius addresses this topic in his excellent sermon on the Myrrh-bearing women and their anxiety concerning who will roll the stone away from the tomb for us? He notes, “*The stone is the soul's illness by which all the other spiritual illnesses are guarded incurably and which the holy fathers call insensibility. Many will say, what sort of sin is this? We have never heard of it. According to the fathers, insensibility is the deadening of spiritual feelings, the unseen death of the human soul with respect to spiritual things in a life that is flourishing with respect to material things. From a*

long-term physical sickness all strength can become exhausted and the body's abilities withered; then the illness cannot find any more food, and ceases to torment the body's constitution. It leaves the sick man alone and wasted, as if dead and incapable of movement due to the debilitating suffering, the terrible, dumb morbidity that is not expressed by any particular suffering. The same thing happens to the human soul. Long-term slackness of life amidst continuous distractions, constant voluntary sins, forgetfulness of God and eternity, inattention or only superficial attention to the Gospel teachings removes from our spirit any inclination toward spiritual things, and deadens it to them. Although they continue to exist, they cease to exist for our spirit because its life has ended for them—all its strength is directed toward the material, the temporal, the vain, and the sinful.

Everyone who wants to dispassionately and seriously investigate the state of his soul will see the illness of insensibility in it; he will see its broad significance, its gravity and consequence, and will have to admit that it is the manifestation and witness of his deadness of soul. When we want to study the Word of God, what boredom hits us! Everything we read seems hard to understand, not worthy of attention, and strange. How quickly we want to be free of that reading! Why is this? Because we feel no affinity for the Word of God.

When we rise for prayer, what dryness and coldness we feel! How we rush to finish our cursory, completely distracted prayer! Why? Because we are estranged from God: we believe in God's existence with a dead faith; He does not exist to our sensibility. Why have we forgotten eternity? Are we excluded from the number of those who must enter into its boundless realm? Doesn't death stand before us face to face, as it does to all humans? Why is this? It is because we do not want to think about eternity; we have lost the precious foretaste of it, and acquired a false perception of our earthly sojourn. This false perception imagines that our earthly life is endless.

We are so deceived and distracted by this false perception that we conform all our actions to them, bringing all the potential of our soul and body as a sacrifice to corruption, not caring at all about what awaits us in the other world. After all, we must inevitably become permanent inhabitants of that world.” This insensibility can happen to us who minister at the Lord’s altar almost imperceptibly if we aren’t vigilant. We begin to profane the sacred by taking for granted the holy things of God. It may start with pointless idle talk in the altar or rushing through Proskimedia or cutting out portions of the Divine Services with the excuse that “people will complain”. Pretty soon, prayer becomes shorter and less regular. Other matters begin to pre-occupy the heart.

Insensibility is one of the best examples of why a good spiritual father is so vital for your spiritual life. If you are honest with him, he will be able to discern the seeds of insensibility begin to take root in your heart and root them out before it is too late.

I mention all of these things because the life of the priest is one of constant spiritual warfare in the garden of your own heart as well as the hearts of all those whom you serve. There is untold joy in serving as a priest but it is a joy that is not discernible to the secular world. Only the spiritual person can taste the goodness of the Lord and rejoice in His goodness. You will graduate here today with much accomplished. The Lord has abundantly blessed each of you. He has also given you tremendous responsibility. He calls you His friends IF you do what He commands. This friendship comes at a price but the reward is beyond imagining. As you leave this holy place, know what you are undertaking and resolve mightily to be found worthy of the calling you have received. Labor with every fiber of your being to be a faithful friend of the Lord Christ.

I will close my remarks with the words of Saint John Chrysostom on the importance and awesome dignity of the priesthood:

The Priest's relations with his people involve thus much difficulty. But if any inquire about his relations with God, he will find the others to be as nothing, since these require a greater and more thorough earnestness. For he who acts as an ambassador on behalf of the whole city — but why do I say the city? On behalf of the whole world indeed — prays that God would be merciful to the sins of all, not only of the living, but also of the departed. What manner of man ought he to be? For my part I think that the boldness of speech of Moses and Elias, is insufficient for such supplication. For as though he were entrusted with the whole world and were himself the father of all men, he draws near to God, beseeching that wars may be extinguished everywhere, that tumults may be quelled; asking for peace and plenty, and a swift deliverance from all the ills that beset each one, publicly and privately; and he ought as much to excel in every respect all those on whose behalf he prays, as rulers should excel their subjects.” (On the Priesthood, Book VI.4)

May our thrice holy God bless you abundantly as you strive to serve the Church in all holiness and righteousness.