

COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS OF
ARCHBISHOP MICHAEL
TO THE GRADUATING CLASS OF 2020

It is my joy to be a part of the festivities this evening, although they are virtual... honoring the St. Tikhon's Seminary Graduating Class of 2020. While I cannot be with you in person, please, know that I am with you in spirit and in prayer... in mind and in heart.

I want to begin by congratulating you for all that you have accomplished in your three years at St. Tikhon's Seminary – especially all that you have endured this final semester because of the Coronavirus pandemic. We acknowledge all the adjustments that you had to make ... all the sacrifices that you had to make ... all the festivities that you were deprived of. We thank you for your faithfulness.

We are grateful for all the services you attended throughout three years at the Monastery Church, allowing yourselves to be shaped by your spiritual father and the monastics ... all the knowledge you worked hard to learn at the feet of the brilliant scholars and experienced pastors who comprise our faculty ... and the friendships that you forged, sometimes amidst difficulties, among your classmates, who will be your life-long brothers in Christ and supporters in your ministry. I hope you realize that you leave St. Tikhon's Seminary with so much more than you came with.

I take this opportunity to thank your wives for all the sacrifices that they made leaving home, coming here, and beginning a new life ... sacrifices of family and home, finances, and comforts, time with you and your children ... and some sacrifices of cross-bearing, seen only by the Lord Himself. May God bless them abundantly for all that they are and all that they have done for you and for us, out of love for Him.

I also thank your children for the many times when they didn't have their Dad when they needed him or wanted him ... because he was busy serving or studying or working. I pray that they can understand that their lost time ... was spent on shaping a future servant of the Lord and His Church.

I thank your parents for raising you so well and enabling you to be offered to Christ and His Church in the service of His people. We thank them for the gift of their son to Our Lord.

And finally, I thank all of the priests and teachers who shaped you, the parishes who sponsored you, and the benefactors who supported you and prayed for you, bringing you to this momentous day in your life. May God bless them all!

CHARGE TO THE GRADUATING CLASS OF 2020

As we offer a final word of encouragement to the graduating class of 2020 – this class whose last semester and commencement ceremonies had to be rewritten because of the Coronavirus – we realize we are sending you out into a world that is deeply secularized, scarred by wounds from the pandemic, and not so well anchored in faith.

So often in that world, success has been measured by dollars and cents, prominence and power, possessions and prestige – not sacrifice, or service, or sanctity. It has been a world that demands political correctness, not revealed truth. You will be enticed to be “of this world” – not just in it. And the “icons” of this world? They have been sports heroes, politicians, and movie stars – not Our Lord, not His Mother, not the Saints.

These, of course, are not the measurements of life’s achievements according to the Gospel. And so I would charge you to challenge those standards of the world ... with these metrics of ministry – secrets to a successful priesthood, a successful diaconate, successful lay leadership in the Church ... a vocation, accepted and followed.

1. Be a Man of Prayer: Even though you have a degree in divinity in your hand, remember the sacred maxim of the desert monk Evagrius, “A theologian is one who prays, and one who prays is a theologian.” Our Lord set the example for us to follow – at every turn, He is in communion with His Father in prayer; in the synagogue on every Sabbath, in the Temple on every feast day. He encourages us: “Keep on asking and you shall receive...”.

2. You Will Always Be a Servant: Whether you become a deacon or are ordained a priest, elevated to archpriest or archimandrite, consecrated a bishop or elected metropolitan, you will always be a servant – a servant of the Lord, in His Name, to His People. You are privileged to serve at His Holy Table or in the soup kitchen. Never forget the One you imitate: “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.”

3. Never Compromise the Truth: You have been chosen to be part of the continuum of truth-bearers that spans the history of Christ’s Church. You must be one with the Holy Fathers of our Faith – “the Faith which was once delivered unto the saints” (Jude 3) – so that the Church will speak with but a single voice amid today’s cacophonies. We must accept, not speculate; preserve, not innovate; defend, not attack; uphold, not tear down our Tradition which is “the life of the Holy Spirit in the Church.”

4. Preach the Word In Season and Out of Season: Every chance that you get, at Liturgy or Vespers, a Baptism or Wedding or Funeral, from the amvon or on the street, share the precious Word of God. At every turn, we must speak Christ’s words – the words of His Church, not the world’s words, not our words. The words of our Lord’s first sermon ... and so many afterwards: “Repent, the Kingdom of God is at hand ...” are the urgent message the world needs to hear so very badly in the 21st century – and at all times.

5. Share the Faith: Saint John Chrysostom once put priests into two camps – those who make their parish their world, and those who make the world their parish. Before His Ascension, Christ’s last command to us was: “Go, make disciples of all nations...” So many people have no faith, so many have no church. We are not allowed to hide our faith, or Christ’s holy Church, under a bushel basket. Archbishop Anastasios of Albania reminds us, “Evangelization is as necessary for the Church, as breathing is for the body.”

6. Serve at the Altar with Joy: The Fathers tell us that those who serve in the sanctuary are blessed with a privilege that even angels do not have. Radiate that joy the Lord speaks of in the Gospel ... “a joy that no one will ever be able to take away from you.” Think of all the martyrs and saints before you ... hierarchs like Metropolitan Leonty, priests like Fr. Roman Braga. Serve as if this were your first Liturgy, your only Liturgy, and your last Liturgy. “No one is worthy ...” but you have been called and chosen. Rejoice – humbly and gratefully – in that glory.

7. Last but Most Important – Love Your People: “God is love”, writes Saint John. “A new commandment I give to you; that you love one another as I have loved you,” Jesus teaches. “Love your enemies” is perhaps the greatest challenge of all to come from our Lord’s lips. If Christ so commands all His followers, should not our parishioners expect their priest to be a loving spiritual father?

At the end of his life, bent by the years, Saint John the Theologian could no longer preach sermons. Supported by his friends, he would address one simple exhortation: “My children, love one another!” Asked why he kept repeating the phrase, the elder John replied: “Because it is the Lord’s highest command – obeying this one is enough.”

Pray – Be a Servant – Defend the Truth – Preach the Word – Share the Faith – Serve with Joy – and Love Your People.

My prayer for you is that the fruit of your labors, whatever they are, may be multiplied a hundredfold, as you serve the God Who loves you more than you love yourself. May He bless you, may He keep you, may He ever love you.

On behalf of all of us who have been blessed to play a part in your formation: Be assured of my prayers and my love for each and every one of you. May God grant you and your families many, many blessed years.

+ Archbishop Michael of New York