

*“The Love that Moves the Sun and the Other Stars”:
Our Task to Proclaim the Gospel of the God of All Creation*



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*Commencement Address
Thomas Aquinas College
Santa Paula, California
May 14, 2011*

President McLean, Dr. Kelly and members of the faculty; Mr. Wensley and members of the Board of Governors; Father Buckley and Father Raftery; distinguished graduates; all of you my dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

I am touched by the kindness of your invitation to be here and to share this beautiful day of joy with you.

I have been here in Southern California for almost a year now. On May 26, I will celebrate the anniversary of my installation as coadjutor. I have been the Archbishop of Los Angeles since the beginning of March.

I wake up every morning and I realize: I'm not in San Antonio, Texas anymore.

Los Angeles is truly an amazing city, with all of its liveliness and energy, all the diversity of languages, religions, cultures and lifestyles!

I was reading the remarks of Blessed John Paul II when he visited Los Angeles in 1987. He called the city “a great metropolis.” He was right. It is truly a city of the world.

And the Church is a kind of microcosm. We have almost 75 ethnic and national groups in the Archdiocese and we celebrate the holy Eucharist and minister to people in more than 40 different languages. It really is what God calls his Catholic Church to be — *una familia de Dios* — “One family of God,” drawn from every country, race and language.

I am humbled and excited by the possibilities for my ministry in Los Angeles. So I ask you please to remember me and my ministry in your prayers.

It is an honor for me to accept the St. Thomas Aquinas Medallion.

I admire this college and your faithfulness to the Church's mission for higher education and the new evangelization. So this is a sincere honor for me.

I have been studying St. Thomas since I was a young man in the seminary. I wrote my thesis on his theology of the virtues and specifically the virtue of courage.

Last year I wrote a book called *Men of Brave Heart*. I tried to take a fresh look at Thomas's theology in light of the teachings and witness of the saints and I applied this teaching to issues in the moral formation of priests and seminarians.

We need to hear Thomas's voice today — especially his ideas about the image of God and the image of Christ and the *teleology* or purpose of the human person.

He reminds us that, in the words of the *Catechism*: “The vocation of humanity is to show forth the image of God and to be transformed into the image of the Father's only Son.”

Or in Thomas's own beautiful words: “The ultimate end of things is to become like God!”ⁱ

Thomas's concerns are very close to the heart of what I want to talk with you about today.

I want to start with a story that Blessed John Paul II once told. I have been thinking a lot about him. I know you are as overjoyed as I am that he has been beatified.

I have always felt a strong connection of grace with him. I was a new priest, ordained just three months, when he was named Pope in 1978. He called me to be a bishop in 2001 and, not long before his death in 2005, he called me to be an archbishop. And I feel the hand of Providence at work in his being beatified as I begin my ministry here in Los Angeles.

Recently, I was reading some retreat talks he gave for university students Cracow in 1972, back when he was still Cardinal Karol Wojtyla. In one of these talks, he described a letter he received from a great natural scientist. Here is what that scientist wrote to him:

For the most part, I do not find God on the paths of my science. But there are moments — most often in the face of the majesty of nature, the beauty of the mountains, for example — that a strange thing happens: I, who do not find God on the paths of my science, at such moments, I feel that *God exists!* And then I begin to pray.ⁱⁱ

This is what I want to talk with you about this afternoon. It is something that concerns me very much.

Why is it that during the course of this good man's scientific work, he could not find God? How come, when he was in his laboratory or doing experiments in the natural world, this great scientist could not discover that God exists? Why did he not think of

his scientific work as a kind of prayer, as something pleasing that he could offer to God?

My dear sisters and brothers, he could not because we have allowed Almighty God to become eclipsed in our scientific and intellectual life — in higher education, and in our culture in general.

We have eliminated God from all the processes by which we seek knowledge about ourselves and about our world. God is no longer a factor in our methods. Hence, God is nowhere to be found among our conclusions.

This fact has profound implications for the world you are entering into, my dear young brothers and sisters.

You are entering into a culture in America and in the West that is increasingly secularized and “de-Christianized.”

Powerful interests have been at work for decades now, seeking to erase the influence — and even the memory of Western civilization’s Christian roots. God has been eclipsed not only in science, but also in our laws and public policies, in our arts and literature, in our schools and media.

The goal, advocates of this effort say, is to get to a “post-Christian society.”

They image a beautiful world, liberated from depending on God or superstitious or “magical” thinking. They imagine a society governed by reason and technology, dedicated to individual freedom and the pursuit of material comfort. And they imagine a society that would have no interest in defining the “good life,” or making distinctions among the array of religions, cultures, lifestyles and viewpoints we find in the modern metropolis.

Now, I believe this “goal” of a secular, post-Christian society is a seductive illusion and a trap. But that is the subject for another talk at another time.

This afternoon, I just want to point out that this mindset will be a challenge to you, dear graduates. But it forms the territory of your Christian witness and mission. This is the environment in which you are called to proclaim Christ as his disciples.

You are about to commence into a world where more and more of our brothers and sisters live without any awareness of their need for God.

You will realize very quickly that in order to participate in the economic, political, and cultural life of our society, you will be asked to essentially conduct yourself as if you don’t believe in God or as if he does not exist.

It is increasingly common today — even for good, faithful people — to treat their religious faith as something private that has nothing to do with the rest of their lives.

You need to resist that temptation in your own lives. But you also have an important duty to confront this culture with the power and the promise of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our world needs to be brought to a new remembrance of the God who created us and redeemed us and who calls us to a love that never ends.

As graduates of this fine Catholic college, you have a unique responsibility for this new evangelization. You must promote a new dialogue of reconciliation between faith and reason.

Blessed John Paul taught us that: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth.”ⁱⁱⁱ

That is a beautiful saying. God made us with minds that can reason and hearts that can believe. We are “hard-wired” you might say — to seek the truth about who we are, the truth about the world we live in, and the truth about God.

And we can only discover these truths through our use of *both* reason *and* faith.

The fundamental problem today is that we have told ourselves that the insights of faith are irrelevant to our study of the world and to the study of the human person.

Our Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI speaks of “the modern self-limitation of reason.”^{iv} What he means is that we have told ourselves that there are certain things we can never really know. We have made a decision to *limit* our reason to only certain kinds of knowledge.

We have told ourselves that we can only know those things that we can experience ourselves or verify by experiments in a laboratory or by a mathematical equation. Everything else is rejected as “subjective,” something private and hence unknowable.

Since we cannot “see” God with a telescope or detect the human soul with an MRI machine, we conclude that trying to talk about these realities is a waste of time. We conclude that we cannot know for sure whether they are true or not.

Now, my brothers and sisters, this way of thinking is like going into a fight with one hand tied behind your back, or trying to fly with only one wing.

Do we really want to accept that “reality” is only what we can see or touch or “prove” with experiments? What about the reality of the Eucharist or the sacraments? What about our Confession of Faith — our belief in things that are seen and *unseen*, visible and invisible?

Our world needs the eyes of faith, my brothers and sisters.

The “modern self-limitation of reason” has led to moral chaos. We are building a world where faith and life are completely separated; a world where knowledge and technical ability are separated from ethics and morality; and, where power is divorced from responsibility.

It is a world in which we can identify causes and effects, but not reasons or purposes.

Reason is a great gift from God. But reason alone can't give meaning to our lives. Reason alone can find “no reason” to defend the weak, the unborn or the human embryo. Reason alone can find no reason, no value in a person born with disabilities.

The Second Vatican Council warned us, and Blessed John Paul stressed again and again: “Without a Creator, the creature vanishes.”^v When God is unknown, we are unknowable to ourselves.

That is what has happened with the divorce of faith and reason.

Without faith, we can discover how the world works. But not *why*. We can't know where we come from or how we ought to live. Or why we were created.

Reason gives us only partial truths. But we are made to desire the fullness of truth. We are made to desire our Creator.

The problem today is that our intellectuals and our cultural leaders no longer have confidence. They are skeptical that we can know our Creator from what he has created. So we bracket off the question of God as something we cannot know.

My brothers and sisters, you are commencing into a world that has made the one true God, an “unknown god.”

It is a lot like the world that the first Christians lived in. You are entering a world that is a kind of “spiritual bazaar” — filled with ancient religions, new spiritualities, new paganisms, and all sorts of obsessions and substitutes for religious faith.

It is a lot like Athens, when St. Paul visited there in the first century. Do you remember his great speech at the Areopagus, the forum for Athens's cultural elite?

St. Paul said:

Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious. For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, *To an unknown god*. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.^{vi}

This is your mission as graduates of this great college, my brothers and sisters. You must proclaim the true and living God to a world where he is unknown and considered unknowable.

Blessed John Paul used to talk about the need to evangelize all the new “areopagi” of modern culture. He called us to infuse Gospel values into all the areas where elite attitudes and opinions are formed and expressed — science, politics, business, the arts, philosophy, higher education, popular entertainment, and the media.^{vii}

This is *your* mission, dear graduates!

Every Christian in every age has to give an account of the hope that is in him!^{viii} In our times, the great defense we have to make is that God is “knowable.” We have to help people understand that it is still possible to know God, to love God, and to serve God.

We must tell the world once more, the good news that we have a Creator!

We *can* know God through reason. As St. Paul said, we can know the invisible nature and eternal power of our Creator, from the visible and temporal things of creation.^{ix}

Science and reason have helped us to see that our world *is* intelligible, that it is “reasonable.” That it operates according to patterns that have a precise order and a predictable logic.

The world is *not* chaos and random chance. It is the opposite. From the tiniest cell to the orbit of the planets, we know there is an intelligent structure to everything in creation.

This confirms the revelation of faith. This confirms what the Gospel tells us. That in the beginning was the Word, *the Logos*. And in him all things were created.

But faith opens us to know even more. Faith opens us to know that the Creator is not only divine Reason. He is Love.

He is the one the poet Dante spoke of: *The Love that moves the sun and the other stars!*^x

The designs of nature speak to us of God’s love and truth!^{xi}

Creation is the work of God’s plan of loving goodness — a plan of love born in the heart of God before the foundation of the world.

This is what we must tell people!

To again quote your patron, St. Thomas Aquinas: “Creatures came into existence when the Key of Love opened his hand.”^{xii}

My brothers and sisters, we can never be content with only proving God's existence. We need to proclaim God's love. We need to proclaim him as Lord of creation, and Master of history, and King of every human heart.

We must proclaim the Gospel of the God of all creation to the men and women of our day.

We must tell them the good news that our Creator is a Father of tender mercies.^{xiii} That he made this world for a reason. That he made each one of us for a reason.

We must proclaim that the world exists for the praise of God's glory. And that, as St. Irenaeus declared: "The glory of God is man fully alive."^{xiv}

Dear graduates: You are called to make many converts to the God of all Creation.

I want to leave you with a beautiful story of conversion.

It is the story of one of our contemporaries, a great priest, professor and theologian, Cardinal Avery Dulles. He died just a few years ago at the end of a long and fruitful career of service to the Church.

He had grown up very privileged and as a high-church Presbyterian. His dad, as you may know, was the famous John Foster Dulles, who was secretary of state under President Eisenhower.

But by the time he got to Harvard University in 1936, Dulles had no faith. He was very much a modern man. He believed science had proven religion to be all superstition.

He thought that God was a kind of excuse made up to explain things that could not be explained yet by reason. As he saw it, the world was just a mass of matter and energy. Human life had emerged by chance and evolved according to the process of natural selection.

Dulles remained a seeker after the truth. He loved philosophy and history and poetry.

One day, he was reading St. Augustine's book, *The City of God*. He got up and took a walk outside. It was springtime and the trees were just starting to bud.

Dulles began to think about the trees. Why every year, at around this time, did the trees and flowers start to bud?

He wrote in his memoir: "The thought came to me suddenly, with all the strength and novelty of a revelation, that these little buds in their innocence and meekness followed a rule, a law of which I as yet knew nothing."^{xv}

Dulles reasoned that if the trees exhibited an order and purpose, there must be some higher power of intelligence behind them, a Designer, a Creator.

That was the start. That night for the first time in years, he prayed the “Our Father,” which he had learned when he was a child. He started reading the gospels every day. He discovered and came to fall in love with Jesus Christ.

This is a beautiful story.

We don’t know if that scientist who wrote to Blessed John Paul all those years ago ever came to the faith. We do know that the beauty of this world, the beauty of creation, brought him to pray to his Creator, as it did for Cardinal Dulles.

What we must all do, my brothers and sisters, is to help others make this journey also.

We must help them to cross the threshold — from the wonders of this world, from all the beauty in heaven and earth, to know the God of all creation. And to believe in Jesus Christ, the first-born of all creation, through whom he created the world and through whom he upholds the universe, by the Word of his power!

Thank you for your attention today my friends. And thank you again for the great honor of this St. Thomas Aquinas Medallion.

I ask the intercession of Our Blessed Mother, the Seat of Wisdom, that our Father in heaven will bestow upon you all the blessings of creation and salvation.^{xvi}

ⁱ Quoted in *Men of Brave Heart* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2010), 128.

ⁱⁱ *The Making of the Pope of the Millennium: Kalendarium of the Life of Karol Wojtyla* (Marians of the Immaculate Conception, 2000), 465; Wojtyla, *The Way to Christ: Spiritual Exercises* (Harper & Row, 1982), 81.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Fides et Ratio*, 1.

^{iv} Address at Regensburg University (Sept. 12, 2006).

^v *Gaudium et Spes*, 36; *Catechism*, 308.

^{vi} Acts 17:22–23.

^{vii} *Redemptoris Missio*, 37.

^{viii} 1 Pet. 3:15.

^{ix} Rom. 1:20, 25.

^x *Paradisio*, 33:145.

^{xi} Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 48.

^{xii} *Catechism*, 293.

^{xiii} 2 Cor. 1:3.

^{xiv} *Catechism*, 293–294.

^{xv} *A Testimonial to Grace* (Sheed & Ward, 1996), 35–37.

^{xvi} *Catechism*, 1082.