

REMARKS FOR THE 2009 MERRIMACK COLLEGE ACADEMIC CONVOCATION

Good morning. Welcome to the fall 2009 Academic Convocation. This is my 35th opening of an academic year. I am amazed how quickly the academic years roll by. By now, you our students have been inundated with assignments due, exams to take, projects to plan, and papers to write. And yet in the midst of that buzz, we can still pause today in Academic Convocation to say welcome one last time to the 2009-2010 Academic Year.

Today we are called together to celebrate and proclaim why we are here at Merrimack, where we are going, and why we do the work we do.

For those of you who are entering your senior year,

robed today in recognition of the status you have achieved and the last steps you begin to take toward graduation, this is a moment to acknowledge that in eight short, lightening fast months, you leave this college to begin your life's work. Use wisely these remaining months of relatively safe exploration of ideas and disinterested learning for its own sake. You have inhaled ideas; now you will discover how powerful and transformative they can be in your personal lives and in the course of human history and events. Ideas lose their innocence when they are confronted with truth and are tested in the exam of lived experience.

For those whose first Merrimack convocation this is, we salute you at the start of your academic career. By now you are learning that you are not enrolled in 13th grade. You are learning that there is more to knowledge than facts,

that self knowledge, as Socrates put it, is the beginning of all learning. Struggle to learn what it means for you to be an individual – a word that derives from the Latin word “individua” which means – undivided within yourself and inextricably engaged in your lived world. Amazingly, there is no “there” and “then” without your being “here” and “now”. You are not an insignificant particle in this vast Universe; you are essential to the world as we know it.

As a unique individual, learn the comfort of being alone – again a word derived from “at-one” – and come to grips with the inescapable truth that you are a unique center of the Universe; from that will flow your freedom, originality and creative engagement of the world around you. That’s right – in the entire history of the universe, there has been, is and will be only one of you. Leave your unique fingerprints on

this universe.

And as you play comfortably with aloneness, at the same time, you will feel the deep discomfort of loneliness that wells up only within a human individual – a loneliness that can only be satisfied through engaging other individuals and becoming we. Because we are lonely, we share, communicate and love.

In time you will learn that no individual has “to be”; all are finite, mortal and contingent. Then you may ask the question – “Is that all there is?” Then you penetrate the infinite abyss.

These are no longer detached ideas about yourself and about other individuals with whom you share the journey here and now. This is experiencing and thinking at its most engaging and awe-filled level. From you we demand

excellence of thought. There is no room for complacency and boredom; if you are bored, then you have only yourself to blame. Do not settle for what you have always done. Do not imagine that what used to be enough still is. College is a place to wear your passion for learning on your sleeves. Take Aristotle's first sentence in his *Metaphysics* seriously – "All men by nature have the desire to know."

Most of you have come here to get a degree. Many of you have come to get a job. I ask that you join us instead in getting an education. Albert Einstein said, "Training helps you to make a living; education enables you to make a life."

Do not be afraid to love literature, or art, or science, or business, or engineering, or economics or whatever subject your professor moves you to want to know and know better. Do not be ashamed because you are moved by the desire

to learn. Give yourself the chance to become the individual you can be.

Welcome then to this Academic Convocation of Merrimack College. As it is every year and has been for the 1000 years of Catholic Higher Education, welcome to our community of scholars. Welcome to our dreams of enlightenment, welcome to our desire for engagement, welcome to our driving hope for empowerment. May you enjoy success in all your endeavors. May we grow together in mind, and heart, and hope. Thank you