Charge to Graduates

Myanmar Institute of Theology

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"What Now?"

Distinguished Trustees, Dr. Simon P.K. En, fellow faculty members, graduates, family members and friends, it is a great privilege for me to address you this morning on this very significant occasion. To my students, let me say one more time, "Mingalaba!" This is my last opportunity to speak to you as a group, and I have been very much looking forward to it!

Today is the first day of the rest of your life. This is true for all of us, but this well known saying takes on special meaning for graduates on Commencement Day—and it is to you, the class of 2009, that I will be directing my comments this morning.

As you probably realize, commencement means the beginning, not the end. We are here to celebrate the successful completion of your seminary work, but we are also here to mark the beginning of all that is ahead for you. No matter what has happened up to this point, the future stretches out before you as a long journey of adventure and possibilities.

So my question for you this morning is not about the past, but about the present and the future. And my question is: "What now?"

As you take your next steps in full time Christian service or further education, I have five suggestions for your journey…

1. Let your passion for ministry flow.
2. Pursue Jesus with your whole heart.
3. Look for God's presence in your life.
4. Don't confuse seeking God with serving God. And,
5. Pray without ceasing.

Suggestion #1 Let your passion flow.

It has been a tremendous privilege and joy for me to teach so many of you over the last two months. I've heard your questions, I've read your exams and papers, and I have talked with a number of you individually.

But it wasn't until I read your contextualized essays that I began to see your hearts, and to feel some of your pain and your deep concern for your people.

You desperately want to help in whatever ways you can. You want to make a difference with your life. I can see that.

I realize now that every one of you is facing very challenging circumstances, but you are not daunted. Most of you believe you are called to the work ahead of you—whether it is preaching, teaching, leading youth, or working in administration. You believe that you have a message to take to your context, and that you have important work to do.

That's what I call passion. And passion is a good thing, because it grows out of your own heart and mind, and motivates you to put all your effort into serving Christ and his church.

When I left seminary, I was so eager to get started in ministry. I would work day and night, sometimes 70 or 80 hours over six or seven days a week. I had passion for pastoring. Then, I earned a Ph.D., and I had passion for teaching. And then I had passion for Christian social service. I stayed working with the same organization for 10 years, and I was passionate for the work we were doing for troubled teenagers. Now, I have a tremendous amount of passion for our new global ministry.

In each case passion drove me forward, and yet along the way, there were many times when passion was simply not enough to keep me going.

So, as you prepare to move forward into your next assignment, let your passion for ministry flow. But remember, passion alone is not enough. You will need something more for the long journey ahead.

And that something more is Jesus.

Suggestion # 2. Pursue Jesus with your whole heart.

As most of you know, two and a half years ago, I walked 500 miles with my family across northern Spain on pilgrimage. I was in transition in my life. I was leaving one phase of my service for Christ and about to start a new one—just as you are today. So I set aside this time to walk this ancient pilgrimage route to draw closer to God. I wanted to hear God's voice better and to seek God's leading.

Yet, almost as soon as I started, I heard a voice in my head say, "This trip is not about discovering your next step. It is about preparing you to be able to hear my voice when the time comes." That made sense. I didn't just need another assignment for Christian service. I needed to be changed somehow, so that I would be better able to respond to God's call on my life, and make the sacrifices necessary to fulfill God's will.

On the 17th day on pilgrimage. I finally had a chance to walk alone, and I started to think about my relationship with God.[1]

> *I suddenly heard myself say to God or to the air or to myself, "You know. I'm fairly satisfied with my spiritual life. Based on what I know about God and spirituality, I would rate my spiritual life a 9 out of 10…. I like where I am spiritually. Trying to increase my satisfaction level probably wouldn't be worth the effort required.*
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> *"In fact (I reasoned), perhaps my energy would be better applied elsewhere… After all, we are the hands and feet of Christ. Isn't it up to us to attend to concrete, this-world needs and concerns?"… The more I thought about the scope of human suffering, the more my answer seemed self-evident: I told myself, "Stop worrying about becoming more spiritual, and devote more time and energy to helping others!"*

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[1] This section is adapted from my book, *One Step at Time: A Pilgrim's Guide to Spirit-Led Living* (The Alban Institute, 2008), pp. 97-98.

Yet, almost as soon as I reached this conclusion, something shifted within me.

Paul's words to the Philippians (which we read earlier today) came to mind. Paul was very involved in the "real world" service as a church planter, evangelist, fundraiser for the poor, author, public speaker, and teacher. Yet, what was his testimony? He said that nothing mattered more to him than knowing Jesus Christ and the power of his suffering and resurrection (Philippians 3:7-14). He insisted that his first priority was to passionately pursue a deeper relationship with Christ on an ongoing basis and to learn how to live from the resurrection power of God. He said, "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me."

His words struck home.

I now had a new answer to my question. Would God truly want me to risk "wasting" my life, my time, my energy, seeking a deeper spiritual life when there was so much work to be done…? The answer that came to me that day on pilgrimage was now clear: "Yes, God would."

Suggestion #3 Look for God's presence in your life.

From that point on, I began asking God to help me to keep growing spiritually. I started praying to know God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit better.

On Day 29 of the pilgrimage, I received a beautiful answer to part of my prayer.[2]

One this particular day, my elder son, Tim, and I took an alternative route over the mountains and met up with my younger son, Dan, and Jill twelve hours later. Jill questioned my sanity, because the climb was steep, the distance was extra far, and if we got in trouble, there might not be anyone to help us. Yet, we felt drawn to the adventure and the challenge.

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[2] Ibid., pp. 108-109 (adapted).

Well, the scenery was spectacular. The experience was the best of the pilgrimage so far. Poorly marked trails; long, steep inclines; mid-summer heat; and a painful, final stretch downhill, all made for a fabulous, memorable adventure. We spent hours in silence or simple conversation, hardly seeing another soul, walking in such beauty.

Yet, the best part of the day for me was simply being with my son. The joy did not come from what we did or said, as much as it came from being in his presence. We both felt completely free to be ourselves and to enjoy the experience together. I watched as Tim stopped to photograph the sunrise slowly splashing light into the valley hundreds of feet below us. I smiled when I heard joy in his voice, while marveling at centuries old tree trunks, or stooping to pat a dog that ran out of nowhere to greet us. I laughed when we had to duck to get out of the way of a horned cow that suddenly took an unhealthy interest in us. I growled with him as we inspected our long scratches and bleeding legs. …

What a great experience! I cannot put into words the depth of the joy I felt. But even greater than that joy was the moment of epiphany I had when I realized something about God the Father. I suddenly saw that if God loves me as I love my son, surely God delights in just being with me, as I was delighting in just being with my son. If I can feel such joy just seeing Tim so happy and peaceful, I have to think that God—whose parental love must far exceed mine—must be thrilled to be with me at such times, too.

Somehow, my experience that day on the Camino helped me to believe that God

delights in me, just because I am a child of God.

Sometimes it is so hard to believe that God is present and active in our lives. Especially when we suffer or see others suffer, sometimes we can feel abandoned or unloved. But such perceptions are not accurate—not according to the teaching of the Bible and the testimony of millions of Christians over the centuries.

Instead of trying to understand things I cannot understand about God, I have found so much more joy, peace and love by seeking God where He can be found: in the little experiences of life, in little answers to prayer, in the little joys and discoveries in nature and in relationships. The more I look for God in my life and expect the Holy Spirit to be working in me, the more I seem to find God. I am always looking for God… so that I may know God better and draw closer to God.

Suggestion #4. Don't confuse seeking God with serving God.

Most of you will be entering or returning to a Christian culture that will demand everything from you as a pastor or Christian worker. Those of you who are the most dedicated are also the most at risk of being exploited by others, because you will feel guilty if you do not try to do everything everyone wants you to do.

Many of you will take jobs where others will expect you to be available 7 days a week, and if you are not, you will be criticized. There will be great pressure for you to try to meet everyone's needs.

Well, guess what? You can't. You cannot meet everyone's needs. There will always be more requests, more needs, more demands on your time. And when you find yourself being pulled in too many directions, with too little sleep, with too much pressure, what are you going to do then? Keep trying harder until you collapse from exhaustion? Or worse, drop over dead from a heart attack, as has happened?

You see, the problem is that too often we think that having a good relationship with God means that we will work ourselves to death trying to serving God. And what they often translates to is that we falsely equate pleasing others with pleasing God. And so we think we cannot say "no" to the demands of others, without saying "no" to Christ.

The truth however is quite different. Sometimes, we have to say "no" to others in order to say "yes" to Christ. Sometimes we have to say "no" to service, to say "yes" to seeking God.

I can't give you a formula to help you know in every situation when you should say yes or when you should say no to the demands of your church or others. But I can tell you that Jesus is quite clear that the most important priority we have is to abide in him. He was also quite clear when he said that loving others was our second priority—not our first. Our first priority is to love God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength; and then to love others out of our experience of the love of God.

When we put pleasing others above knowing and loving God, we risk losing touch with the real source of life, the real source of power, the real source of love, grace and joy. Your culture may demand that you put serving others first, but who are you going to obey? If you don't draw some boundaries and carve out time and space for your relationship with God, with your family, with yourself, you are going to lose your ability to serve as God intends.

Some day, you will be honored at the great Graduation Celebration in Heaven. I assure you, I will not be the commencement speaker that day. Jesus will be. The words you will long to hear will not be what we are saying to you today, "Well done good and faithful students." You are going to want to hear, "Well done good and faithful servants."

But do not think that Jesus is only going to be concerned about how much work you did or how many people you pleased. He will also care about how much you loved him and how you much you learned to live as one with God.

Suggestion #5. Pray without ceasing.

Finally, all of this leads to the fifth suggestion I have for your journey: Pray without ceasing. The only way that you are going to be able to stay on track with your life, and to know what adjustments to make, and when; and when to say yes, and when to say no; and when to seek God and when to focus on service, is if God helps you all along the way.

We need God in our lives—God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit—from the beginning to the end. And prayer is the key to connecting us to God and to accessing God's power to live our lives. No doubt, this is why Paul taught us to "pray without ceasing."

To help me keep praying and to stay on track with my vision and top priorities I have created three prayers that I say every day.

1) The first one comes right out of Scripture: Micah 6:8.

"Lord, help me today to live justly, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with you."

2) The second is based on my heart's desire for my life, and what I believe God most wants to do in me and through me.

"Dear God, please help me today to live fully, to love deeply, and to give freely, so others may know and experience you through me." Often I will substitute the names of the people I will be seeing that day for "others".

For example, I might pray, "Dear God, please help me today to live fully, to love deeply, and to give freely, so that Jill, Tim, Dan, my students, my fellow faculty members, and the people at the church may know and experience you through me."

3) The third prayer is really an extension of the second. Through this prayer I remind myself of my unique calling, based on the gifts God has given me to serve the Church. I pray, "Father, please use me today to inspire, teach, and encourage others to live fully, to grow spiritually, and to serve Christ more effectively."

I urge you to create your own prayers that you recite regularly. You will know you have good ones if they fit with biblical teaching and with whom God made you to be. They will also lift you up and make your heart sing. They will probably inspire you, and resonate deeply within you. Your mind will affirm the truth in the prayers. Your heart will feel joy and delight when you say them. You will feel motivated to live by them. Then, learn to pray all the time, in every situation, for every reason, that your life may be well connected to the Holy Spirit as much as possible.

Conclusion

At the end of our 37th day on pilgrimage, we arrived at our destination. I remember going into the worship service in the grand Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela. We were having communion. As I put the bread in my mouth that represents the body of Christ, I involuntarily fell to my knees in prayer and worship. Tears were streaming from my face.

In ways I did not understand, God had used the long journey to strengthen my faith in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. On my knees on that cold stone floor, on a very hot summer day, in that old church in Spain, Jesus met me in a fresh and powerful way. I had sought Jesus with my whole heart, and suddenly I had found him. Or perhaps, I should say, he found me.

I looked up at the cross, and I knew beyond a shadow of doubt that I believed in Jesus, and that no one and nothing was more important to me than Jesus.

I never got an answer about my future work while walking on pilgrimage, but I received something more important. I realized that I am called to a lifelong journey of faith, which is sometimes going to be very hard. I am called to a life of ministry, which requires that I give up my will to serve God's will. Yet, no matter how much I must sacrifice to serve Christ by serving others, I can only go forward by going with Jesus.

What I am saying to you today as you prepare to go forward into full time Christian service is that the real purpose of your journey is not service. Believe it or not, even for

full time Christian workers, you have a higher calling than service. *The most important purpose of your life is to know and love God, to follow Jesus, and to be filled and led by the Holy Spirit*.

Then, flowing out of a close relationship with God, will be a life full of service—good service, fruitful service, meaningful service, fulfilling service, even sacrificial service. But when you get the order backwards, and you put service ahead of your relationship with God, you risk killing your passion and losing your love for God, and you undermine your ability to be the spiritual leader the church desperately needs you to be.

As you head out soon to begin the next phase of your life, you don't have to have everything figured out ahead of time. You can't possibly know all that is ahead or how God will lead you. But you can seek to keep your priorities straight. You can:

1. Let your passion for ministry flow.
2. Pursue Jesus with your whole heart.
3. Look for God everywhere in your life.
4. Be careful not to confuse seeking God with serving God.
5. Pray without ceasing.

If you do these things, and learn how to take one step at a time, in sync with the Holy Spirit, you will experience greater growth, joy, peace, and fruitfulness than you can imagine.

May God bless you on your spiritual and vocational journey—for your sake, for the sake of your family, for the sake of your church, for the sake of your people, for the sake of this nation, and for the sake of the kingdom of God.

I look forward to seeing you again some day, either in this life, or at the journey's end.

Amen.