

# A New Commencement

Notre Dame's invitation to President Obama to deliver the Commencement address and to receive an honorary degree unleashed a wide controversy and provoked violently opposed reactions among all who look upon this University as a sign of the ideal of Catholic higher education. The community finds itself divided and confused, and the integrity of the University's educational mission is being challenged. On such an occasion, with great urgency we feel the need to take hold of the reasons for which such an institution exists.

**What is the meaning of Christian education**, and even more fundamentally what is Christian life today? How do we live today the fruitful faith that led a handful of French missionaries a century and a half ago to found a tiny college on the shore of Saint Mary's Lake—where before there was nothing—with the firm conviction that the school “will be one of the most powerful means for doing good in this country”? How is that connection between faith and life present as the impetus for our work in the university and in society?

For us faith is not an ethical code nor an ideology but an experience: **an encounter with Christ present here and now in the Christian community**. Christian faith gives us a freedom and a passion for living that express themselves above all in the form of questions as we face reality, and an inexhaustible openness to everything human. Political and ethical categories do not define us; our life springs from belonging to a fact, to a story begun and carried forward by an exceptional **Presence** in human history. Over the course of two millennia, that Presence has inspired innumerable initiatives that have educated men and women, including the University of Notre Dame. We cannot limit our thirst for truth and our desire to enter into a genuine relationship with reality; we want certainty about its meaning in its totality. We need a place where faith and reason are not enemies, where their unity launches us on a path of knowledge that is fearless, open, and free.

An invitation to a Catholic university – an invitation to anyone, especially to the President of the United States of America – should be an **invitation to encounter that history**, that method of relating to reality, and that experience of life and freedom.

What then is at stake in this Commencement Day? Much more than merely defending values – even the most sacred – or affirming a Catholic institution's “openness” to the world. At stake is our hope for the future of the university and the future of society.

For us **hope begins from the recognition that with Christ we discover a new way** to live life, to study, to do research, to be involved in politics and economics, to work in the world. In commencing from that Presence, we live hope not merely as a sentiment, a dream, or a project of power but as a certainty for the future that springs forth from an experience happening now.

With the certainty of faith that Father Sorin had after Notre Dame burned to the ground in 1879, let us recognize at the end of each day that we “**built it too small ... so, tomorrow, as soon as the bricks cool, we will rebuild it, bigger and better than ever**”.

