



Department of Justice

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ADDRESS BY
ATTORNEY GENERAL ROBERT F. KENNEDY
AT
MANHATTAN COLLEGE COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES
NEW YORK, N. Y.

JUNE 12, 1962

Most Reverend clergy, Christian Brothers, very distinguished guests - and new fellow alumni:

I am honored to become at this hour, and in this manner, a member of the oldest Catholic alumni group in the United States. It is a high privilege for one somewhat removed from your campus and exacting curriculum to be included in the select company receiving degrees today.

To receive this recognition without the normal academic niceties of attendance, absorption and exams - not to mention tuition - does not really detract too much from the pleasure of the award. In fact, I most strongly advocate the merit system now in vogue at Manhattan College.

I could, I know, express this simple word of thanks and subside into silence, to the accompaniment of your grateful sighs of relief. I agree that the commencement exercises at all colleges should be an elective. The long elocution lavished on captive graduates represents the final on-campus sacrifice you will be constrained to offer up for some worthy intention.

A truly Christian Brother briefed me on the ground rules of your more recent commencements. He actually used the word 'brief.' He alluded delicately to the 1888 graduation when the visiting Archbishop of San Luis Potosi, was called upon merely to give a final blessing to Cardinal Hayes' graduating class. He spoke ornately, and occasionally in English, for almost two hours.

On these otherwise glad occasions, pundits in possession of the podium are tempted, by tradition, to reveal the accumulated wisdom of a long and mature experience. For me, this is rather easy; but as Brother A. Joseph, my mentor, discreetly hinted even seniors seldom learn from second-hand experience - and never do on commencement day.

Yet paradoxically, in connection with this very occasion, I, myself, have learned a lot from experience - the experience and history of your college. 159 pages.

So these few words I say are based more on your experience and that of Manhattan, than on my own.

Strangely, the college name "Manhattan" merely honors the name of an island. Sadly, we find that this neutral and non-Catholic name, "Manhattan," was chosen in 1861 to improve the chances of getting a college charter from an anti-Catholic legislature.

Thus, your very name and formal inception are and have been a standing and vivid reproach to prejudice.

Happily, today, the Catholic and the clergy are not expected to hide their faith and flag on the firing line ranged against intolerance and inequality.

I find, in your history, a sort of free and easy democracy with a minimum of tyranny and interference from the faculty. This includes a successful student strike and an instance where the college president was expelled instead of the student.

In retaliation, the ex-president deserted the Christian Brothers, became a priest and the president of his own college in Montana.

In scanning your commencements of long ago, I note the older programs and faculty were largely French, the declamations were in Latin and Greek and only the incidental music was Irish.

Against this Gallic background, Kelly green became the college color. The democratic proceedings by which this alien color was cheerfully chosen is nowhere recorded.

One finds on this canvas, covering a century of college history, events and qualities of greatness which could inspire and lift a nation and a world. There is here love beyond loving, dedication, fortitude and sacrifice.

There is always a persistent courage and a will undaunted. Such were and are, of course, the Christian Brothers and lay associates who almost miraculously changed spiritual resources into the brick and granite we behold today. I know this same great spirit finds its whole souled counterpart in the mothers, fathers and families whose denial and unselfishness made this day a reality instead of an unfulfilled dream.

I found in your history a hundred and fifty-nine pages of giving without getting, generosity without thought of gratitude. This is the purgative way and the history of the Christian Brothers through the three centuries and across the world they have enriched.

But here, in the making of Manhattan, is an example for us all. Here is proof that the small can be great and even one slender candle can banish darkness. Here is evidence that billions are not the first, the final or the full answer to a true world society under God.

Manhattan College had its Bethlehem in a church basement on Canal Street in 1848. It was steadily evicted northward to its present site.

A novitiate was founded in an attic and early students included sons of emancipated slaves.

The cunning Christian Brothers, real estate experts, bought the wrong sites three times, the back of the old college became the front, new stories were added to old buildings at the bottom and the college was sold for taxes once.

It has had at times classrooms and no students and at other times students without classrooms.

I mention these four things not to suggest that miscalculations are not confined to Washington, to any political party or era but rather as dramatic proof of what basic unity, solidarity, loyalty, good will and a sense of sacrifice could do against handicaps and great odds in a world beyond Manhattan.

Here, - despite the disappointments, the failures and the absence of resources - the aim and thrust, however feeble at times, was always forward and this is how it has to be for all of us.

The facilities at Manhattan were constantly becoming outmoded and outdated. This was due to lack of means and not to lack of vision. For the men who made Manhattan never doubted that a college, a nation or a world cannot deal with the problems and needs of today with the ways and means of yesterday.

Yet, we have large segments of thought, public opinion and leadership, which are blind to the simple logic of this truth.

This is not the easiest time in the life of the United States because the American people bear unusual and heavy burdens. It is easier for some perhaps to find solace and comfort and satisfaction in old slogans, old theories and easy answers than to examine the facts, consider the future and face up to our responsibilities with the full realization that there are no easy answers.

The President said in Milwaukee last month:

" I see this country as the most powerful, vital, vigorous country in the history of the world, carrying responsibility all around the world, and I see it today as a choice between being willing to accept these responsibilities, provide a better life for our people, because from this comes a better life. Or I see it standing still."

Thus, in the last analysis, the task before the American people is to make either educated judgments or decisions based on emotion and slogan. The first course is complicated and sometimes frustrating, but the second is far more dangerous and deceiving.

So, in these extraordinary times, the knowledge, the vigor and the versatility of educated men and women are in greater demand than ever before. I cannot believe that all the sacrifices which you and your parents and teachers have made so that you could obtain an education were made solely to give you an economic advantage over less fortunate citizens in the years ahead.

It is not enough in these times to lend your talents at working diligently at your job, raising a family and leading self-sufficient, pleasant lives. The people who have had the advantage of a college education must participate wholeheartedly in government and take an active interest in politics, government and community affairs.

I do not advocate that the government be limited to the educated, but I do hope that you will participate in the process of government, whether at local, state or national level, and do your best to serve the nation's interest as you see it.

If I leave here today without heeding your history and without a renewed and sharper sense of sacrifice and service, and without a stronger will, in my small way, to overcome the obstacles to a peace and prosperity of spiritual worth, I will have forfeited the honor bestowed upon me.

If you should go forth and never rise above the need and necessity of your own moment, you will have missed this message of Manhattan. If you do not engage in the effort to move this country forward or add a turn to the wheel in the uphill effort to advance the cause of freedom and human dignity, you will have betrayed the tradition of Manhattan.

It is not my right to utter so harsh a judgment. It is a prerogative reserved to an alma mater born and steeped in dedication and which gave more men to a priesthood and a hierarchy than any other. They gave their lives and vigor selflessly. You have walked and worked in the memorials to Manhattan men who made the sacrifice supreme in Italy, Africa, Normandy and Guadalcanal.

Standing here in their heroic shadows, the words "go forth" take on a special sense and urgency in terms of the challenge they once met and the challenge now confronting us.

To me, they will always be reminders that this school does not train bystanders. It gives no degrees to sidewalk engineers, or credits to mere detached observers and ineffectual critics.

To graduates bred and trained in this hallowed place, I need not say these things. I need not speak of forgetfulness and forfeiture. Manhattan has indelibly inscribed within your separate hearts the tender words of Terence:

"I will make you remember always, this place, these years and me."