Commencement address 2017

The primary purpose of Covington Catholic High School is to embrace the gospel message of Jesus the Christ in order to educate young men spiritually, academically, physically and socially. That may be the last time you hear that statement, but hold that thought.

Bishop Roger Foys, distinguished clergy, Mr. Michael Clines, dignitaries, administrators, faculty, staff, my wife, parents of graduates, and finally members of the graduating class of Covington Catholic, 2017.

“May today there be peace within you. May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be. May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith. May you use the gifts that you have been given and pass on the love that you have received. May you be content knowing you are child of God. Let His presence settle into your bones and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love. It is there for each of us.”

I see the recently retired Mr. Jack Kaelin is here tonight. For those of you who did not know, Mr. Kaelin taught me Economics his first year at Covington Catholic in 1963. An icon. I wish we could do it again.

I graduated in 1964. My classes were in the old school. Before man landed on the moon, shortly after John Kennedy’s assassination, at the peak of the Vietnam War, before cell phones, back when computers wouldn’t fit in a tractor trailer, let alone your pocket.

Not everything has changed ***for the better*** since then, however. So prepare yourself and hold on to those things that you’ve learned and are**, or should be,** important to you.

 Some of my experiences at CCH and the friends I made here have gotten me through some very difficult times. You will have to face difficult times too.

Your day is finally here. Part of you wants to stay, part of you wants to move on. Some of you are thrilled, some nervous and excited, some leery of what lies ahead. But all of you are proud. As well you should be. I would bet that many of you have the same feeling in your bellies that you had when sitting in freshman Religion class on the very first day of school four years ago, staring at a crabby looking old man who was explaining acceptable and unacceptable classroom behavior as well as academic expectations. If you feel that way, GOOD….…. Everything worth doing starts by being scared.

I told you then that I would treat you like men as long as you acted like men. Most of you appreciated that.

As they used to say in the opening song of the Mickey Mouse Club TV show back in the 1950’s and 60’s: “Today is the day that is filled with surprises, nobody knows what’s gonna happen”…….. You may not know what’s gonna happen, but you’ve been “somewhat” prepared for almost anything, thanks to the foundations laid by your parents, your faith and many of your teachers and experiences at Covington Catholic.

Hopefully you have learned respect and accountability, and most important, you have a deeper and stronger sense of faith. …….C.S. Lewis, Aquinas, Augustine, Chesterton, Schindler’s List, the Passion of the Christ, Mt. Knowledge, Wyoming, Nicaragua. It is this Covington Catholic faith experience that will help to see you through the difficult times ahead.

As James Taylor sang so eloquently “Lord knows when the cold wind blows it will turn your head around”. I lost my wife of 32 years to breast cancer in 1999. I just lost my mother last month, and one of my best friends and my business partner, Mr. Tom Franxman, died suddenly the week before Christmas last year, (Mathew’s grandfather). Just last weekend I held my yellow Labrador retriever Margaret as she was euthanized because of her failing health. Very difficult for me.

Where does the strength come from when we have to confront experiences that are emotionally draining and seem overwhelming? Courage and character come to the forefront if you are a man who has built a foundation based on lessons learned, forcing yourself to do difficult and seemingly impossible things, and your faith in your God, family, and ***good*** friends. Some of you may have to struggle like a butterfly does to get out of the cocoon before you can be all that you are meant to be. But, you have no reason to fear inadequacy, for you are a child of God. **And, ……….your playing small does not serve the world….. PLAY LARGE**.

Many years ago, when I was in the Navy, I watched a movie by the name of “Alfie” one night when we were at sea. The main character was a narcissistic individual who used everyone and anyone that gave him the opportunity to do so. The opening line of the movie theme song was: “What’s it all about Alfie?” …..“is it just for the moment we live?” “Are we meant to take more than we give, or are we meant to be kind? “

One of my fondest memories of what Covington Catholic stands for and something that makes me very proud, was a community service experience. We invited 15 young adults from ARC, the Association for Retarded Citizens, and their parents, to a football game here as our guests. We asked for student volunteers to sit with them during the game, get them hot dogs and drinks. A number of our guests, had Down Syndrome and one I remember was sitting with his dad and freshman Jordan Counts.

When the game was over, we walked the entire group out to their cars. The father of one the boys with Down Syndrome, turned around and we saw that he was crying. He looked at me and said: “you have no idea how much this means to my son”….….one of my freshmen, Justin Tyrone, looked right at him and with tears in **HIS** eyes, said:………: “MAYBE WE DO”. ***Isn’t it funny how tears have a way of helping you to rearrange your priorities???***

It was a difficult day for our freshmen who had never really spent any time with mentally and physically challenged young people. But what a loving experience. Lesson learned.

So, what’s next?

Well gentlemen, you’re not in Kansas anymore. The world awaits. My wish for you is that you hold in your hearts the things of value that you have experienced here. Remember: “we look not to what is seen, but to what is unseen. For what is seen is transitory, but what is unseen is eternal”. Open your hearts and your eyes to what God has planned, not just the world our culture lures you toward.

Recall Chevy Chases’ famous line in the movie “*Caddy Shack”:* “***Be the ball*** Danny”. Lead the way. Hopefully down the middle of the fairway. Hit ‘em straight.

The world in which we live is changing. Things that were of value and marks of individual character in my days here are eroding. Don’t let the material world influence you to the point where it’s “all about you”. Keep God in your life. Really ***attend*** Mass and receive the sacraments especially when it’s difficult for you to get out of bed. Make the sacrifice. God made the sacrifice for you, make it for Him as a way of showing you believe.

Do the right thing. Always. Even when it costs you. Show your God that you care. It’ll make a man out of you. And the right kind of man. Have the strength of character your children will expect, need, and cherish. Ask God to show you what He has planned. Do what He expects. When you were a child, you thought as a child, now you are becoming a man. Fight for what is right and just in a world whose priorities change with the whims of egos. The day will come when your loved ones will put together ***your*** legacy. Your success in business won’t matter to your grandchildren. Success in life and sharing love and ***time*** with them **WILL.**

Many of you are being called to be priests. Do you have the courage to save a thousand souls? Many of you will marry. Remember that you will then assume the responsibility of saving the souls of your wife and children. God will hand you the football so to speak. Don’t fumble.

When I was 13, my mom told me that she was taking my brother shopping and I needed to stay home……. With dad. I was prepared for and hoping for the “big talk” about sex. Kind of get the message on girls and life.

My dad sat me down at the dining room table and said: “Billy, you’re getting older. You’re making and choosing new friends and enjoying new experiences…..you and I will get along just fine as long as you never do anything to embarrass your mother.” Then he got up and walked away. That was it.

When I was in business for myself I had the chance to travel on many occasions. On one I decided to spend 3 days in San Francisco and pass on my daughter’s kindergarten performance at St. Agnes. When I got home she was so excited and asked me to watch it on video. My wife had taped it.

And so I had the opportunity to see my 5 year old daughter sing “rinkity, dink, a dink a dink, rinkity dink a doo “I LOVE YOU” ***on video tape.*** I had passed on the live performance...,***HUGE*** mistake on my part. Feeding MY ego was more important. Is still feel regret.

Don’t pass on the live performances gentlemen. Those memories last a life time. Especially for your children.

You CAN change the world, one person at a time…..it’s not what you gather, it’s what you SCATTER that tells what type of life you’ve lived. As Dan Tieman used to say at every opportunity: “When you finally get to meet with God face to face, He will ask you “did you lead people to Me or away from Me”?

Look outside yourselves. Be a man. Be the man God intended you to be. Make someone happy. It’s not all about **you**.

Just last week Covington Catholic sent 8 students to be pall bearers for a homeless lady who died in our community with no family. **THAT**, gentleman, is something of which all of us should be proud. THAT is what we are all about. That is why God put us here………... At this school.

I am very proud of you, and what you have accomplished these last four years. I remember a teacher from Lloyd High School asked me at the conclusion of Special Olympics Track and Field day one Saturday in April a few years ago…….. where we had over 50 students volunteer to help out: …”Where do you get all of these wonderful boys”?…….as Mr. Hertsenberg has said on numerous occasions: “the goodness is in them. Covington Catholic gives them the opportunity to bring it out.”

CCH is a Gospel centered institution. In four years you have experienced the many different ways Christ graced you through your teachers, your teams, your clubs and your friends. The last command to us in the Gospels is the “eschatological task”, the challenge to now carry this forward…….play it forward so to speak.

So go out and through your actions continue to build on the foundation that you now have. And as St. Francis of Assisi said, “If necessary use words”.

FINALLY:

I’m going to expand/expound on G.K. Chesterton’s famous quote:

Remember as you leave this school, that “***the true soldier fights not because he hates*** **what is front of him, but because he loves what is behind him**.…….” Love and cherish what you are leaving behind here.

Thanks. We love you, and God bless you.