

New Student Convocation

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco

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My remarks this afternoon are less of a welcome to students and more of a farewell or adios to parents. The reality is that this afternoon you parents leave your sons and daughters; they stay to begin the great adventure of Jesuit education at the University of San Francisco.

I met many of you parents at last night's reception and spoke to all of you at this morning's session. We clearly share your excitement and anxiety. All I want to do this afternoon is offer you a rather provocative metaphor.

At the opening of Stephen Sondheim's play, *Sunday in the Park with George*, the French impressionist, George Seurat, says:

"White. A blank page or canvas. The challenge: bring order to the whole. Through design. Composition. Balance. Light. And harmony."

Then on a fresh canvas, Seurat begins to paint; first, the landscape and, then, the woman he loves, whose name, somewhat ironically, is Dot. On that blank surface through the thousands of minute brush strokes, Seurat creates a whole scene. He has to maintain a double perspective with every stroke. He sees it up close, but also from the viewer's perspective, several steps back from the canvas. His design gradually emerges through a carefully crafted composition of balance, light, and harmony.

The University of San Francisco faces an even more difficult challenge. We don't begin with a blank canvas. We begin with you students who come from a rich variety of places, backgrounds, experiences, and interests. There are many resources on our pallet: library and laboratory, classroom discussions and residence hall conversations, internet access and a rich urban context, student retreats and service opportunities in the Tenderloin, and diversity of fellow students and a variety of competing perspectives on issues. Like Seurat's brush strokes, these activities gradually fill up the canvas of a Jesuit education at USF. The challenge, however, is not just to fill up the canvas, but to bring order to the whole of your lives through a carefully crafted composition of balance, light, and harmony.

At the conclusion of *Sunday in the Park with George*, Dot looks at the blank canvas and says, "So many possibilities..." Like the artist, we have so many opportunities for bringing order to the whole of our lives. But when we step back to take a look, will all the elements merge into a living composition of grace and beauty or will it be one of chaos and ugliness? This is your challenge. How do you connect all the different elements of living and learning to create something of lasting worth and beauty, to create of yourself a well integrated human being capable of loving and being loved?

There are so many possibilities for you to bring harmony to the whole. Neither your

parents nor your teachers can paint your picture, much as they might try to do so. The brush is in your hands.

Force feeding is not an acceptable teaching strategy here at USF. Though it may be difficult, you parents and we faculty and staff have to step back and let them work the varied components of their lives into a living composition of grace and beauty, or possibly of chaos and ugliness. This is their challenge, not ours.

Our challenge is to instruct, support, and inspire them while they struggle to make the connections between all the different elements of learning and living, so that they graduate from here as persons with well tempered intellects and tender hearts — able and eager to be leaders in the struggle for a more humane and just world.