

Commencement Remarks

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco
December 14, 2007 | St. Ignatius Church

My congratulations to you graduates, and my thanks to your family and friends who share the joy of your accomplishment today. I also express my appreciation to our staff and faculty. Let me read an excerpt from a letter I received just last week:

“We are most grateful to the outstanding faculty members who have guided our daughter towards becoming a responsible and caring member of society. It is the Jesuit philosophy of “educating minds and hearts to change the world” that has made our two children the unique individuals they have become as young adults. As parents, we cannot express the gratitude we feel on this proud occasion and hope you can convey our thanks to the wonderful men and women who work to instill USF’s mission into the minds and hearts of all who study there.”

Today, I switch this hat for this one -- knowing that your diploma may be the most valuable and expensive Christmas gift you will ever receive. I have given you your diploma; now your challenge is to pay for it!

The substance of my comments is the true story of a good friend of mine who was born in Mexico and grew up as a migrant worker child. His family followed the crops in search of work. They never stayed long in any one place. Friendships were fleeting; schooling was intermittent; hunger was constant; life was hard. The story picks up as the family prepares yet again to go off in search of work:

As they were packing to leave, a young couple came to their door. “Pasen,” Papa said, inviting them in. The man wore a blue faded jacket and khaki pants, mended at the knees. His young wife had on a simple brown dress and a gray wool sweater, worn at the elbows. The man said, “We are sorry to bother you, but with all this rain and my wife expecting a baby....well, we thought, perhaps you could help us out a little bit.”

He reached into a paper bag and pulled out a wallet. “Perhaps you could give us fifty cents for this? Look, it’s pure leather; almost brand new,” he said, handing it to Papa.

Shaking his head, Papa replied, “I am sorry. I wish I could, paisano, but we’re broke too.”

When Panchito heard this, he panicked. “Broke? But not like last year,” he thought. “No, this time Papa and Mama will have enough money to get me a ball for Christmas.” Ever since he was six, Panchito had wanted a red ball – a ball to toss in the air, to catch, to twirl, then to drop and bounce up and down. “Please, how about twenty-five cents?” Before Papa could answer, the man quickly pulled out from the bag a white embroidered handkerchief and said, “How about ten cents for this handkerchief? Please. My wife did the needlework on it.”

“I am very sorry,” Papa repeated.

“It’s beautiful,” Mama said, gently placing her hand on the woman’s fragile shoulder. “May God bless you.” Papa then walked the couple out the door.

The family headed north where they found work on a cotton ranch, lived in a tent, and slept together for warmth on one mattress. The story continues:

The closer Christmas drew, the more anxious and excited Panchito became. December 24 finally arrived. “One more day,” Panchito thought.

After supper, Panchito half-listened to Mama tell the story of how Jesus was born. He wanted the evening to end and morning to come. Finally, sleep over-came his four brothers and they all huddled together and covered themselves with army blankets. Panchito could not sleep thinking about Christmas. Once in a while, Papa's words, "but we're broke too," entered his mind, but he pushed them out by daydreaming of playing with his very own ball.

Thinking the whole family was asleep, Mama quietly slipped out of bed and lit the kerosene lamp. Panchito covered his head with the blanket and through a hole in it, he watched her, trying to see what gifts she was going to wrap. But Panchito could see only her weather-worn face. As she began to wrap the gifts, silent tears ran down her cheeks. Panchito did not know why.

At dawn, Panchito and his brothers hurriedly got up to get their presents. Panchito picked up his and squeezed it with both hands. It felt hard. He nervously tore the butcher paper wrapping. When he opened the box and looked inside he was dumbfounded: it was a bag of candy. Trying to search for words to tell Mama how he felt, Panchito looked up at her. Her eyes were full of tears.

Papa, who was standing next to her, lifted the corner of the mattress and pulled out from underneath the white embroidered handkerchief. He tenderly wiped her eyes with it and handed it to her, saying, "Feliz Navidad, vieja."

Panchito saw Mama's eyes light up when she saw her gift. She looked so pleased, so joyful, just as she had when his baby brother, Ruben, was born. Panchito took a deep breath, then opened his bag of candy. He reached in and gave a candy first to Mama, then to Papa. He hugged them both and said, "Gracias."

*[taken from *The Christmas Gift*, by Francisco Jimenez]*

You leave the Hilltop with our prayers that you will find and hold to that which gives your life a deep meaning – someone or something that energizes and enthuses you; something or someone to sacrifice, struggle and even die for.

And now I have only to welcome you to the alumni association of the University of San Francisco. We will stay in touch with you.