

Commencement Remarks

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco
Spring 2013 | St. Ignatius Church

Congratulations to you graduates and to your families and friends, who share the joy of your accomplishments that we celebrate today. I also thank our staff and faculty, who are the heart and soul of the University and ask the faculty to please stand for a final round of appreciative applause.

This graduation is a unique and unrepeatable moment: you graduates, faculty, staff, trustees, family and friends are together for the first and last time ever here in St. Ignatius Church. I take this occasion to pause and reflect on who and how we choose to be in the world.

Let me begin with a story from Rabbi Stephen Pearce, upon whom we conferred an honorary degree at the Arts and Sciences commencement ceremony. In his book, *Flash of Insight*, Rabbi Pearce recalls a college student who achieved the highest grades in his class and was accepted by his first-choice medical school with a substantial scholarship.

His parents sent him off to Japan for the summer as a reward for excelling above all his classmates. There he met a guru who told him that his values were all wrong. The guru said, “Your greatest pleasure is in overshadowing your classmates. You delight in getting an A when they get B’s. This is what gives you satisfaction. Later, you will choose a mate and get married not because of love but because you will want to win the person that everyone else wants. You have defined yourself by competition, rivalry, and getting ahead. Spend time in the ashram. You will see that it’s different here: we all share; no cut-throat competition; everyone is at peace.”

Convinced of the need to reorder his life, the young man called his parents and told them that he was dropping out of med school, despite their strong objections, to spend time in the ashram.

Several months later, he emailed his parents, “I know you disagreed with my decision, but you must know how happy I am. For the first time ever, I am at peace with myself. Here there is no strife, no competition, no rivalries and no dissonance in my soul. We all share equally. We all love each other. This way of life is so consistent with who and how I want to be that in these few months I have already become the #2 disciple in the ashram and I think that I if I work hard at it I can be #1 by June.”

More insightfully, Annie Lamott, at a point in her life when she realized that she was caught up in empty ambitions, confessed to feeling like a veteran greyhound who finally figures out that she’s been chasing mechanical bunnies her entire life; all that energy and it’s not even a real rabbit. In a similar vein, Joseph Campbell said the greatest tragedy in life is climbing high up the ladder of success and, then finding out, too late, that it’s up against the wrong wall.

Along with my congratulations and best wishes, I offer you graduates a simple suggestion: live free from the tyranny of superficialities of our culture, which would have you believe that wealth, power, status and a perfect body will bring you the happiness and satisfaction we all long for. This is simply not true.

The truth is that we human beings are hard-wired for what the bible calls, “treasure that does not fail, that thieves cannot steal nor moths consume. For where our treasure is, there our hearts will be.” Treasure family, personal integrity, good friends, truth, goodness, beauty, compassion and a cause bigger than yourself. That’s where our hearts belong.

The great Saint Augustine got it right when he wrote, “our hearts are made for God and will never rest until they rest in God.” Settle for nothing less. Let that truth be the beacon that guides your life’s journey towards who and how you want to be in the world.

I welcome all of you to the University of San Francisco alumni association.