

## Convocation Honoring Seniors, May, 2008

Faculty Address: Dr. Susan Hanssen, Assistant Professor of History

We are here, in 2008, at the University of Dallas, in Irving, Texas. And it is good that we are here. From here on this hill we can look back to the Law and the Prophets and forward to the Passion and the New Jerusalem.

From here we can look back: 1900, 1800, 1700, 1600, 1500, to 1492 Columbus sailing the Ocean Blue and 1517 Martin Luther beginning the Protestant Reformation—those two iconic dates that stand at the head of modern history, at the head of Western Civ II and American Civ, dates that pose the questions that led us up this hill: The figure of Christopher Columbus forces us to ask what is the relationship between faith and reason, between the compass and the cross, between the pursuit of happiness and the Passion & Death of Our Lord Jesus Christ; The figure of Martin Luther forces us to ask what is the relationship between our individual experience of God and the Logos Incarnate, between the judgments of our individual consciences and the Tradition & Magisterium of Christ's Church, between the "mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave, to every living heart and hearthstone all over this broad land" and the abstract, eternal, and universal truth that all men are created equal.

On this hill in Irving, named after Washington Irving, who wrote the first English language biography of Christopher Columbus and gave us the myth of the American as the modern, enlightened man protesting against the dark superstitions of the Spanish monks who believed that the earth was flat despite the fact that they prayed daily to the little *Logos* enthroned on the *Sedes Sapientiae* holding the *orbis terrarum* in his little hands—on this hill in Irving, your *alma mater* has fed you truths in answer to these questions about what it means to be human and how to become more fully human, but she has also given you to drink from her very own hope. Now you are going forth to a great civil war, testing—not whether these truths are true—but rather testing yourselves, testing the endurance of your hope, testing whether you can remain in the truth...and bear fruit! fruit that will remain!

Now comes the moment of decision. There are two options for what I can say to you as parting words of wisdom: On the one hand I could send you off with the words of the Swedish missionary in the movie *Zulu* to the British troops who constituted the thin red line of law & order & civilization in a death struggle against anarchy: "You are going to die! You are going to die! You are all going to die!!" Or, I could give you a kind of old boy's pat on the back, "You guys are the best; NIKE: 'Just do it!' Be a winner!" I am not allowed the "both thesis" but must force myself, against the feminine desire for compromise and accommodation, to choose one of these options, so I must lead you back into the dense forest, for one last, for-old-times-sake examination of the grounds for the hope that is in us.

Let us pick out two moments on the timeline of your four years at UD, a beginning and an end; let us measure the distance and note the direction, and see if tracing the trajectory gives us some sense of the final outcome: will your life story be "tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral, scene individable, or poem unlimited"?

The two points I have selected are your first visit to campus as a “prospie” and the today of your job hunt. To describe these two moments I have found a passage from Henry James’s novel *The Ambassadors* about an American in Paris (prospie in Old Mill and American in Paris being, methinks, a fitting analogy), and (of course, why not?) a passage from *The Education of Henry Adams*, “Perennial Job Hunt Man” himself. Here you are as a prospie:

His Parisian friend invited [our American] to his own poor place, and his own poor place, which was very poor, gave to his idiosyncrasies—those small sublime indifferences and independencies that struck the American as fresh—an odd, engaging dignity. He lived at the end of an alley that went out of an old short cobbled street, that went in turn out of a new, long, smooth avenue—avenue, street, and alley having in common a sort of social shabbiness; and he introduced him to the rather cold blank studio and offered him tea—and this reckless repast, and the odd roommates, and the far-away make-shift life, with its jokes and its gaps, its delicate daubs and its three or four chairs, its overflow of taste and **conviction** and its lack of most all else—these things wove around the occasion a spell to which our hero unreservedly surrendered.

And now Adams describes the prospects for employment...how things looked to his friends who had just come through the harrowing experience of four years of Civil War, 600,000 dead:

All his American friends and contemporaries who were still alive hastened to get married and retire into back streets and suburbs until they could find employment. For Adams the daily routine of English society had become a habit and threatened to become a vice, so that it was evident that he must begin a career of his own...One profession alone seemed possible—the Press. In 1860 he would have said that he was born to be an editor, like at least a thousand other young graduates from American colleges who entered the would every year enjoying the same **conviction**; but in 1866 the situation was altered; the possession of money had become doubly needful for success, and double energy was essential to get money. America had more than doubled her scale. Yet the press was still the last resource of the educated poor who could not be artists and would not be tutors. Any man who was fit for nothing else could write an editorial or a criticism. The enormous mass of misinformation accumulated in ten years of nomad life could always be worked off on a helpless public, in diluted doses, if one could but secure a table in the corner of a newspaper office. The press was an inferior pulpit; an anonymous schoolmaster; a cheap boarding-school; but it was still the nearest approach to a career for the literary survivor of a wrecked education.

In truth, Henry James’s description of Paris—as a place with an overflow of taste and conviction and a lack of most all else—is not a bad description of our own little *civitas*, our own little City on a Hill, the City of Mansoul, in which you have been raised. But then, have we labored to prepare you for nothing more than Henry Adams’s corner-desk-for-the-perennial-critic? Have we created you *preciosas*? Like Mr. & Mrs. Bennett’s five unendowed daughters, “Five of them without dowries! What’s to become of them?!”

Henry Adams and his friend Henry James *did* believe in truth and moral right; they had come to see, through experience, like Montesquieu’s troglodytes, cave-dwelling creatures, poor inch-worms, that vice did not conduce to happiness and therefore that the true path to happiness lay in virtue. They had learned their lesson, one sad, stupid experience at a time. And therefore they had

achieved a kind of small hope—a hope in themselves and for themselves. If they could keep to the path of virtue, though the world might collapse around them, they could be happy. But when it came to others, well, they would have to learn on their own—through their own sad, stupid experiences. When it came to others, it was every man his own saviour. When it came to conquering and transforming the world in freedom and justice, well, it was hard to say that the old command “Be Fruitful and Multiply, Fill the Earth and Subdue it” (*Crescite et multiplicamini et replete terram et subicite eam*)<sup>1</sup> could still be in effect for such corrupt and depressing times as ours. They could not offer to others an account of the hope that was in them; they could only appeal to their own paltry experience...and what is one man’s experience among so many experiences? What is one personal, autobiographical testimony in the face of a world of advertisements bawling bogus prescriptions for happiness via vice? Or as the Holy Father recently put it in his visit to America—in the face of “a society which markets any number of recipes for human fulfillment”?<sup>2</sup>

Henry Adams and Henry James were no fools; they realized the emptiness of false optimism about their own prospects and the world’s; they were both of them, like so many Americans, on the hunt for a definitive Hope. They were trying to recover the solid grounds for their inkling (one cannot call it conviction in the full sense) that virtue leads to happiness. As G. K. Chesterton says, “[There] is something far more convincing, far more comforting, far more religiously significant than an optimist: he is a happy man.” They were on the hunt for The Happy Man.

The dowry that the University of Dallas has given you is conviction in the full sense of the word. Not just “conviction” as it is used in the first passage, not just “the strong belief on the ground of satisfactory reasons or evidence” to whose “spell” you surrendered when you decided to come or to stay at UD. Not just the sense of power that comes with having hold of a truth. Truth, knowledge can be an acquisition and a power that enables us to pursue our own various ends, our own versions of happiness, until the light fails. But there is another form of conviction, and UD has given you this too; the “conviction” Henry Adams mentions in the second passage, as something that he once had, but lost—the conviction that he had been born to this inheritance of truth...that it was not something he had achieved but something that he had been gifted. And with the sense of gift comes awe and wonder, why me? Why have I been given this gift? There seems more to the story of the gift—some evident, as yet hidden purpose. The gift quality of our education contains a promise, a Hope. “You are a chosen generation, a kingly priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people: that you may declare his virtues, who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Peter 2:9).

At the University of Dallas, the gift of a liberal arts education has been given to you out of the heart of the Church, *ex corde ecclesiae*. The University of Dallas has given you more than an abundance of opinions, more than an overflow of taste, more than the truth as an abstraction which you personally and somewhat tentatively discern. The University of Dallas has given you conviction by introducing you to the Truth who is also our Hope: *Jesus Christus, Herie, et Hodie, Ipse et in Saecula*. As Benedict XVI recently said during his visit to America: “A university or school’s Catholic identity is...a question of conviction – do we really believe that only in the mystery of the Word made flesh does the mystery of man truly become clear (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22)?”

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<sup>1</sup> *Genesis*, 1:28.

<sup>2</sup> RESPONSES OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO THE QUESTIONS POSED BY THE BISHOPS National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., Wednesday, 16 April 2008

The University of Dallas was founded in this conviction and it is this conviction above all else that she offers you. Possessing it, you possess your souls in hope, for it is a conviction that conquers the world.

So I chose to say: "Be a winner!"