

Saint Theresa Catholic School Graduation Speech

delivered at

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by

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“Don’t shine so others can see you. Shine so that through you, others can see Him.”

C. S. Lewis

Thank you, Dr. Newcomb, for your very kind introduction.

Graduates, parents, families, friends, Father Manzano, Dr. Newcomb, faculty and staff of Saint Theresa Catholic School, and honored guests, thank you for inviting me to join you for this tremendously happy occasion.

Congratulations to each of our graduates, and congratulations to all of you on Saint Theresa’s very first graduating class. This is a huge achievement for each of you and for this whole community!

I am delighted to be with you in this magnificent church to celebrate Saint Theresa Catholic School’s first graduating class.

I’ve been coming to Sugar Land for more than fifteen years, and remember with great pleasure seeing the transformation of the interior of your church into one of the most beautiful in the Southwest—and the equally remarkable transformation of your Saint Theresa Chapel.

Like many of you, I can remember walking through your stunning school and admiring the building even before it officially opened its doors.

You are blessed to have such a beautiful church, such an impressive school, such excellent teachers, and such a thriving parish that recognizes the great benefits of a classical Catholic liberal arts education.

Graduates, in a few minutes, I warn you that I’m going to do what graduation speakers do—and give you some advice—but before we get to that, let’s pay tribute to the many people who have played an important role in bringing you—and Saint Theresa’s Catholic School—to this happy occasion.

First, let’s acknowledge your parents for having selected such a remarkable school for you and for having guided and helped you every step of the way.

Let’s also remember Dr. Newcomb and Saint Theresa’s exceptional faculty and staff who have taught you, mentored you, and helped bring you to this point in your scholarly pilgrimage.

Let’s express our appreciation to Father Manzano for his leadership of this dynamic parish and your outstanding school.

And let’s not forget Father Bart Reynolds, who had the courage and talent to build your beautiful school and the wisdom to realize that students here would benefit tremendously from a classic Catholic liberal arts curriculum.

Graduates, reflecting on all that your parents, your teachers, the STCS staff, your pastor, and this wonderful parish have contributed to your happiness and success, may I ask you, please, to join me in giving all of them an enthusiastic round of applause?

Graduates, you are truly blessed. You live in a state so large that it was once its own country. The sky here is so big that it makes even atheists believe in Heaven. You rope, you shoot, you sing country songs, and you line dance. You take snakes and scorpions and wild boar in your stride. You're not ashamed to salute the flag, to let ladies go first, and to bend your knee before your Creator.

You have a fearsome reputation—"Don't mess with Texas!" and everywhere in America, Texans are recognized as being larger than life.

You believe in decency and fairness and courage. The bravery that you proudly remember at the Alamo is alive and well here. You're the only people in America with impressive law enforcement officers named for your state—the Texas Rangers.

No wonder folks say, "There are only two types of people—those who are Texans, and those who wish they were!" Where else can you enjoy bluebonnets, eat Bluebell ice cream, and attend a rodeo, while figuring out how to transplant hearts, and teach astronauts how to navigate in outer space?

And that's when you're not conducting rattlesnake hunts, frying eggs on the sidewalk, or doing battle with industrial strength mosquitoes. You live in the most dynamic place in America—and that's not just because you produce more energy than any other state. Let's face it; whether it's your economy or Lone Star State football, you leave everyone else in the dust. And this being Texas, you know just how big that dust cloud can be!

Here at Saint Theresa's, you get to read and write and do arithmetic, but you also get to learn about God, speak Latin, and practice Gregorian Chant.

You study under the patronage of one of the world's most beloved saints, the Little Flower, and you do all these things in a place so sweet that it's even called Sugar Land.

You have a lot to live up to and a great future ahead of you. Today, graduates, you stand on the peak of your academic achievements thus far. You are at the top. You've made it. It feels good; doesn't it?

And next year, you go to high school. Those four years will be full of excitement, accomplishments, and challenges.

That's when a little advice may come in handy. Whenever you are heading into new territory, it's important to *orient* yourself. And this coming August—if not sooner—you will attend your high school orientations. Those orientations will help you get your bearings. You'll get a map

of your school. You'll meet some of your teachers and classmates. You'll get an idea of what will be expected of you and you'll start thinking about strategies for fitting in and succeeding.

How will you get your bearings? "Orient," the base word for "orientation," holds an important clue. What does the Orient—or the East—have to do with figuring that out? We don't talk about *northerning* or *westerning* ourselves. And, as a Virginian speaking to Texans, I am sorry to say that we don't even talk about *southerning* ourselves. So why do we allude to the Orient? It's because the sun rises in the East—and we need light to know where we are, where we should go, and what we should do.

As you head into high school, my first piece of advice (and don't worry; I'm only going to give you *four!*) is **follow the light**. Why? Because light is a goal of both your intellectual and spiritual life—and that combination is what Catholic education is all about.

Your brain and your heart *both* matter. It's great to be intelligent, but it's even more important to be good.

Your education at Saint Theresa's has been aimed at helping you be not just a smart person but a wonderful human being. As you get older, you want to become not only more knowledgeable, but also wiser. And you want to put that wisdom into action.

To do that, you have to *orient* yourself in the light so that you can see yourself clearly, and can chart the path to your destination.

A beautiful Australian (Maori) proverb suggests how to do that: "Turn your face toward the sun and the shadows will fall behind you." This saying captures the wisdom of walking in the light in both a physical and symbolic sense. For Christians, this advice carries even more meaning because we believe that Christ is the Light of the World. He asks each of us not only to be children of the light but to walk in His light.

As the famous writer C. S. Lewis points out, walking in the light doesn't mean shining "...so others can see you," but Shin[ing] so that through you, others can see Him [God]."

The stakes are high, but the rewards are great: as the Gospel of John promises, "He who follows me shall not walk in darkness, but have the light of life (John 8:12). So, in the garden of life, resolve to be a glow worm or a lightening bug! And stay away from the slugs, the stink bugs, and the fire ants!

How are you going to do that? I think we can get some important clues if we follow the light from a very special lamppost—the one in C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*—that marks the boundary between the enchanted land of Narnia and a special wardrobe in our own world.

How many of you have read *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*—or had it read to you? Did you like it? That's great. I'm glad to see that almost of you are familiar with the first book of the Narnia Chronicles and that it's one of your favorites.

As many of you know, Narnia is a wonderful, magic land—full of talking animals, trees with personalities, and all sorts of mythical creatures. But there is a problem in Narnia, and her name is Jadis, the White Witch, the daughter of a jinn and a giant. She is evil; she is cruel; she is ruthless; and she is a liar. Jadis rules the kingdom she has usurped with an iron hand, using her magic to terrify everyone. She even turns her enemies into statues with a flick of her wand.

The cold-hearted, illegitimate Queen emphatically does not walk in the light. She has chilled the hearts of every creature in Narnia and even uses her magic to freeze time—making it always winter but never Christmas. To live in a world without Christmas is a terrible thing. It is to live in a world with little light and warmth, with very small helpings of love, with almost no hope, and absolutely no joy.

Happily, the great lion, Aslan—who is a Christ figure and the exact opposite of the Witch—sacrifices himself to bring Narnia back to life.

One of the first signs that he has broken the White Witch's power is the appearance of Father Christmas—whom we call Santa Claus. When Father Christmas appears in a sleigh full of presents, he gives gifts to the children from our world that will help them and the Narnians.

What do Narnia, the White Witch, Aslan, these four English school children—some of them just your age—and their gifts—have to do with you and your future? Quite a lot, I think.

Like Lucy, Edmund, Susan, and Peter, you are heading into lots of adventures. Like them, you will meet many different kinds of individuals—but probably no talking beavers! You will go many interesting places. You will encounter great good and evil. And like those children, you will be tempted, and you will be challenged to make sacrifices so as to bring light and life to yourself and others.

And that brings me to a *second* piece of advice. Your job, like that of the human characters in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* **is to help bring Christmas into the world wherever you go.**

How do you do that? The big answer is to be the gift to yourself and others that God means you to be! This probably seems a little abstract, so let's be more specific.

And that brings me to my final two pieces of advice. Everywhere you go, in every situation, try to do two things. First, ask yourself “Whom should I thank?”—and then, thank them. Second, in every place and circumstance, ask yourself, “How can I help?” and then do it.

As you move through your teenage years, you will often encounter new circumstances. You may find yourself in situations where you don't know what to do. You may feel very self-conscious and start thinking in self-defeating ways. You may think everyone is looking at you or that no one likes you. You may be afraid that you're too tall or too short or too skinny or too fat. You may think that you're having a bad hair day or that you're dressed in exactly the wrong clothes. You may think that you're not very smart or funny or good looking or athletic or well-dressed or popular.

And you may or may not be right, but the important thing is to bring light and Christmas into the lives of others and then the shadows will fall behind you.

Find those you should thank and thank them.

Find whom you can help and help them.

Everyone likes to be appreciated and everyone appreciates a helping hand. If you are busy thanking those who have helped you or done something for you, and you are busy helping others, you won't have time to think about yourself and what your detractors may be saying about you. Even better, when others look at you, they will not focus on your weaknesses and your faults, but on your virtues. They will see someone who appreciates them and helps them.

If you thank and help wherever you go, you will be welcome everywhere.

Everyone will be happy to see you because they can count on you to lift their spirits by acknowledging them and their hard work. And people will be glad to see you because they know that you will help them and make every situation you're in better.

By giving the gifts of gratitude and service to others you will bring Christmas to everyone you meet. And as much as your gifts help *them*, it will help *you* even more.

Some of you probably know the old joke that all guests bring joy—some when they come—and others when they go. Your goal, graduates, is to fit into the first category.

This advice may sound simple, but it's actually harder than you think.

Sometimes you may not feel like thanking anyone. You may want to focus on yourself. You may want others to thank or compliment you. You may be irritated with the people you should thank. You may be jealous of them. You may not want to acknowledge that they've helped you. You may really want to criticize them or make fun of them or show them how much better you are than they are.

The same goes for helping others. You may want to rest. You may want to play games. You may want to duck out of your chores—much less volunteering to do extra ones! You may want others to be your audience—so that you can show off in front of them. Or you may want others to wait on you.

That's why thanking and serving are so good for you. They both go against what you'd often like to do and what would be easier to do.

Thanking and serving stretch you and make you into a better person. They will help you to become the man or woman you'd like to be.

But that's a sacrifice—which means you have to give something up.

But it also means you *get* something. The Latin roots of the word, “sacrifice”—*sacra*—holy—and *facere*—to make—tell us exactly what you will get—you will become holy.

This is why your very own Saint Theresa highly recommended making sacrifices. She said, “Miss no single opportunity of making some small sacrifice, here by a smiling look, there by a kindly word; always doing the smallest right and doing it all for love.”

If you can thank, if you can serve, if you can sacrifice, there is no limit to how much good you can do and how far you can go. You will become bringers of light and joy. You will walk in the light and radiate light. You will bring Christmas into souls and places where it has been winter too long.

And when you do this, you will cast a Texas-sized shadow behind you!

Thank you very much!