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The  
Princeton Seminary  
Bulletin

You Are Involved

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# The Princeton Seminary Bulletin

Vol. LIII

OCTOBER, 1959

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Donald Macleod, Editor

Edward J. Jurji, Book Review Editor

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## LET US COMMENCE TOGETHER

Words of farewell to the new Graduates by the President of the Seminary

Fellow Graduates of the Class of 1959:

WHEN I first graduated from Princeton Seminary in the year 1915, the second year of the First World War, I was fascinated by the word "commencement." In its particular association, it was a new word for me. I had never heard it used in academic circles as a synonym for graduation. I took it to be an Americanism, a mintage of the American spirit.

A week ago, however, in anticipation of this moment, I took the trouble to explore the meaning and origin of the word "commencement" as used in academic life in this country. I discovered that in its origin the word is not really an Americanism at all, but is a term which began to be used in its current academic significance in the period of mid-English. So now, when I "graduate" from Seminary for the second time, and I say this advisedly for you have graciously made me an honorary member of your class, I want to take this word as the theme of what has been called traditionally "Words of Farewell," but which are not strictly so today, for we are going to "commence" together.

I found in the course of my research, as I looked into both the Webster and the Oxford dictionaries, that academically speaking, to "commence" refers to that form of action which is expressed in taking a full degree, or to participation in the ceremony in which this full degree is awarded. I discovered, moreover, both to my surprise and chagrin, that in Middle England the word "commencement" was used only at the Universities of Cambridge and Dublin. That is to say, it appears never to have sounded in this sense north of the Tweed. The English and the Irish of those days may, in their benightedness, have even questioned whether students graduating from Scottish universities ever really obtained a full degree!

The really interesting thing is, however, that according to that marvelous tome of wisdom called a dictionary, three meanings are attached to the word "commence," and so to "commencement." One is the purely temporal meaning. I "commence," that is, I "begin." I enter day after day upon something new. I make a fresh start, though what I engage in may be pure routine. In academic circles, as I have suggested, to "commence" means to "obtain a full degree," or to participate in the ceremony associated with the granting of that degree. This is the second meaning.

But there is a third meaning, the pristine, basic meaning of the word commence. To commence means to begin to be. *To begin to be!* That is to say, to begin to be really alive, to acquire a new stature, to have new possi-

bilities, to enjoy a new freedom. In the academic sphere this takes place when loyalty is given to the institution and the ideals of the institution that has granted the degree.

In the deepest and broadest sense, however, to commence is to begin to be in very truth a human being. To begin to be is to become a captive to something, to someone, bigger than oneself, and to find one's being, fulfill one's destiny, in the gay, joyous, adventurous abandon to an idea, a cause, above all to a Person. He alone has begun to be in the fullest human sense, who is dedicated to the service of God and man. As we have just sung in our Class hymn:

Make me a captive, Lord,  
And then I shall be free.

As regards you from this hour onwards, you are going to be free from the academic pressures to which you had to subject yourselves before the full degree was granted. You can now, however, as God's free men and women, shape your course, but subject always, if freedom is to be enjoyed, to that Greater than yourselves.

As for me, the freedom accorded by my new degree, the degree of President Emeritus, and honorary member of the Class of 1959, will mean freedom from administrative responsibility, which in one place or another, or in one form or another, I have had to discharge for thirty-six years out of forty-three years of official service. And yet, for such responsibility I have never felt myself to be specially fitted, or in the highest degree creatively competent. Exultant in this new-found freedom, fellow classmates, will be new work and the fulfillment of long-cherished dreams. Let me express one of these dreams, changing a word in a familiar couplet and say:

Work that the *decades* should have done  
Must crowd the hours of setting sun.

At this point, however, let me use again the first person plural and speak about *us*. It will be ours, as part of our task in the years ahead, to infuse new meaning into, and even to restore to its proper status, the word commitment, a word which is becoming increasingly unpopular, both in cultural and religious circles. Plato said in his time: "The unexamined life is unworthy of a human being." Let us, in our time, say with a shout: "The uncommitted life is unworthy of a human being." The uncommitted person has not really begun to be. He is not truly alive. He doesn't know what life means and what human nature can become. For true devotion, enthusiasm, passion, for something, for someone greater than oneself, are inseparable from being truly alive, from receiving a full degree, from "commencing" in the fullest sense.

In that greatest book in Spanish literature, *The Life of Don Quixote*, the

Knight of La Mancha came to a moment when he could say, "I know who I am." It was the moment of his spiritual rebirth, fool though he was regarded by others. So, too, with us. We shall begin to be when we find the true and worthy object of our passionate allegiance, and then let ourselves go. And what is that highest and best object of devotion? What but Jesus Christ, his Church and his Kingdom?

God needs men, not creatures full of noisy, catchy phrases.  
 Dogs he asks for, who their noses  
 Deeply thrust into Today  
 And there scent Eternity.

To find the eternal in the temporal, in the passing moment, is to begin to live. Then the temporal and the transient become transfigured.

It was this that the great Augustine meant when he wrote in his *Confessions*: "All our years and our fathers' years have passed away through thy Today, and from it received the measure and the mold of such being as they have." Let us never forget that the routine, the commonplace, the transitory, flow as a stream through God's Today, which gives them their true pattern and importance. When we relate our lives to the eternal order, and engage in fulfilling some aspect of God's eternal purpose, we become really alive.

So *let us begin to be*. As the stream of life makes a new turn, let us be pilgrims. If in the coming days we find ourselves in the inner city, in a rural parish, in an industrial center, in a chaplaincy of one form or another; or if we come to occupy a teaching post, or go on a mission to the uttermost ends of the earth, or live, perchance, like a recluse engaged in writing and research for the sake of the Kingdom, let us do two things.

First, let us place the accent of eternity, of foreverness, upon the sphere where we go, and upon every work that we do. If it should be God's will, let us remain in that place and engage in that task till traveling days are done. Yet in so doing let us never cease to retain the pilgrim sense. Let us never be so rooted in any place that we shall not be ready to pull up stakes at God's beckoning, to begin the march afresh as pilgrims, crusading pilgrims. Such were Abraham and Moses, such were Paul and Jesus Christ Himself, travelers and pilgrims. Such, too, were the great Spanish saints, Theresa of Avila and John of the Cross: *grandes andariegos*, "great walkers," they were called. Let it be ours, by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, to restore in the Church of today, in the culture and religion of our time, the pilgrim sense, the sense of the traveler who moves along trails and highways with a deep sense of the eternal, who does things that are everlastingly significant amid the routine of the changing temporal order.

And this, too, let us remember. On our pilgrim way, let us say "No" to mere ease and comfort, to prestige and popularity. Let us get on to the road

where our most creative thinking can be done, where the holiest companionships can be formed, where the Church needs most support to fulfill her world mission. Comrades of the Class of 1959, let us be pilgrims of eternity.

When I was a very small boy, a good part of my Sunday afternoons were spent looking at the pictures in a big volume of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. One of the hymns I dearly love occurs in that famous classic. We have sung it many a time together in Miller Chapel. For myself and for you, I repeat it now, and so conclude:

He who would valiant be  
'Gainst all disaster  
Let him in constancy  
Follow the Master,  
There's no discouragement  
Shall make him once relent  
His first avowed intent  
To be a pilgrim.