

## The St. John's College Seal

*(Convocation Remarks, August 27, 2009)*

Good morning. Welcome again freshmen class of 2013 and new students in the Graduate Institute. Congratulations on choosing to pursue your education at St. John's College. We are very glad you are joining us. A special welcome to the families who are here today. Each student arrives at this ceremony today not through his or her own efforts alone, although they are no doubt substantial, but also through the efforts and sacrifices of others. Some of whom are with us this morning, particularly the students' families and friends. Please join me in thanking them.

Welcome back to the rest of the college – students, faculty, staff, alumni and friends.

This morning the class of 2013 and our new graduate students marked their formal entry into the college by signing the college register. The tradition of signing the register as part of formal matriculation dates from the Middle Ages and has existed at St. John's College since at least the introduction of the "New Program" on the Annapolis campus in 1937 and on the Santa Fe campus since it opened in October, 1964. At that time the first 82 students signed the register and since then literally thousands have followed in their footsteps. The tradition of signing the register serves as a reminder of our heritage and a commitment to our future. It is recognition of the contribution of those who have come before and a pledge to remain true to the ideals they championed and to nurture the opportunity they provided for those who come after us.

On the podium before you is the seal of St. John's College with its distinctive phrase in Latin, "Facio liberos ex liberis libris libraque." The seal was adopted in 1937 with the advent of the, so called, "New Program". The "New Program" is the basis of the current graduate liberal arts and undergraduate curriculums. Those of you who have studied Latin may have already recognized the words on the seal as a Latin pun, which unfortunately does not translate into English. In English it reads roughly, "I make free men and women from children by means of the books and a balance." This is frankly a

pretty audacious claim on the part of the college, but I believe an accurate one. So, I would like to take a few moments as you begin your studies and your lives at St. John's to reflect a bit on the seal and how we and you may justify its claim.

The principal idea emphasized by the seal is freedom. What does freedom mean in this context?

It is the freedom to explore the ideas that have informed and shaped the past, inform and shape the present and will surely inform and shape the future. The freedom to question these ideas and grow in all dimensions – mind, body and spirit. It is the freedom to think for yourself. The freedom not just to answer questions, but to question answers. It is the opportunity to experience the liberating quality of education which encourages a healthy skepticism grounded in knowledge, but that rejects mindless cynicism and nihilism. As the founding dean of the St. John's program, Scott Buchanan, put it, the aim of a St. John's education is “. . . liberty, the internal freedom from passion and dogma.” The freedom from slavery to popular opinion or fad or fashion. To make informed choices for yourself. This freedom, however, is not license. It is freedom that also demands responsibility. I will return to this later, but for now let me come back to the seal and its claim.

Some of you may be offended to hear the reference to transforming children into adults. After all, the graduate students are well into adulthood. And, for the freshmen, part of entering college is leaving behind childhood and entering the adult world. But, I would argue that what the seal refers to is not chronological age. Maturity is not merely a matter of how old you are. Some people remain children in many ways for their entire lives. They never think for themselves, never develop a respect for others, never learn responsibility nor contribute to the larger community. Often they are pawns for the ideas and desires of others. They may be grown, but they are not adults, particularly not free men and women. The opportunity to become free adults is what St. John's aspires to provide and by signing the register, you have shown your commitment to pursue.

If the objective of a St. John's education is freedom, or free adults, men and women, how does St. John's claim to help its students attain this freedom? The answer from the seal is through the books and a balance. Or put another way through an all-required curriculum in the liberal arts. The seven books on the seal represent the seven traditional liberal arts. It may seem ironic that an education that seeks to help its students achieve freedom would first restrict it with an all-required curriculum. A curriculum that requires the undergraduates to study four years of mathematics; four years of language, two of ancient Greek and two of French; three years of laboratory science; a year of music; four years of seminar; and allows for only two electives, what we call preceptorials. And a graduate curriculum that is similarly structured. A curriculum in the case of both the graduate and undergraduate programs that is based on reading and discussing original texts many of which were written hundreds even thousands of years ago. Texts that are sometimes referred to as the Great Books.

Why original texts; why the Great Books? How do they contribute to making free men and women?

They do so by raising the most fundamental, important and eternal questions. Questions that are as alive today as they were centuries ago. Questions of character and virtue, questions of human relations, questions of power and politics, questions of war and peace, questions of life and death, questions of who we are and where we are going, questions of the divine and more. We grapple with these questions for insights that may guide us today in our personal lives and in our lives as citizens and members of society. Questions that are the foundation of freedom.

The all-required curriculum may, on the surface, not only seem the antithesis of freedom, but even anti-democratic, as choice is the essence of democracy. While the curriculum is determined, the education that emerges from this curriculum is anything but. Choice is abundant in the issues that are raised and the manner in which they are addressed. In fact, we believe that we have the most democratic classrooms possible. Nothing is settled. Every question is open for discussion. The teachers are the texts themselves.

Everyone is equal in the classroom and has a voice before the texts and the ideas they contain. Classes are led by tutors, not professors. Tutors, who are here to learn with the students, not lecture or profess. The conversation begins with a question from the tutor, but the class responds to the questions of all. Learning is the goal and questions are the means.

The seal mentions not only books, but also a balance. The chemical balance on the seal is, of course, a direct reference to the science laboratory, but it suggests even more. It indicates that learning at St. John's consists of more than reading about and discussing the ideas in Great Books. The St. John's program is very much a hands-on enterprise. Active participation is the norm whether it is conducting an experiment in the laboratory, demonstrating a proof at the board in math, or translating a portion of a Greek or French text in language. While conversation is at the heart of learning at St. John's, it is not the only element. The balance on the seal represents the experimentation, demonstration, translation, musical composition and performance and writing that are integral to learning at the college.

Learning at St. John's is a cooperative endeavor, but it is based on individual responsibility. Just as your accomplishment in coming to St. John's is not the result of your efforts alone, so your accomplishments while at St. John's will come not only through your efforts but also those of faculty, staff and fellow students.

Each member of the class whether student or tutor is expected to come prepared and to participate in the conversation. Each student shares a responsibility for the success of the class. What a student gains from the class and the entire program depends on his or her preparation, but it also depends on the contribution of his or her classmates. Part of learning at St. John's is listening carefully, absorbing and reflecting upon what others say and resisting the temptation to have the last word. The process is cumulative and becomes more and more liberating over the course of your studies leading, we hope, upon graduation, to the truly free men and women the seal calls for.

As audacious as it is, what the St. John's seal does not promise is anything approaching a pre-vocational education. Given the current difficulties in our economy and society, there is an even greater demand for colleges and students to focus their education on simply getting a job. Some may say that today a St. John's education is an unaffordable luxury; that a college's most important goal must be to prepare students for the workplace. I imagine this thought may have occurred to some of you.

However, on the contrary, I believe that in today's world a St. John's education is even more important and even more timely than ever. The St. John's program is about ends not means. It is not intended to limit horizons, but to broaden them. We do not deny that a vocation, earning a living, is an important part of life. Indeed, we have a growing college-funded internship program that allows students to explore vocational opportunities during their summers. But it is certainly not all of life.

Indeed, I would assert that much of what has contributed to our current economic circumstances and political gridlock is not the lack of technical preparation or competence on the part of academics, business leaders, political leaders and average citizens, but a lack of perspective, judgment and in some cases ethics. The current debate, if you can honor it with that title, on health care, where shouting substitutes for dialogue and dogma replaces reason, further reinforces the fact that truly free men and women are essential to the life of our country and the world. And therefore, reinforces the value of and the need for a St. John's education.

If I am right, the answer for our difficulties is not more expertise that comes from training for the job market posing as education or an accumulation of facts posing as knowledge, but more reflection, balance and fresh thinking that comes from a liberal arts education. An education for freedom, an education that is the basis for a life-time of learning, contribution and meaning. An education that is even more a necessity in these trying times. A St. John's education.

Having said this, you students will certainly be preparing for the future, for both a living and a life. Not by seeking relevance and courses designed to prepare for a specific vocation, but by acquiring the one attribute that we know the future will demand -- the ability to learn and to adapt. This ability is why St. John's alumni are research scientists when we do no research, creative artists when we teach no art, internet entrepreneurs when we have no computer science classes, business executives when we teach no business, doctors when we offer no pre-med courses, or food editors and chefs when we have no culinary majors.

This is an education meant for a lifetime. It is not unusual for alumni to claim that St. John's "changed their life." I see this fervor for learning in our alumni whether an editor in New York City, an educator on the Navajo Reservation, an international lawyer in Miami, a restaurateur in Paris, a diplomat in Japan or a farmer in New Mexico.

These alumni have sat where you sit today, signed the register as you have and engaged in the same program you are embarking upon. They have made the words of the St. John's seal their own. Now it is your turn to seize the opportunity you have been offered and to make the most of it. Explore, define, question, commit. Don't sit on the sidelines passively in the classroom and beyond.

Get involved. We hope your dorm room is comfortable, but don't hang out there. Exercise your body and spirit as well as your mind. Get to the gym. Actively join in intramurals. Be a Quixotic, a Geometer, a Myrmidon or an Olympian. Throw a pot in the pottery studio. Work on a play. Go whitewater rafting. Join the St. John's Search and Rescue team. Write for *The Moon*, the student publication. Run for Student Polity. And these are just a sample. If you don't find an organization that responds to your passion, start one. The college will be glad to help you.

Also look for an opportunity for service, to give back. There are tremendous needs in the local community. Imagine what a difference we could make if each of us found some way to serve others. You can begin this Saturday morning at the on-campus community

service day. If you get to the dining hall at 8:30 Saturday morning you can sample one of my patented presidential pancakes. Believe me; you will be glad you did.

Your fellow students in *Project Politaë* are dedicated to serving the community on and off campus. They have many possibilities that can work within your schedule. You can contact them through the assistant dean's or the career services' offices. If you do so you will both benefit others and yourself.

Finally, take care of yourself and your fellow students. Look out for your roommate and classmates. There will be construction on campus during the year. Please pay attention to the equipment as it moves about, particularly between the library and the lower dorms.

Watch your health and mind your habits. If you don't smoke, don't start. If you do smoke, stop. Smoking won't improve your studies or make you any better looking. In fact, it will likely do just the opposite. Be very careful with alcohol. It can lead to great harm personally and have a destructive effect on the community. In addition, underage drinking is against the law and a reminder that the treatment of law in the books we read is not merely academic or theoretical.

Once again, congratulations on choosing St. John's where, beginning today, you are on your way to becoming free men and women by means of the books and a balance. The faculty and staff are extremely pleased to have you with us and pledge to work as hard as you do to make the words of the seal a reality for you. You should know that since you have joined us, St. John's College will never be the same, and since you have joined St. John's College, I am confident you will never be the same.

Freshman class of 2013, students in the Graduate Institute, returning students, faculty, staff, alumni, families and friends, I declare the college in session.  
Convocatum Est!