

St. Michael's College, May 15, 2022

President Sterritt, Board of Trustees, Faculty and Staff:
thank you for this honor and for the opportunity to say a few words to this extraordinary graduating class at St. Michael's College. I am humbled.

Get this: 40 years ago **today**, I graduated from Xavier University in Cincinnati. Because you're now college graduates you did some quick math and are now thinking: "how can a dude so young looking be in his early sixties?" Yeah, I get that a lot.

I knew only two things about my future when I graduated from college: 1) that I would soon be heading to Fairbanks, Alaska, to start a year in the Jesuit Volunteer Corps, and 2) that a college buddy and I were going to take an 8,500-mile road trip to the Pacific Ocean and back in three weeks in my sister's Dodge Colt.

Forty years ago, my college computer class involved punch cards and term papers were banged out on a typewriter. I graduated a quarter point under cum laude thanks to a few Bs and

that cursed C in—you guessed it—a course in Shakespeare. Alas, it was “not to be.” I commuted to college with a series of high-mileage and highly unreliable cars none of which cost more than \$500. I navigated my small world with a physical map. Mobile phones were still several years away and the iPhone and Google maps 25 years distant: technology that I never dreamed could exist.

Forty years ago, I had no idea that I would find love through Match.com or, as it was known in those days, the Jesuit Volunteer Corps. When I left Ohio for Alaska, I didn’t know that in early December of that same year, I would fall in love with this cute California redhead named Susie, or that I would continue work in the Catholic Church for the next 39 years.

Forty years ago, I had no idea that I would become a father of three children, struggle to pay bills on a layman’s salary yet find so much satisfaction working to address systemic injustices. Nor did I know that our family would suffer an unspeakable loss with the death of our youngest, a tragedy that still, nearly five years

later, ripples far and wide but somehow also generated deeper empathy in me, Susie, my two older children Ben and Anna, and so many others. Zach's disease and his passing made us acutely aware of the tragic failures of our disjointed health care system that, until very recently and spurred by the pandemic, stigmatized mental illness both for the victims and their loved ones.

And forty years ago—heck just a few months ago—I would have never thought I would have the honor of addressing the 2022 graduating class at St. Michael's College in Vermont. Not only that, after my thoroughly mediocre academic achievements, I would have never guessed that I would finally get a doctorate. I texted my six siblings that I expect henceforth to be addressed as Dr. Misleh. They replied with OMGs and laughter emojis. And although they and many others may question Dr. Sterritt's judgement, I think it is impeccable!

The point is, so much can happen in 40 years. In the days ahead, know that your future remains full of opportunity and full of unknowns. Your diploma places you at a clear advantage as you

enter out into the world of work. Still, this achievement is but one piece of the puzzle for a successful life. I contend that the secret to a full and meaningful life is not this degree, the career path you choose nor even the close friends or a committed soul mate (if you are as lucky as I have been). I believe that the secret to a truly meaningful and full life begins with gratitude.

I'm often asked how I became the founder of a Catholic organization dedicated to moving the Catholic community to action on climate change. I often wonder that myself. All I know is that God is good. Like you, I can only attribute this day, this moment, to grace and gratitude.

Years ago, at a family dinner I was grouching about how hard it is to get the Catholic Church to move on climate change. My niece Emma, just a young teen at the time said, "Buck up Uncle Dan! No one said that saving the earth was going to be easy." She's right, it is tough and overwhelming work. Yet I often remind myself that despite this difficult mission, I am blessed to have found such a noble purpose in life. We must all—you, me, our

friends, our families, our work colleagues—do our part to save the earth from our own foolishness and selfishness. Every daily decision we make about what we buy, how we move, how we keep ourselves cool or warm, and even how we make a living impacts the future of our planet and its people. We must fully embrace the fact, the scientific reality, that we are a part of creation, not apart from it. We must hold the notion that all is connected. Quoting the naturalist John Muir: “When we try to pick out anything by itself we find that it is bound fast by a thousand invisible cords...to everything in the universe.” Seeing how all is connected is vital as we commit this great work. Having just experienced St. Michael’s mission of helping to shape your future through the experiences of service, the liberal arts, and encouraging the exploration of a variety of academic disciplines, you have lots of tools to help you understand this interconnectedness and join in this mission.

Toward the end of his encyclical, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home* Pope Francis reminds us that God will not abandon our efforts and that we must, [quote] “...sing as we go.

May our struggles and our concern for this planet never take away the joy of our hope.” [unquote]

Let us sing as we go. Look, nobody likes a grim do-gooder. We have many issues facing our society with climate change being a biggie. But without a sense of hope or a sense of humor, without intentionally joining with others on our journey and without joy, a by-product of gratitude, we will quickly flame out, become desperate and paralyzed. Remember, you’ve made it to this moment through a global pandemic. That is no small matter. Let us sing as we go. Let us be grateful we’ve made it this far and look forward to a future that we can shape through our own vision and efforts.

A story about gratitude.

One day years ago I took a trip to Benin in West Africa. Our delegation was to learn more about how Catholic Relief Services operates overseas. One of those days was spent at a remote girls’ orphanage. They came from all over the country. Most had been abandoned or given over to indentured servitude. Their stories

were heart-wrenching. The lucky ones had been placed in the orphanage directly by their families who simply could not afford another child. But others had to escape horrifying abuse traveling on foot for miles through the brush and forests.

The nuns taught the girls marketable skills in textiles, baking, and soap-making. During our stay, they happily instructed us how to use the knitting and weaving machines. I recall girls giggling at me in my newly gifted kente cloth that I was wearing as a skirt while trying to manage the foot pedals to draw water from their well.

The night before, our guide told us that this orphanage would be the place to purchase souvenirs. I dropped well over \$100 on a beautiful handmade tablecloth and napkins, and a few other items. After a long but joyful day, each of us was given a small paper bag and a big hug by a specific orphan as we climbed aboard our bus. In the bag was soap, shay butter, crackers and other snacks: all gifts they had made. I was overcome with emotion. These girls had nothing, their short lives had known

mostly misery abandonment. And me with my American privilege, climbing aboard an air-conditioned bus to be driven back to a nice hotel, and flying home to a country where the perpetrators of such crimes suffer legal sanctions. Guilt combined with overwhelming gratitude left me in tears for several minutes as the bus pulled away from their compound. I can't recall a time since where I have been so overwhelmed with gratitude for such modest and beautiful gifts, for their kindness, and their joy. Gratitude, joy, hope. These are the things that humans must embrace to live a life that is full.

The daily practice of gratitude is generative: the more you appreciate your life, your friends, your family, and your earth, the easier it is to be grateful for even the smallest of things: a flower, the gentle rain, a child's laughter. Thank the waiter, the clerk at the pharmacy, the men and women who fix our homes and cars, our bodies and our souls. Thank them even when they are not kind. You never know their story; what struggles they may be facing. Your graciousness may create a small crack where a little

hope and little light can seep in. Developing habits of gratitude for life's good things can orient us towards the positive when hard and unwanted lessons come, when our future is tested, or when the ground shifts beneath our feet.

Start today by thanking not only your parents, friends, and professors, but the people who set up these chairs on the lawn, the staff who will clean your vacated dorm rooms, the folks who not only made your meals but those who planted and harvested that bounty.

When May 15, 2062, rolls around, I hope you will have found love, good meaningful work, and a deep appreciation for the transformative, daily practice of gratitude.

So now it's my turn: thank you, the 2022 graduates of St. Michael's College! Thank you for who you are, thank you for what you will become and thank you for the hope that you bring all of us as you venture forth to change the world! Go get 'em!