

Dies Natalis, November 16, 2017

Speech by Eleonore Stump

Tilburg Graduation Talk

I am glad to be here with you today, and I am grateful to Tilburg University for the award of this honorary doctorate, which I am so pleased to receive. This is an occasion of honor for all of you graduates also, because you have worked very hard to get to this point. It is the end of an important stage in your lives. But, of course, it is only the beginning of something else, the beginning of the rest of your lives. And so on this occasion I thought we might reflect together on what it is to live a good life.

What sort of life do you want for yourself? In an age where technology seems to govern our lives and every moment of the day is accompanied by digital communication, what sort of life *should* you want? You might suppose that there would be nothing easier to know than this; but if you look around you, you can see that people are not always very good at figuring out what they really want out of life or what they should want.

Consider, for example, my little three-year old granddaughter. Dora Explorer is an American cartoon character, and you can buy Dora-shaped graham crackers. When my little granddaughter was a specially good girl, she used to get two Dora crackers. And then she had what, in her own small world, she thought she really wanted. But, in the grand scheme of things, two Dora crackers aren't worth much, and a person who longs for Dora crackers isn't really getting much when her longing is fulfilled. The deepest desires of a human heart, which are unfolding in each of us from birth onwards, will be radically disappointed if the best we ever get is Dora crackers.

But, then, we don't expect much from three-year olds. Once a person grows up, we think, she'll want something more than Dora crackers, and she'll know what it is she wants. But consider the sorts of things grown-up people think they want. Some people devote their lives to things so trivial, they seem not to have advanced much past the three-year old stage. When you see what such people have given their whole lives to, what they thought they wanted above everything else, it still looks just like Dora crackers.

In the world of Nazi Germany during the period of the Second World War, everyone in the Nazi party in Germany got a party badge. Hitler's badge was made out of gold, and at the end of his life, Hitler gave that gold badge as a gift to the wife of one his trusted politicians, Magda Goebbels. She said that it was the proudest moment of her life when he did. But he gave her that gold badge in the bunker under Berlin, as Germany was losing the war. In that bunker in the last days of the war, Magda Goebbels killed all six of her children and herself in an appallingly misguided act of loyalty to Hitler. When the invading soldiers of the Allied armies conquered Berlin and found her body, one of them took that little bit of a gold badge from her dress and

pocketed it as a souvenir. As we see it now in retrospect, the gold badge that symbolized what Magda Goebbels lived and died for is a fitting symbol of the terrible waste of her life.

So what is worth living for? And what difference does it make to what you do with your lives that you are educated?

For how many people, in how many places and times, has your sort of education been possible even to dream about? It is an astonishing gift that each of you has been given. Besides the leisure and the money needed for education, consider all the other gifts needed to make full-time study possible. You live in countries which are at peace, and you are endowed with sufficient health to enable you to learn. And so on. A vast quantity of the good things the earth has to offer has been bestowed on you in the process of your education. And so each of you has a responsibility also to serve others with those very good things that have been given to you.

Sometimes when we think about our responsibilities to others, we think about the poor. And this is a good thing to think about. We are so used to the economic system in which we live that we feel terrific about ourselves if we remember the poor by donating a little money to some charity. In the past, the Western world has sometimes taken a tougher attitude with regard to responsibilities to the poor. The highly influential thinker from the Patristic period, Basil the Great, thought that giving to the poor was not a matter of mercy. He thought it was a matter of justice. That's why Basil says with stern disapproval to a prosperous person who doesn't share with the poor, "It is the hungry man's bread that you withhold, the naked man's cloak that you have stored away, the shoe of the barefoot that you have left to rot, the money of the needy that you have buried underground."ⁱ

In fact, the medieval period thought that there are acts of help which are owed in justice to those in need. There are the corporeal acts of almsgiving or charity, and then there are the *spiritual* acts of almsgiving or charity. These spiritual acts are instructing people who are ignorant, counseling people who are troubled, consoling people who are sorrowful, speaking up for people who are treated unjustly, forgiving people who have injured us, bearing with people who trouble us, and praying for everybody. This list is obligatory, too. That is, on the medieval view, all these things are a matter of justice.

This is a wonderful list, in my view.

Consider speaking up against injustice done to others. This is one of the seven spiritual acts of charity, and on the medieval view it is also obligatory. We might understand the sort of self-protectiveness or cowardice that makes a person silent when he should step forward to protect those victimized by injustice, but we would surely think less of people who give in to that sort of cowardice. In order to avoid moral scorn, there are times when we *have* to speak up, even if it is at cost to ourselves.

The spiritual acts of charity are obligatory on everybody, on the medieval view. But clearly some of the acts of spiritual almsgiving on the medieval list are especially obligatory for educated people, and those are the acts of instructing the ignorant, counseling the doubtful, and maybe even consoling the sorrowful. Sometimes the sorrowful need help with the rent or kind and comforting words. But sometimes the sorrowful need real help in making sense of their world, in understanding what to do to go forward with their lives. And then maybe, just maybe,

there is something our education has given us that can be passed on to a suffering soul in a way that will give him the help *he* needs in his sorrow.

And so the medieval list of spiritual acts of charity shows you where the gift of an education gives you a special ability to be of help to others.

Now at this point you might be thinking to yourself that you are just an ordinary person who doesn't have much to give to others. But this is a mistaken idea on your part.

Think for a moment about the people we take as examples of greatness. Look, for example, at Mother Teresa. She started as one small, obscure, powerless woman, with no money and no special talents or opportunities, but she gave herself whole-heartedly in love and service, and the result was amazing. The religious order she founded is all over the world now. Or think about Elie Wiesel, who was given a Nobel prize and one hundred and twenty honorary doctorates. At your age, an age when students are worried about their exams, Elie Wiesel was in the Nazi concentration camps, enduring one of the worst horrors human beings have ever known. When the war ended, he had no money, no job, no parents, no home, no country. But he was true to himself, and he gave himself unstintingly to the things he believed in. We all now feel the greatness of this man.

And so in trying to think how to live in such a way that in the end you get something worth having out of life, you do not need to try to determine how much talent or opportunity you have been given. You just need to give everything you've got to contribute what you can to make the world a better place. And that is where the real prizes lie. Real excellence in our lives does not lie in the things advertisements tell us to want, or in the false gold of the self-destructive pathways of worldly honor and power. Those things are Dora crackers for adults. Real excellence lies in love and service.

So that is what I want to say to you. Only you can know how best you can give back to your world a little of the abundant good that has been given to you in your education. But if you look for a way to give yourselves in service to others, you will be going for the gold, not the false gold represented by Magda Goebbels's party badge, but the real gold, which makes a human life worth living.

ⁱ *ST* IIaIIae.32.5 ad 2. (I liked and so used the translation of the quotation of the passage from Basil given in the Dominican Fathers translation of the *ST* passage.)