Good Morning!

I can’t tell you how delighted I am to be here with you today, in this faith-filled place, with all of you members of the Class of 2015 and your families and friends, and the staff and faculty of this great University.

This is a joyous occasion – I like joyous occasions – and if I do not talk too long – we will keep it that way - right? My wife, Suzanne, who is here with us today, is a trustee of Mount St. Mary’s and has been for seven years. So when I began to prepare these remarks for today I asked for her advice. She said: “Remember, blessed are the brief, for they will be invited back.”

We have been married now for 48 years and I have learned to follow her advice.

Speaking of my wife, today is Mother’s Day and so to her and to all you mothers I doff my cap. How fitting for us to be gathered here on your day on this Mount of our Holy Mother, Mary. I salute all of you parents on this happy day and congratulate you. Many of you are probably also getting a good pay raise today as well.
I save my warmest greeting for you Members of the Class of 2015. This is a big day. Today you are joining a select group of Americans – college graduates. Congratulations!

It has dawned upon me that you, the Class of 2015 and I, are now classmates of the Mount. You will have gotten your degree the hard way – you earned it. Me, I got mine by just showing up. It is almost like a miracle.

It is also my pleasure to be here today and in the company of your most recent President, and my friend, Tom Powell.

Tom Powell is a “Whole Man,” one who has been a stand-out success in everything he has done, whether it was as a newlywed on the Alaskan frontier, in the Academy, as a husband, father or friend. He has been a role model for many of us in all of these ways, but for me, the most important of all has been the way he so effectively led here as President, and so unapologetically, kept Christ and the Catholic Church prominent in the culture of The Mount.

He and his wife, Irene, have been gifts on this campus for 12 years, and we thank them and wish them well. I also want to congratulate Simon Newman as the new President of the Mount and wish him much success as well.

You graduates are about to enter a new time in your life – you are “commencing” a new phase, if you will.

Neither of my parents went to college. My Dad did not even go to high school. So it makes me curious – could I see by a show of hands how many of you graduates are the first in your family to go to college? What a gift we have been given, but it comes with a responsibility to lead and give back. One doesn’t need a college education to be a good leader. Leadership takes many forms, but common to good leaders, in my experience, is a solid set of fundamental values.

Speaking of fundamentals makes me think of a popular T.V. show in the USA when I was a boy. The star was a priest, and his name was Bishop Fulton J. Sheen. He was on every Sunday night at prime time for one hour in a show called “Life is Worth Living.” It is my opinion that this so called “old stuff” or “old material” also called the fundamental values, will continue to serve you well forever.
We all acquire our values in different ways, but most of us have gotten them at home, and where we went to school; we are all products of our own experiences. My recollections are vivid about my childhood days and my observations of character and courage and faith in action – and leadership.

They are of my mother fighting to keep a hungry family of seven children together with an unemployed, alcoholic father, all living in what had been an abandoned farm house, with no electricity or plumbing, and often without enough food. She would read the Bible to us around a kerosene lantern, and admonish us to hold our heads up and retain our dignity and our hope, and would say repeatedly that, if we would work hard, study hard, and pray hard, that we would succeed in America.

She was valedictorian of her class and a Latin scholar but she was not able to go to college. They could not afford it. She was determined that her children would somehow go to college because she knew it was the way out of the cycle of poverty that our family lived in.

Picture that, here we were in this crumbling house, wearing unmatched shoes, and she was stressing that we study hard at this little country school we were attending so we could be successful. It always baffled me how she could maintain that attitude under such conditions. She was a leader. It was a profound testimony to her love of our country, to hope, and to faith in the power of prayer. It was leadership “seen-à qua non”.

Mom turned out to be right too. All seven of us went to college; four have postgraduate degrees; one is a retired Army General who has a son who is now a three star general. Another of her grandsons was recently the navigator on Air Force One. My Mom knew the advantage of a good education; she stuck to her values and instilled them in her children.

These values of faith, family, prayer and hard work helps to define you also, I am sure. I also know many of your alumni, and I notice something that each of them have in common. They are leaders who take great pride in being graduates of Mount St. Mary’s, and they feel a loyalty to the Mount, and support its programs and work to keep it in top shape to serve those who follow, like you.
I also find in each of them that I know, a profound faith in God and a strong commitment to the Church and to their community.

You graduates are inheriting a special legacy here at Mount St. Mary’s. When President Powell asked me to give this Commencement Address I immediately said yes, because it is such an honor.

But I harbor no illusions about how much of what I say you will remember, or, in fact, how long you will even remember who spoke. There are studies out there that suggest that I am right about this. I do happen to remember my Commencement speaker at West Point; it was Vice-President Lyndon Johnson. I do not remember a word he said, but I do remember that my Dad went to sleep.

So knowing you will not long remember me nor my words), and not wanting any of you Dads to go to sleep, I want to wrap up with just a few thoughts as you join the ranks Mount Saint Mary’s alumni.

It is an old cliché to say you are graduating in interesting times, but it is also true. Certainly there are some big problems, but we also live in the greatest country on earth. We in the United States have tremendous opportunities. First off, we have a very vital Catholic Church, we have an economy ready to explode, we continue to be the most innovative nation in the world, entrepreneurship is alive and well; we are blessed with enormous natural resources, we have a sound rule of law, and we are free.

I just returned from China, where 1.2 billion people live, and where they are booming, but where one cannot even make a joke or a pun about their government without being arrested. Nowhere else can you find the freedom that we enjoy as Americans. Nowhere else will you find fellow citizens who continue to volunteer and don uniforms and deploy too far off, dangerous places in order to keep country free. We are Americans. We are free, and we are very lucky.

The opportunity and responsibility of your generation is to continue this tradition of service, and to keep us free. You are equipped to do that. No matter the location or the circumstance – a poor farm house, a nation’s capitol – you will be able to lead because you are educated people of faith – thanks to your families and the Mount.
I am convinced that if you pray, and if you are working hard, and following your passion and your conscience, you will be successful. God doesn’t want you to fail. Jesus said, “My yoke is easy, and my burden light.” God does not want you to be unhappy or anxious either. He wants you to enjoy your life. He does, though, I believe, want you to give back and be a leader, humbly ask Him for help when you need it.

So remember when we meet again, and I ask you what I said to you today – you will first laugh, I hope, and then say that I asked you to be leaders, work hard, have fun, give back and yes, say your prayers!

Pretty basic, “old material,” so go for it my new classmates!

Congratulations, and God bless you!