

Good Evening. It is an honor to address the members of the Graduating Class of 2017 and their families. Every class develops its own personality based on a variety of factors. To all the members of the Class of 1986 here tonight, I want you to know that I have taken your child's high school education much more seriously than I did my own. This class's personality has been formed, among other things, through the many ways in which the members of this class have connected with one another through adversity. One of my favorite moments of the year was when Zach Woodke, whose football season began in question due to an injury last spring and recovery from surgery, ended his three-year varsity letterman career with a punt return touchdown against Badin. #4 never had it easy, but he never would have wanted it any other way. He competed and he fought and he led; he helped others get to the end zone, then finally, through sheer persistence, he made it himself. That one play – powerful, dynamic, undeniable, creative, courageous – epitomizes one of the greatest captains our football program has ever had. Those qualities also epitomize the class of 2017, led by Class President, Zach Woodke. The Class turned out a variety of characters and personalities, they found success in abundance, and they really like each other. They rally around one another in celebration and in consolation. They are goofy and funny and I have loved most minutes that I have gotten to spend with them. What lies inside of them is a heart of tremendous size and strength, one that brims with hope and courage, one that serves and suffers, one that beats for many. These students represent what is so wonderful about this school of ours – the opportunity to pursue Full Stature in Christ – the God-given power to choose to develop ourselves in whatever ways He has blessed us and whatever ways we feel compelled to mature. In my opinion, no class has done more to realize those words than the class of 2017.

Parents, you are the backbone of Catholic education. Your desire for something better for your children and your willingness to pay for it creates the possibility for us to help you fulfill that desire and turn it into a promise that you make to your children. As I have passed students in the halls over the course of the last few weeks, many have said in passing, "Hey! I voted for you for speaker!" I would ask why, remembering that these folks never seemed all that excited about what I was telling them in English class over the years. The overwhelming answer was this: I want you to make my mom cry. So, here is what we are going to do for you parents tonight, and trust me, it will make both mom and dad weep bucketsful of tears: we are giving you parents here tonight an itemized statement of every dime that you have spent on your child's Catholic education. That's right: all the tuition, all the participation fees, tech fees, lab fees, booster fees, magazine drive money, book fair money, bookstore money, field trip money, lunch money, bail money, bribe money, fund-raising, alms-giving, donations, contributions, and all other forms of cash that have been extracted from you over the years, even the money you have spent on sacraments of chance like bingo, raffle tickets and split-the-pot. Tonight, you will cry, thinking of the his and hers sports cars that you could be driving to your villa on the French Riviera from the airport where you parked your private jet, if you had chosen public school for your child. However, hang on to the statement; it has both short-term and long-term value. In a short term, when your student who has been the beneficiary of this lucre decides that he is not feeling the whole God thing, or she feels like she needs a break from her traditional belief structure, you can pull out this statement and say very simply, "You can be an Atheist or an Agnostic or a Druid to your heart's content, as soon as you pay us back every single penny." Adding a modest interest rate is a nice "real world" touch.

Later, when the time comes for you to shuffle off this mortal coil and meet Our Lord face-to-face beyond the pearly gates, the statement works like an express pass to the front of the line. The Lord will take your face in His hands and He will thank you for giving your children / His children the opportunity to learn from the creative, loving, beautiful people who teach them at Catholic preschools and grade schools. He will thank you for allowing your son to be transformed by Mike Orlando, David Sandmann, Paul Romolo, John Chadwell, John Norman, and the men of McNicholas. He will thank you for allowing your daughter to be encouraged and

strengthened by Julie Muething, Mary Beth Sandmann, Barb Gillming, Jenni Tumser, Regina Goines, and the women of McNicholas. I can promise you this, from one parent to another: your children will never be surrounded by a group of people outside your family who will love them and care for them the way the adults at McNicholas love and care for your children – Never. I said a couple of years ago that parents are goofy because, despite the sacrifices and the suffering, they would not change anything about being parents. Well, teachers and those who work with high school students are full-blown lunatics. At least as parents, you will continue to be with your child as he/she continues to pursue an extraordinary life – you will see them become professionals, spouses, and parents. We will go back next year and start all over again with a whole new bunch of kids – more adolescent people with racing minds and raging hormones. But to the parents, thank you for the trust you place in us, the promise you make to your child, and the faith you witness to us all.

Now, I feel that it is incumbent upon me as a graduation speaker to offer some advice to the graduates. [I have already explained to you how a poem is like a baseball and how moments in life are like pitches in a baseball game and, in essence, how life itself is a game of baseball. Those are the only truths in life I have found. But, I have realized some things that are NOT true: some misconceptions that I want to dispel for you, if you have not already learned them for yourself. I have mentioned these before, so if you remember them from nine years ago, you can nap for the next couple of minutes.

1. High school prepares you for the “life in the real world.”
  - a. Life is not a world into which you gain acceptance at graduation, birthdays, or other milestone events – life in the real world is the decisions and the relationships you make – you have been making those all along – you’ve made some good ones and you have screwed some up – learn from both.
  - b. By the way, no part of life is more “unreal” than college – plan your own schedule, skip classes, wear what you want, arrive in various stages of consciousness – in many ways, college will be the antithesis of what you have prepared for over the last four years.
2. These are the best years of your life.
  - a. How can they be? You have not found your life’s calling (unless you are Jacob Robb), you have not committed to the person with whom you want to share the rest of forever, and you have not brought a new life into your own. Live each day as if it is the beginning of the best that is yet to come.
  - b. These are some of the easier years of your life because you have the Bank of Mom & Dad to fund your endeavors and a crew of like-minded friends with whom to spend your free time – enjoy the cash, the crew, and the free time while you can.]
3. A good life is an easy life.
  - a. It’s not about being care-free, it’s about caring about the right things that make a life well-lived; surround yourself with people who care about you, people who will make the good times better and the bad times bearable.
  - b. My wife, my children and my students have made my life greater than anything I deserve or could have imagined, but none of them make my life easier. Loving others and being loved can be hard work sometimes. Love doesn’t promise to make life go well, just to make life go forward.

There are two people that I want to talk about whose lives can be seen as amazing because of the influence they have had on others, but their lives certainly have not been easy. There have been other members of this class to suffer great loss, battle great disease, and face great adversity; but I believe that God forced my path to cross with these two for a while so that we could learn from each other. They have changed my life. I heard of Adrian’s diagnosis over the summer before her junior year through posts on social media, but I did not learn until we arrived back at school that she was in my English class. Because of her rigorous treatment schedule and the intensity of her treatments, she basically missed the first semester. I posted assignments for her to do

and her mom would come and pick up quizzes and tests that she needed to take. She is the only person with whom I have ever Skyped – I hope it stays that way. At some point during the fall, Adrian asked if I could come to her house and talk with her about characters in THE CANTERBURY TALES, and I made my first house call as a teacher. While the strangest thing that happened that night was hearing Mr. Ell firing a rifle at critters in the pasture behind their house, the most amazing thing was taking place at the dinner table. I sat at that table with a young woman who, despite all the unfairness and trauma and suffering she had faced, was trying to figure out how to distinguish the Monk and the Friar from one another for her test over the material. It was awesome to see someone who cared so much about being a student and who wanted so badly to be a kid again, even if that only meant struggling with homework. It was both humbling and empowering to sit with her that night, then to finally see her desk occupied when she returned to class, then to see her back on the court this past fall, and then to witness the support showered upon her when she was chosen the Penn Station Athlete of the Month a while back. The love and life and dance moves that she inspired in our school that day created a feel that I have never witnessed in that gym in all the 30+ years that I have been a Rocket. We are blessed as a community to have been able to be in the presence of someone who never accepted anyone's pity throughout her ordeal, but instead gave hope to everyone through how she handled it. Yo, Adrian, you made us all ADRIAN STRONG. You are the heart of the class of 2017.

While Adrian's fall from health was catastrophic and her road back to health was grueling, Noah Kohl's life has been beset by an illness that has Noah in a cycle of ups and downs that would test the piety and patience of the most devout saint. Noah Kohl is the toughest person I have ever met in my life. He is a dude that would have every reason to feel cheated, forsaken, or spiteful, and probably has; but he has never allowed those feelings to affect how he treats others. Instead, Noah has devoted himself to creativity and imagination, to his family and friends, and to living life with passion and strength. Having Noah first period last year, I could often sense that he had not had a restful night and was exhausted. He'd give me a beleaguered smile and I would tell him to do whatever he felt he needed to do to be comfortable and feel better. Once class began, he was engaged and leading the class. I watched Noah do breathing treatments during Kairos so that he would not have to miss anything that was happening on his retreat. He later shared his thoughts eloquently and powerfully about what an amazing experience Kairos was for him. He has created a series of stunning sketches and paintings that capture the constriction and confinement that he associates with CF. Using his immense talent to create, he gives a sense of the reality of people, primarily children, stricken with CF. And he has done it all with humility and grace and a smile on his face. Noah, God has blessed me by making me a part of your journey and I thank Him daily for every minute that I have gotten to witness and draw from your incredible strength. You are the soul of the Class of 2017.

Finally, I know that I have said some pretty mean things to some of you for choosing me as the speaker tonight, sworn violent retribution against you, perhaps a multi-generational curse levied against a few of your families; but I don't mean any of it. In all honesty, it gives me a chance to think about a lot of the interactions that I have had with many of you. I wish there was time for a shout out to each of you with whom I have worked in some way to say how impressive and wonderful I think you are. If I have coached you, been on a retreat with you, watched you play or perform, or even had a conversation or made eye-contact with in the hallway, please know that I admire and respect what you have done for our school. If you are one of my offensive linemen, remember that the Lord loves workers and those who sacrifice for others, and so do the ladies. If you are one of the students I have taught, I thank God for you and the chance to have worked with you. And if you were one of my English2 CP2 students who became my English3 CP2 students, I love you with all of my heart. I have never had more fun teaching than I did with you guys. I already miss you. I made a deal with the Lord a while back that if He would help me stay out of my own way and get back to Him, I would hold

His people in my heart and bring them with me. If you are in the class of 2017, you are forever in my heart. And before anybody calls me a big, fat, drama llama, I was there. I saw how you cared about one another. I witnessed how you listened to and talked with one another. I felt the energy in the room when you all got together. All of you have reminded me that I don't teach a curriculum. I don't coach a sport. I don't lead a retreat. By the grace of God, I teach and coach and lead McNicholas Rockets, Children of God, sons and daughters, brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews and cousins and grandchildren and best friends of other Rockets. McNicholas is a family business. You reminded me daily that in a universe that has been expanding in all directions at the speed of light for over 14.5 billion years, each of you is a unique being, once-in-a-forever, a miracle, created in the image and likeness of the most powerful force in that universe. You are awesome, and I don't even have to shout because you already know.

In closing, many people here tonight will find it significant that, when you were sophomores, some of you had the privilege of being in the last classes taught by John Kirchgassner. We'll let his words resonate: "Good job, Troops. Well Done!"