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**Address**  
**Avila University Graduation**  
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President Gordon, trustees, faculty, graduates, students and guests attending these graduation exercises of Avila University, I am honored and deeply grateful for your recognition in granting me a Doctorate of Humane Letters. When Dr. Gordon approached me many months ago to suggest the possibility I must admit there was a certain hesitancy on my part. Knowing so many of the former recipients of this singular honor I did not want to be the one to lower the standards associated with this academic distinction. But with perfect logic and eminent practicality, I concluded that this was not my problem. Avila, fortunately or unfortunately, would have to live with it! I have never been able to respond to the oft-asked question, "How, in the name of God, did you ever become a bishop?" My only surmise is that the Holy See was desperate!

The downside for you, my dear graduates, is that I am expected to offer you a few words of wisdom and, whether or not you would prefer to be undergoing a root canal at this moment, you are expected to listen to them.

You should know that a sociological study has revealed that ten years after the event less than 5% of the graduates could recall the name of the so-called VIP who addressed them at their graduation. An even lesser percentage could recall just one idea he or she had tried to implant in their minds. So, fortified by this infallible guarantee that my name and my message may not last until sundown, I better stop wasting time and get on with it.

If I have the right to sow one idea in your fertile educated minds on this happy occasion, then I would like you to remember the word POLARIZATION. In my opinion, with which you are welcome to disagree, it is a major disease which is undermining the integrity of both our society and our church. There are, of course, other factors which influence our world of ideas and the depth of our spirituality but I am operating under the principle that you all intend to enjoy lunch at a reasonable hour today.

In my lexicon, POLARIZATION is the division of our civil society and our religious beliefs into two elements concentrated about opposing extremes. Now, extremes have to exist because they mark the beginning and the ending points of every continuum. These points, of necessity, have adjusted their foundations over the centuries with the unfolding of knowledge. Human creativity coupled with the influence of the Holy Spirit have nurtured a dynamic movement of the pendulum between one extreme and the other in every age. As graduates, albeit of a specific discipline, you are in many ways the inheritors of this healthy synthesis and development of ideas which, with all its flaws, has given us this marvelous world in which we live.

Why, then, do I mention the word POLARIZATION in a somewhat negative sense? Precisely

because I believe the pendulum has stopped swinging or, perhaps more accurately, it has lost its vigor. The poles, the extremes, are adopting all the qualities of fortresses and those who live within them see everything in terms of black and white. Unfortunately, those who live in the castle at the other end of the continuum are regarded as implacable enemies and the sentiment is reciprocated with a similar hostility.

The need for collective security and the natural desire to seek the comfort of a compatible community are not what is in question here. It is something deeper with far more profound implications. It begins with the conviction that I am right and you are wrong. It escalates itself to the next level which convinces one that he is always right and everybody else is always wrong. It brims over the top when the elimination of the other seems both desirable and justifiable. It led Christ to the cross.

The delusional polarization of which I speak is readily recognizable on the international scene both historically and in our own current headlines.

- It created the gulags and Belsens and the Katyn Woods of our recent past.
- It gave birth to the Kamikaze pilot, the suicide bomber, the assassin and the perpetrators of September 11.

It erects walls, some to keep people in, others to keep people out; we might say prisons on a grand scale.

I have stood before a twenty foot high wall crowned with spirals of barbed wire as it snaked its way throughout the inner suburbs of Belfast in my native Ireland . The sadness is that the people on both sides of that wall go to church every Sunday and sing exuberantly of the glories of their Christianity. Polarization at its worst.

Why should I belabor the point? We have had Hardrian's Wall, the Great Wall of China , the Iron Curtain, the Berlin Wall and what have we learned? Apparently, not much. We are now building one in the Holy Land .

It must be recognized that this state of affairs is far more than the adoption of a code of principles by which to conduct one's life. Such is universally encouraged and certainly those of us who are Catholics profess a Creed which gives substance to a structured belief system. The polarization only becomes critical when it becomes frozen, immovable, arrogant and frequently irrational. It equates dialogue with weakness and it regards the existence of diversity as an affront. Although it would be an unfair depiction to regard it as all-pervasive or monolithic it is, nevertheless, well capable of bringing paralysis and frustration to our body politic. When everything is seen in terms of black and white, all the shades in-between become unacceptable.

The wolf will often present itself in sheep's clothing using such rallying cries as patriotism, orthodoxy, freedom and even "our God-given rights," but you risk being considered an ingrate should you ask for an accurate definition of these values. I would hope that adherence to the old adage; "my country, right or wrong" is no longer acceptable in a civilized society.

As an off-shoot of polarization very often the vast majority who reside between the two extremes become disillusioned and apathetic. They justify their non-involvement by maintaining that participation wouldn't produce any meaningful difference. They have identified themselves with the Shakespearean phrase, "a plague o' both your houses." (Romeo and Juliet, act

3, scene 1) I consider a democracy as unhealthy when large numbers do not bother to vote. I have already referred to some international issues where polarization has led to impasses such that civil strife continues, human rights are denied, refugee camps become the norm and people die in genocidal ferocity. Shouldn't we be angry that a child dies of preventable hunger every five seconds of every day?

On the national scene we can all recall the level of bitterness engendered by the Presidential campaign and election this past November. The technique of designating states blue and red, a graphic with limited mathematical validity, has further exacerbated the national debate on serious issues. Each side is accusing the other of playing politics and each side is probably right. As a result the craft of good government is being sidelined. Polarization is readily observable in the contention surrounding the Social Security dilemma, the appointment of judges, taxation policies, the role of the Congressional Ethics Committee and the legislation involved with the way we use and abuse the environment.

The Church is not immune from the paralysis which comes with polarization. The media commentaries which abounded in the days before the recent papal election demonstrated this point. On the one hand there were groups and individuals who demanded that the new pope should make changes which would fundamentally alter the nature of the Catholic Church.

Then there were others who would like to freeze the activity of the Holy Spirit preferably at some time prior to the Second Vatican Council. Obviously both extremes are unacceptable and one has to wonder about the knowledge of theology and ecclesiology which their proponents possess.

I have news for you. Despite all its warts, and we have had our share in recent years, the Church is alive and well. It is an institution of divine origin resting on human shoulders which seeks to turn sinners into saints. Each, in his own way, is part of that pilgrimage.

This is the weekend of Pentecost, popularly referred to as the birthday of the Church. It celebrates the Spirit-filled graduation of the Apostles when they sallied forth with a mandate to convert the world to the way of the crucified and the risen Christ. The same Spirit continues to remind us of the integrity of Christ's teaching and guides us in the development of doctrine. No matter how much we try to insulate our lives in a garment of self-sufficiency, a patient God will never abandon us. The Spirit never sleeps.

I know you realize that only a tiny percentage of the world's population ever receives a college degree. You are among those fortunate ones but such blessings come with added responsibilities. After you establish your careers keep a place in your heart for others. Call it "pay back time," if you will. I would like you to think of POLARIZATION as a dirty twelve letter word! Participate in the public discourse, use your intelligence to study the issues, promote dialogue with your real and imaginary adversaries and, if you must build, build bridges rather than ramparts.

These qualities will also serve you well as a believer, a person of faith. The Church does not need pontificators who do not know the teaching of Christ any more than it needs theologians who do not know God's people. Christ put it very succinctly, "I know mine and mine know me."

So much for my words which you have my permission to forget in keeping with the destiny of all graduation addresses. I do hope, however, that the word POLARIZATION will haunt your consciousness for at least a week!

I close with an observation of Madeline Albright, the first woman Secretary of State, who uttered these very practical words to the graduates of Wellesley College a decade ago.

“Graduation is one of the four great milestones in life. The others are the day you were born, the day you die, and the day you finally pay off your student loan.”

Congratulations, graduates, and may God be your constant companion.