



A SERMON
PREACHED ON THE OCCASION OF
THE GOLDEN JUBILEE
OF REGIS HIGH SCHOOL

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Bishop of Albany, 1969–1976

THOU ART A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES AND THE GLORY OF THY PEOPLE

(LUKE 2:32)

A family get-together is usually a joyous occasion, especially so when the younger members are present. Today there is certainly ample reason for rejoicing as we gather here to offer a Solemn Pontifical Mass of Thanksgiving commemorating the Golden Jubilee of the founding of our beloved Regis High School. Significantly, too, we come here on this meaningful Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord in the Temple. For, today, in a very special sense, we observe our own Presentation Day.

Our love for Regis grows deeper and stronger as her years turn to gold. Joyfully we present ourselves in this holy temple which holds so much meaning for all sons of Regis. In this magnificent Church we familiarly and fondly call the Regis Chapel, we pray with our own holy family—the Jesuit Fathers, the scholastics, the lay teachers, the students with their parents, the Alumni representatives—the Regis Family. At this solemn moment we join hearts in thanking God for the grace, the light and the favors that we have received in such abundance these fifty years. We pause, as our thoughts look back, to remember in prayer those so dear and near to us and now one with Christ—our saintly benefactress, our founding fathers, our teachers and our Alumni. We prayerfully hope, moreover, that Our Blessed Lord will continue to bless Regis and that the spirit with which she endowed us will continue to flourish for generations yet unborn in years yet unnumbered.

A golden jubilee seems an appropriate time for reflection and projection. Colossus-like, we stand astride a magnificent past and a glorious future.

Our past goes back to the year 1914 which began uneventfully. As Henry Ford raised the salary of his employees to \$5.00 for an 8-hour day, Maine and Vermont were deliberating whether his autos were safe enough to speed along at eight miles an hour. Remember 1914 was only one year away from the ringing of the telephone, but several years from the magic of radio and many years from the miracle of TV. Pancho Villa was up to his old tricks in Mexico, churning up a revolution which Captain MacArthur was ordered to quell, the first ship was passing through the Panama Canal, and Woodrow Wilson was in the White House penning Princetonian prose. Then, suddenly, on June 28, 1914, the Austrian Archduke fell dead of an assassin's bullet, and the hand that held the pistol triggered the First World War which has never really cooled off.

And, at the same time, across the street on 84th and Park Avenue, a few Jesuit Fathers were surveying property on which stood three wooden frame homes and a carriage house with an owl atop it. With these buildings razed, they would erect here a liberal arts scholarship high school for gifted young men—a pilot project in Catholic education. There were obstacles, of course, but they were not insurmountable, especially when

a generous lady set up a substantial endowment to translate this dream into reality. How often should we who have felt the warmth of her charity remember her who built this monument more lasting than bronze!

Even though the steel construction did not start until St. Patrick's Day, Regis opened on Monday September 14, 1914 with 250 students who took no entrance exam. Can you imagine that in 1914 Father David Hearn, the Rector, and Father James Kilroy, the first Headmaster, ran an ad in *The Catholic News* appealing for students? Now, it is rumored, the CIA screens the applicants.

Quickly the word spread about this scholarship school—the best commercials were voiced by the 8th Grade nuns who engaged in unholy rivalry to see how many of their students could make Regis and then stay there.

Going to Regis, of course, was its own reward. It has a kind of built-in respectability. Surely this reputation has not changed in fifty years—the fellows in your neighborhood were envious, the young ladies were in awe at your recital of the Greek alphabet, the nuns considered you a genius, the parish priest was embarrassed to preach in your presence—and your parents even hesitated to ask you to run errands. Some of us took all this adulation in stride; we knew we were lucky, others got a little puffed up, convinced that it's what's up top that really counts. We were in fact our own worst enemies, for all this praise went to our heads and we humbly felt superior. Years ago you certainly had it made if you went to Regis.

Occasionally a few students would complain: "Why do we get all this Latin

and Greek, why don't they open up the science lab?" In rebuttal we were told all about the *Ratio Studiorum*, the *Quadrivium* and the *Trivium*, and we nodded. Ours was a thorough grounding in fundamentals; we were given a standard of values, of attitudes and of excellence. Our training was not just to get a high mark in the Province Exam. It was a preparation for living. We were so taught the way to live that later, hopefully, we would live the way we were taught.

We all carry with us many mental souvenirs of our awakening manhood here at Regis—the entrance exam—the unexpected quizzes—conditions—the First Fridays—the sinker breakfasts—Jug, euphemistically called Study Hall—the plays and the debates—the boat ride—the Ichthus Pin—the Novena of Grace—Father Archdeacon jangling keys—the dedicated Jesuit Faculty—our exemplary lay teachers—taskmasters no longer, now good friends—the Senior Staircase—the Senior Retreat—a real diploma—graduation—Regis Alumni.

That Regis has fulfilled the purpose of her foundation is a matter of public record. Her Alumni—now over 4,000—adorn and influence every vocation, profession and occupation—each of them trying to work out his salvation as best as he can from bustling market places, to courts of justice, to the quiet Cistercian Cloister—*Terra Marique Ubique*—Christian gentlemen, proud of their heritage, grateful for their opportunity to have been here, and thrilled to call Regis their Alma Mater.

In the illustrious Society of Jesus are numbered nearly 300 Regis Alumni inflamed with the Pentecostal fire of Ignatius and aglow with the zeal of

John Francis Regis. May you young men be as sacrificially generous as your predecessors!

The Archdiocese of New York is grateful for the many Sons of Regis ministering as diocesan priests in this challenging agora. Our ardent hope is that many more will hurry to replace our depleting Regis ranks. How blessed is Regis that over 10% of her Alumni are in the priesthood! Proudly we challenge her students of the next half century to surpass, even to equal this impressive statistic.

The world has turned many times since that opening day and today—fifty years later—you young men are privileged to walk through the door whose threshold has been worn thin by the hurrying footsteps of your predecessors. Your curriculum of studies has changed somewhat, accommodated to the limitless frontiers of learning in this astral age. More than ever Regis must thrust for the stars. But the values of life you learn remain constant.

Need I remind you that it is still a privilege to attend Regis High School and it appears that most of you young men are enjoying it. This is not an exempt privilege, however; it is freighted with responsibilities. Noblesse oblige. Upon whom else can we call to exemplify Christian youth at its noblest and finest if not upon you who are drinking deeply of the wells of Christian culture? To you we point with pride as living models of an educational system that prepares you for the eternal future as well as for the throbbing present. You must prove yourself worthy of this investment.

People are still searching for Christ, not so much in books and arguments as in the

lives of His followers. The best argument for Christianity is a good Christian. Do people find Christ in you? Are you Christ to them? Do you prompt them to run to Him and not from Him? How can anyone come to know Him unless you who know Him come to love Him? Do our people look to you as their light—as their glory?

The Owl is practically the Regis mascot. Rescued from demolition's destruction and perched pensively above the Quadrangle, this owl has watched the passing Regis parade for fifty years. Silently wise and wisely silent—what a story he could unfold—of hopes, promises and fulfillments—of disappointment, frustration and despair—of those who made it—of those who did not. And later—after graduation—of those whom destiny marked for greatness, achieving it—of those who, surrendering their standard of values, lost their priceless gift of faith—of the ordinary strugglers and pluggers who surprisingly flowered into greatness—of the myopic geniuses who interpret life only in terms of second aorists and protases of contrary to the fact conditions—or of the ten-talented, once showered with honor and merit cards, now, in later life, isolating themselves like ablative absolutes, refusing to give even their home address, if there be one—of those spoon-fed scholars who coast through life claiming that society owes them a living simply because they spent four years at Regis—and of those egghead idolaters of the intellect, contemptuous of anyone who does not appreciate Homeric similes in dactylic hexameter verse.

The wise old owl would be the first to caution you not to become upset should someone think the Greek accusative a

Fleming thriller, or a feminine *caesura* a new hairdo, or the movable *nu* an oriental dancer. Even this owl knows that your contribution to civilization must be more than knowing the verbs that take the dative, or translating Cicero without a trot, or completing a crossword puzzle without a dictionary.

What would impress the owl if we all gathered under his wing in the Quadrangle—the purple of the church—the ermine of the State—our National Merit Scholarships—our degrees—our tax brackets—our credit cards—our club memberships? Certainly he would blink many times as he beholds this vast panoply of material success, but, as a curious owl, isn't he entitled to ask: "How are you using the gifts God gave you? You used most of them well here at Regis. Do you still remember where you are going? Do you know how to get there? Are people any better because of your pilgrimage through life? Is the world any better because you went to Regis? Does your light lead our people to glory?"

The Regis Alumni Association Directory is also a book of meditations. Here in cold type is recorded the Odyssey of our lives. Worthy of your occasional scanning, it vividly confirms the realistic advice in the Book of Ecclesiastes: "The race is not to the swift, nor victory to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the learned, nor favor to the skillful, but time and chance happen to us all." (9:11)

This is precisely why the young man voted by his class most likely to succeed frequently does not; why the first in Phi Beta Kappa is not necessarily first in life; why the brilliant speaker is not in the House of Congress on his silver jubilee of graduation. But he who is always getting

ready for what in realistic language we call the "breaks," who takes advantage of time and chance when they appear—and they will appear—at long last gets the gold crown, or whatever you recognize as the symbol of success. The judgments of God are inscrutable, His way unsearchable.

Significantly, we hold our family together on the meaningful Feast of the Presentation of Our Lord. The old priest to whom Christ was presented in the temple was named Simeon. Like Simeon, those of us who graduated Regis years ago have grown old. As the Simeons of Regis, we are proud to present you young men in this temple. Frankly—we envy you—your youth, your intelligence, your scholarship, your vision, your hopes, and the bustling, exploding, fascinating age in which you find your challenge and your vocation.

Many of us Simeons would never make Regis, if we had to try again. But we rest, content that Regis is in the best of hands and that her best is yet to be. This is the reason for our unbounded joy as these golden years cast a graceful glow upon our Alma Mater and why each of her older sons now joyfully recites his own "Nunc Dimittis"—Now you may dismiss me in peace, O Lord, for I pray that these young Regians presented here today may be the light to enlighten the Gentiles and the glory of our people.