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Convocation Address, May 15, 1989

Let Us Be Listeners

Dear students, colleagues and friends,

It is one of the amiable eccentricities of academic life that not a few of its institutions paradoxically call convocation, the final day of the academic year, when results are published and diplomas granted, "Commencement Day", i.e., day of beginning. Perhaps academia, settled as it is on the side of theory and contemplation, is secretly so impressed with the active life which follows it that it named its own closing day "commencement", i.e., the beginning of the real thing, of true life. Thus on convocation we seem to be called, above all, to look forward to the future.

Nevertheless, on a day like this, the first sentiment must be to look back with gratitude and thanksgiving. For many of us this day represents the happy conclusion of one or more years of studies, although the whole enterprise may at times have looked precarious enough for any number of reasons, be they financial, political, spiritual, or reasons of health.

Convocation, then, is a day of giving thanks to God for having led us through a maze of uncertainties. We want to give thanks for having been kept safe, for external gifts and provisions as well as for the internal gifts and talents that have emerged. However, we are not only grateful that you, the students, have made it through, but that the College, too, survived, - that it did not default, which could easily have been the fate of a young and largely unendowed institution. So we want to say thanks to God for the continued existence of Regent and, indeed, for its new home as a visible and tangible sign of sustenance and growth.

Moreover, as we pause to give thanks tonight we also do this as individuals for individuals, i.e., that we personally thank those who actually helped us to reach this day. We have been the recipients of much caring and friendship. Thus, tonight, we consciously rejoice in God's goodness, and we should make it concrete by going and personally thanking some people for the benefits that have reached us through them.

Further, tonight we want to remember to thank God for having redeemed us from meaninglessness and given us a purpose in life. This is often the experience of people who encounter vital Christianity and find in it a goal and commission for life.

It seems to me remarkable that in our time enlightened men and women wish to develop nothing but themselves, totally individualistic, but must then necessarily recognize that life has become meaningless because it is now bereft of its larger context, and perspective. With such a prospect, one learns to be grateful for the redemption from meaninglessness and the gift of a higher purpose, which the Christian faith bestows upon us.

Gratitude is essential. Not in vain does St. Paul say that all our prayers should be accompanied by thanksgiving. It is often the only way out of emotionally confusing situations. For it opens the eyes to a fairer view of people, things, and circumstances. "I will praise the name of God with a song, and will

magnify Him with thanksgiving" (Ps. 69:30f.). This is therefore the first note that must be sounded at convocation.

If gratitude is the first essential element on Convocation, then a second essential element that calls for acknowledgement at the end of a study year is forgiveness. "As far as the East is from the West, so far He has removed our transgressions from us." Today, we will not fail to offer our prayer and petition for forgiveness of the sins and shortcomings for which we have become responsible during the last months and years. Let me be practical: I think I am entitled to speak on behalf of my colleagues when I say that as teachers we especially need to ask students and staff for forgiveness for each unsuitable and inappropriate thing that we have done and word that we have spoken. "We all stumble in many things", is what James in the New Testament expresses particularly with a view to the teachers in the church.

Clearly, we must all ask God for forgiveness. We must also ask forgiveness of each other. With the same concreteness that we have allocated to gratitude, we should take the opportunity to when necessary ask forgiveness from each other and grant it to each other in a personal way. This is not only desirable in order for us to bring back pleasant memories from our time at Regent. Rather, only on the basis of forgiveness can one begin a new phase in life in freedom, i.e., without moral, spiritual, emotional blackmail, without guilt from the past which so easily determines the future.

In emphasizing thanksgiving and forgiveness, we have - not without an awareness of paradox - looked back to the past at a moment of "commencement" or beginning (of a new turn in life). But even as we now turn towards the future, I am not going to give you a rousing challenge to reach out and conquer it. Rather, I give you what looks like another paradox and unexpected counter-climax. Many of you have term-papers and examinations behind you and are now all set, raring to go and to put the theory into action. A convocation address normally emphasizes that bags are packed, shoes laced and everybody ready. "Let's get cracking!" Against the rule of the game, however, I will not serve tonight as the one who fires the starting pistol for your race, who inflames the excitement, or gives you last words of encouragement for the competition that lies before you. Rather I am calling you to put the brakes on, to pause, to postpone the start, and to "wait upon the Lord". I am asking you foremost and above all to "let us be listeners".

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Jesus highlights this point in the juxtaposition of the attitudes of two of his friends Martha and Mary: Martha exerts herself in providing for the needs of the large party whereas Mary sits at His feet and listens to Him. But it is Mary who gets His recommendation: "One thing is needed and Mary has chosen that good part which will not be taken away from her" (Luk. 10:42). Jesus calls us to give precedence to the stance of Mary.

I have come to think that among the "multitude of God's mercies" (Ps. 106:7) which I have received, my recent illness was to teach me this lesson. It is the call beyond Christian activism to the listening which takes place in prayer and in the meditation of Scripture. It is a call to act out of receiving.

Now, in the past, if someone had called me a workaholic, I would secretly have responded: "Of course, what else?" A workaholic in the Kingdom of God, that

was a title of honour! I saw my Christian and human dignity, my self-confidence, and reason of self-respect in being a "worker" in God's vineyard. But Jesus said: "No longer do I call you servants" (John 15:15). The sum-total of Christianity, love of Christ, following the Master, is not primarily a labour relationship. Also, Jesus does not, as a psychological trickster might try, call His disciples friends in order to make them identify even deeper with their work, as it sometimes happens as an inducement of ambition in the field of secular vocations. We need not fear: - love for Christ will in itself produce all necessary motivation and identification with His goals and His work. However, we are faced with a situation where it is not enough to secure the quantity of work, we must look to its spiritual quality. We are confronted with the question of goal and direction, not merely the energy and the push of what we do.

As we go away from Regent, our most important equipment is an intact prayer-relationship with God in Christ. To be eager is good, but it is not all there is, rather to be spiritually alive and attentive for His suggestions and the indications of His will: Not just to be eager, but to listen and to be inspired. That is the meaning of "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness" (Mt. 6:33). The primacy goes to listening.

Let us beware of the seductive glory of Christian workaholism, of the moments when we tell ourselves secretly, how wonderful it feels to be exhausted in the work of the Lord, of having at least "really pitched in", "given one's best", "put one's best foot forward". No, it is far better to do a few inconspicuous things but do them under God's instruction. Christian commitment is not primarily towards Christian activism - that would be a basic misreading of Christianity.

Listening to the voice of God comes first and must precede all action. This is already indicated in the early Old Testament parallel to the story of Mary of Bethany, when in his blessing of Israel Moses prays: "All ... saints are in your hands. They sit down at your feet. Everyone receives your word." (Deut. 33:3). Indeed, the call to listen is the first charge made by the prophet Isajah: "Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth" (Is. 1:7). Listening to God is the first step towards loving God and as such absolutely central for Israel (Deut. 6:4). "Hear, o Israel, the Lord your God is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might. And these words shall be in your heart and you shall teach them diligently to your children." In the same vein, in the New Covenant God calls us to listen, to listen to Jesus: "This is My beloved son; hear Him" (Mt. 9:7).

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After we have underlined the importance of listening to God, I would like to make you aware of the fact that there are at least three popular philosophies which silently or openly combat the Christian stance of listening. Looking at them may not only uncover them as the traps that they are, but also further help clarify the object that we are after.

The first of these three philosophical attitudes is Activism. It goes hand in hand with the technological bent of modern secular civilization. Its pragmatism and its utilitarianism emphasize what is useful and what is practical. The many books suggesting "How To" do and effect something are witness to this. This attitude has pervaded much of Western Christianity, too.

In the same context, I am today wondering about that new industrial standard of "Search of Excellence" of which I am very fond and with which I certainly have gone to market during these last years. Welcome as it must be, in itself it is a merely formal predicate and as such could go together with a deed that is evil in essence. Think of a perfectly executed robbery! Again, excellence in a limited field can also be delivered by a properly programmed machine. We can do and produce things brilliantly that are humanly and spiritually irrelevant. Therefore, "excellence" is an important secular and even Christian ideal; being a formal criterion, however, means that it must remain subservient and secondary.

But isn't there such a thing as Christian activism? What are we to make of the Biblical injunction, "not only to listen, but also to act", in which James echoes His Master's Sermon on the Mount? How can Paul exhort the church not to be idle? Why does John say, "Let us love not only with words but with deeds?" Why would Jesus emphasize, "The harvest truly is plentiful, but the labourers are few" and promise that labourers will receive their reward? Why are we asked to pray that God may send more labourers into His harvest?

How can the New Testament, how can Jesus himself hold these two attitudes together, the one that calls for workers and the other that gives precedence to Mary listening? The answer must be that the Bible incorporates "both - and". It does give primacy to listening, but not without the subsequent 100% commitment to Christian action. On the other hand, once we have grasped the need for true and practical dedication to God, our next move could destroy everything again, if we rushed in with some self-chosen mode of worship or service of God. Our first calling is to have fellowship with Christ, and then we are called to ministry. We must not lose the commissioner, saviour and friend over our commission.

Like dark neon lights when turned on, our work must be illumined from within by our contact and fellowship with Christ. Such illumination comes from listening. "What does My Lord say to His servant?" (Josh. 5:14), and "My soul silently waits for God. From Him comes my salvation." (Ps. 62:1f.). Especially as we begin a new stage in life, we need to become quiet before God and in the direction of God. Devotion must bring forth attentiveness. We must make ourselves receptive for His instruction. Only thus can we arrive at wisdom in action and make the spiritual investment in people and situations, of which humanity is so much in need.

The story is told of the young Franciscan monk in one of the port cities in Northern France in the days of rapid expansion of the Order. He was asked whether he, too, wished to cross over to Britain. His answer is a classic. He said: "I don't know whether I shall wish. For my superior has not yet told me." Fashioned by the teaching of Scripture, we are, in a similar way, to submit our plans and possibilities to the decisions of Christ, directing our wish and our will to Him. We are to listen to God and not to rush into things which have a momentary Christian appeal.

If the first trap is activism, then the second obstacle to Christian listening lies on the opposite side of the Good Road of faith. It is passivism, also sometimes called quietism. It interprets the story of Bethany as the condemnation of Christian action altogether. It takes the story out of context, claiming that sitting idly and listening is indeed what the Christian life is all about. Passivism is often quoted as a quasi-Reformational protest against the supposedly Roman Catholic doctrine of righteousness by works.

The theology of quietism likes the Bethany story, but rejects the other half of the sayings of Jesus. It conceals in effect the human propensity to sin, and ignores the Biblical task of the sanctification of the believer. Asking man to do nothing but to "repose in redemption", it fuels the already existing human "sloth-factor". Also, nicely fitting with the philosophy of today's individualism, it gives people the impression that salvation ends with me, with the individual, and makes them forget the perspectives of the Kingdom of God. In the person of Jesus, however, we see both the individual and the Kingdom of God taken care of, and see the attitudes of listening and of action go hand in hand, and not against each other.

A third trap for the Christian call to listening is personal autonomy and self-determination. This arises from the ideology of the Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries which still engulfs us today in the form of the quest for human independence and autonomy vis-à-vis the will of God. Man has "grown up" and now wants to take his rightful place in the world, himself determining his life and destiny. The Protestant Reformation had suggested that man should not, with "implicit faith", listen to the human traditions of the Roman church but, without intermediaries, himself listen to the Gospel; the Enlightenment demands that man should not listen to anybody but think everything (even the Gospel) for himself. Self-determination is a quest which sees listening and liberty of decision as incompatible.

As in the case of activism and quietism, much can be said in a positive appreciation of Enlightenment's search for human identity, dignity, freedom and the programme of a comprehensive development of the self. The question is how far it is possible.

For one thing, total human liberation and autonomy are not available to us. Man's manifold and fundamental interrelatedness with nature through body and soul will at times come to be felt as an irremovable alien domination. In addition, we are only just beginning to see today how much the liberated individual can be taken captive again by a return of collective forms of the same self on a larger scale, e.g. in nationalism, racism, class consciousness and warfare. These are among the mighty forces which the New Testament sums up under the name of "powers and principalities".

Yet personal freedom, a freedom going together with listening and devotion to God, are seen to be in agreement in the person of Jesus. Listening to God and obeying, Jesus was free of human determinations, individual or collective.

In the last analysis, Holy Scripture sees mankind not only as unfree because it is under the powers of sin, but also unable to listen, even if it wanted to. Man's ears often are closed or hardened, and his mind is distracted; we resemble the Egyptian Pharaoh unable to perceive the word of the Lord. This is why the Book of Proverbs emphasizes (Prov. 20:12): "The hearing ear and the seeing eye, the Lord has made both of them," and the New Testament affirms that God's gift is "both to will and to do" (Phil. 2:13). Here, as well as everywhere else, His "strength is made perfect in our weakness" (2 Cor. 12:9). The "art of listening" of which we speak is in reality the divine gift of listening, which comes through prayer.

If there is one faculty we need to have on the way for the next phase in life, it is not the sharp teeth and swift legs needed for the "rat race", but the

listening heart (1 Kgs. 3), for which King Solomon asked, when he was granted a wish from God. This was for him the most important item of equipment at the moment when he had to take over responsibility for the whole people of God. For us it should be similarly essential here and now, since we are all called to be responsible for a part of God's people here on earth.

Christianly speaking, a "listening heart" is vital for the fulfilment of the modern quest for freedom. This should prove especially true in the Western world with its manifold structures of freedom that call for it be filled by personal commitment. It is also the particular legacy which Christians can bring into today's society and its pervading spirit of enlightened human autonomy. The divine gift of a "listening heart" is needed for the sustainment of society as well as for the survival and creativity of personal faith. "He who has an ear, let him hear" (Mt. 11:15) is what Jesus tells His adversaries as well as what the Spirit says to the Churches (Rev. 2:7).

A Note in Conclusion. As Regent says good-bye to another class of graduates, the College does well to look forward and ask itself: What will those look like, who must be our successors?

More than once, the Psalmist takes the opportunity to muse over the future course of history for his people. He is aware that God can "turn rivers into a wilderness", and again, "turn ... dry land into watersprings" (Ps. 107:31.33), not only in the history of nature, but also in a spiritual history. Under these perspectives, what will be the fate of Regent College - wilderness or watersprings? How will future generations speak of us and of our successors?

Of all priorities in our teaching work, the first is that we educate so as to help instill the habit and quality of listening in human hearts. No doubt, those who succeed us must continue to build on the foundations that we, too, have not laid ourselves, but received from our forefathers in the faith. There must be continuation, - but it cannot be in the nature of imitation. A lifeless repeating or a distanced reporting of the piety of predecessors is not enough. Commitment must show its quality in the attitude of prayer and listening that is derived from each generation's direct relationship to Christ as the center. That is the beacon to which teachers must attune their students.

For their own and for their students' sake teachers need silence and frequent times of quiet and prayer, to find, receive, and know what their "statement of purpose", the statement of their life's purpose is to be. Then students must ask themselves the same question. The apostles gave full independence to their young churches. Each church, each generation had to have its own immediate relationship to Christ. Their common bond was the rule of faith (Rom. 12:7) or the "form of doctrine" (Rom. 6:17) to which they had been committed, the general Biblical framework and direction, which had been given to the universal church. It was a set of convictions to which they had been, and still were thoroughly exposed. This, in turn, was now the standard of their own respective preaching, teaching, and ordering of things.

Our successors then must, as the sociologists call it, become a "community of memory and hope", and - we would add - of obedience (Ps. 78:7). That must be their identity. At the same time, the Psalms describe as one of the fundamental characteristics of the Covenant, that its members proclaim the great deeds and the glory of God among the nations. As those who have listened, they make known what they have heard and experienced. In touch with Him "who is light and

there is no darkness in Him", they will themselves be like lighthouses in the moral and spiritual darkness and confusion of their generation.

From a practising Christian one may expect radiation of light and warmth, giving to others both orientation and an experience of shelter. Those who listen to God promote healing instead of creating new problems. They truly become spiritual resource people, i.e., constant sources of inspiration instead of a constant source of irritation for their surroundings. Remember, however, that this is not a matter of human endeavour and achievement. It comes from listening; it is the outcome of communion with Christ.

Convocation Day. We have been called together to ponder our past, and our perspectives for the future. Whatever we have done and what we have become during the past year, we commit into God's hands, the good with thanksgiving, the bad with a prayer for forgiveness. For the future, we pray that, above all, God should make us listeners to Himself, so that we may be neither idle nor self-sufficient nor rash in our deeds, but pause to listen, and then follow Him, moving in consonance with His will. As listeners, we will, - maybe as a paradox to some rationalistic minds - become God's "own special people, zealous for good works" (Tit. 2:14), "which God has prepared beforehand that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).