

UKRAINIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY
L'viv, Ukraine

Commencement Address
6 July 2013

George Weigel

Bishop Borys Gudziak; Father Mykhola Fredyna; Members of the Ukrainian Catholic University Senate; Vice-Rectors and Deans of the Ukrainian Catholic University; faculty and students of the Ukrainian Catholic University academic community; parents, grandparents, and other family members of the graduates; graduates of the Class of 2013 of the Ukrainian Catholic University:

Thank you for inviting me to share this happy day with you, and thank you for honoring my work with the gift of an honorary degree.

The Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church has had a special place in my heart for almost thirty years, since the late Professor Bohdan Bociurkiw and I spent a year together in Washington as fellows of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. There, Dr. Bociurkiw gave me a personal tutorial in Ukrainian history and extensive lessons in the dramatic, heroic story of the Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine. Later, Dr. Bociurkiw helped me draft the 1988 *Appeal for Religious Freedom in the Soviet Union*, which was signed by virtually every major Christian religious leader in America to honor the millennium of Christianity among the Eastern Slavs. The *Appeal* was presented to President Ronald Reagan in the White House and helped shaped his historic speech at the Danilov Monastery in Moscow – and thus I

hope the *Appeal* had some effect in helping liberate the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in the last days of the Soviet Union.

Later, in my work on the biography of Pope John Paul II, I came to what I hope is a deeper understanding of the history of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church in Ukraine and its importance for the future of the world Church – and I tried to bring that understanding to the world through the two volumes of my John Paul II biography, which you have been so kind as to translate into your language.

And so, if I may make the words of John Paul II in 2001 my own, “I greet a land which has known suffering and repression, while preserving a love of freedom which no one has ever managed to repress.” I come to you today as a friend, a fellow-Catholic, and an author who has borne witness to your modern history as a Church of confessor and martyrs, a history of fidelity and courage that I hold in the highest esteem.

It is from that history, I believe, that you will draw the strength and courage to build a free and virtuous society in the Ukraine of the future. Through their witness, the confessors and martyrs of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church planted in your country seeds of integrity, seeds of courage, and seeds of compassion that can, with your help, bring forth a rich harvest in shaping the free and virtuous Ukraine of the future. The example of these confessors and martyrs is history’s gift to you; building a society that lives freedom in truth is your task for the future.

You face great challenges in building that future: challenges posed by the long-term cultural effects of the communist deconstruction of the human person and by the communist destruction of culture and society; challenges posed by the temptations of a post-modern western culture that is rich in material prosperity but impoverished in the things of the spirit. In meeting those challenges, you have been given a precious instrument by this university – the gift of the truth: the truth we know by both revelation and reason; the truth that comes to us from both Jerusalem and Athens; the truth that sets us free in the deepest meaning of liberation.

You may, and if you will permit me, you should thank your teachers for this gift of the truth. In the western world, the arts of teaching have too often been degraded into a sub-set of the arts of entertainment – when they're not debased into a sub-set of the arts of career-advancement. As today's graduates have learned, perhaps not without some struggle, good teaching challenges us, even confronts us, as good teachers invite us to learn and embrace what is true and good and beautiful, so that the true, the good, and the beautiful shape the contours of our life's pilgrimage.

Thus on this day when we rightly applaud our graduates, let us take a moment to applaud good teachers.

Building the free and virtuous society in the Ukraine of the 21st century will require courage. For the legacy of the past that shapes the Ukraine of the present is not only the noble legacy of the confessors and martyrs. That legacy also includes a weakened grasp on the true, the good, and the beautiful, a weakness that expresses itself in social fragmentation, a weak civic culture, corruption in public life, and a lack of trust among people. Building the free and virtuous society in the Ukraine of the 21st century is thus not only a matter of building a robust free economy and a stable democracy; it requires rebuilding civil society and civic culture, a task for which this university is uniquely equipped and to which it has courageously and creatively dedicated itself.

How should you, the class of 2013, approach the challenge of building a free and virtuous Ukraine that history and God's providence have put before you?

How, in your role as citizens, will you make bring moral truths to bear on politics, in business, in the formation of culture?

How, in your role as parents, will you instill in the next generation an understanding of, and a deep appreciation for, the fact that there are deep truths built into the world and into us? That freedom is not mere willfulness? That life is not just the pursuit of pleasure? That nobility and compassion and justice are the true measure of a life well lived?

For those of you who choose the sacred ministry or consecrated religious life, how will you live the vows of your ordination or consecration in such a way that you are agents of the New Evangelization, inviting others into friendship with the Lord Jesus Christ and into the communion of disciples in mission that is the Church?

How will you live lives of fidelity to your vocation, in whatever vocation you embrace, in a world that often tells you that fidelity is a great nonsense?

As you learn, often through hard experience, how to play the challenging role that history has set before you – the role of being the lead generation in an evangelical Catholicism that is a culture-forming counterculture – keep in mind some of the essentials that the good teaching you have been given here have helped you to make your own. Keep in mind what brave men like the Czech dissidents Václav Havel and Václav Benda taught the world during the last years of the Cold War: that even amidst severe difficulties, it is possible to “live in the truth,” and that living in the truth is the greatest of human adventures. Keep in mind that Blessed John Paul II, when asked what he judged to be the most important word in the Holy Scriptures, immediately responded, “Truth.”

And keep in mind what the Catholic intellectual and cultural tradition in which you have been immersed here at the Ukrainian Catholic University has taught you about the truth: that truth is *accessible*; that truth is *symphonic*; and that truth is *liberating*.

Truth is accessible. There are many ironies in history, and one of the greatest ironies that we have witnessed in our time is that the Catholic Church, charged by many leaders of the 18th-century continental European Enlightenment with being an enemy of reason, has become the world's premier institutional defender of the capacity of human reason to grasp the truth of things. Two centuries after Voltaire urged his compatriots to "crush" the "infamy" that was the Church in order to liberate human reason, the Catholic Church stands before a world awash in skepticism and says, with John Paul II in the 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, "Yes, we can get to the truth through the arts of reason. Yes, we can know the deep truths that are embedded in the world and in us." A century after the proponents of what Father Henri de Lubac, S.J. called "atheistic humanism" declared that the God of the Bible was the enemy of human maturation and liberation, believers in the God of the Bible, inspired by the Bishop of Rome, unleashed a revolution of conscience that eventually brought down the greatest tyranny in history, the Soviet empire.

Post-modern western culture in the West teaches that there is only "your truth" and "my truth." Graduates of the Ukrainian Catholic University know that that is not true. And in giving your country a new birth of freedom ordered to goodness, you must insist, calmly and reasonably, that there is not simply "your truth" and "my truth:" that there is actually and in reality something properly called "the truth," which we can access, if imperfectly and incompletely, through reason: a reason that,

Catholics would insist, is amplified by revelation, even as our grasp on revelation is purified by reason.

This is not an abstract point, a matter of settling an intellectual debate. For if there is only *your* truth and *my* truth and neither one of us recognizes anything as *the* truth, then against what horizon of judgment, or by what standard, will we settle our differences when your truth comes into conflict with my truth? There isn't any such horizon or standard. So either you will impose your power on me, or I will impose my power on you. Nietzsche, mad prophet of postmodernity, saw this coming; Joseph Ratzinger prophetically labeled it the "dictatorship of relativism," the day before his election as Pope Benedict XVI; Pope Francis has described a world without a firm grasp on moral truth as a world-without-peace because "everyone is his own criterion."

The free and virtuous Ukraine of the future cannot be built on a foundation of skepticism and cynicism about truth. It will therefore be your role, graduates of the class of 2013, to form a civic culture around the conviction that truth is accessible.

Truth is symphonic. Fragmentation and disintegration are among the chief characteristics of European intellectual life today: everything is in bits and pieces; nothing fits together; there is no "frame" in which the parts can be composed into a whole. Little wonder that cynicism, skepticism, and irony are prominent features in 21st century western culture. In the face of all that, the Catholic intellectual tradition

insists that fragmentation is not all there is. The Catholic intellectual tradition tells us that there is a symphony of truth, in which the various instruments by which we apprehend what is true and good and beautiful play together melodiously.

And that which forms the fragments of intellectual stone into a mosaic of symphonic truth is love: the love which is the basis of the unity of the Church; the ecclesial love, itself an expression of Trinitarian love, in which the world may recognize the unity for which it yearns, but which it never finds on its own.

Truth is liberating. There are many sorrows in what the great Marian hymn, the *Salve, Regina*, calls *hac lacimarum valle* [this valley of tears]; the people of Ukraine have surely borne, over time, more than their share of sorrow. But perhaps the characteristic sorrow of 21st-century life in Europe – a sorrow that strikes the well-taught Catholic as a true sadness, a self-inflicted wound – is the sorrow that comes from self-absorption: the sorrow we find in the childish sandbox in which the object of worship is the Imperial Self, the god called “Me, Myself, and I.” The well-taught Catholic invites others, both those within the household of the faith and those outside it, to reject self-absorption and narcissism and to breathe the bracing, invigorating, liberating air of a life lived in conformity with those truths that are built into reality and into us.

For all genuine human liberation is freedom *in*, and freedom *for*, the truth of who we are and the truth of what our eternal destiny is. All genuine human

liberation flows from making our lives into the gift for others that life itself is to each of us. If you, the graduates of the Ukrainian Catholic University, can embody that Law of the Gift in your own lives, even a cynical world will wonder, “How can you live that way?” Then you can explain: “I live that way through the grace of God in Christ.” And in that way, through the example of lives lived honorably, nobly, and compassionately, you can help liberate your country from the chains of the past, build a future of freedom ordered to goodness, and become agents of the New Evangelization.

We believe, as Catholics, that God has a unique vocation in mind for each of us. And so each graduate of this university must, with the help of the truths you have made our own here, face the challenge of vocational discernment – of discerning, through the help of grace, that unique *something* that God has had in mind for you from all eternity. You are not alone in meeting that challenge. For you can undertake that discernment through the prism of the truth, the goodness, and the beauty you have encountered here at the Ukrainian Catholic University. And you can do so in the calm confidence that the drama of each of our individual lives is “playing” within the cosmic drama that has the God of Israel and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ as its producer, director, scriptwriter, and protagonist.

And there is still more to encourage you on your way, to help you in your vocational discernment, and to strengthen you in your task as citizens called to build the free and virtuous Ukraine of the future. For by grace, through faith, we have seen

the ultimate truth of what God intends for humanity: we have seen that truth and that future in the Resurrection we celebrate at Easter. Because of that – and however challenging the times in which we live and the circumstances in which we find ourselves – we know that, in the end, the human story is a not a cosmic tragedy, but a divine comedy. And we know that between now and the drama’s climax, we are called to live in the pentecostal joy that comes from the fire of divine love.

That is the faith, the hope, and the love that inspired Andrey Sheptytsky and Josyf Slipyj and that gave them the courage to persevere – the courage and perseverance that are the foundation on which this university, of which both these great men dreamed, has been built. Their lives, lived in the truth, proved that, over time, the truth can change what seems unchangeable, and that love, stronger than fear, can bend the curve of history toward freedom and justice.

May their noble and holy examples inspire you, the graduates of the Ukrainian Catholic University, to accept the challenge of 21st-century history, and to use the truths you have made your own here into the tools by which to build a civic culture of freedom ordered to goodness in Ukraine.

God bless you and keep you on your journey.