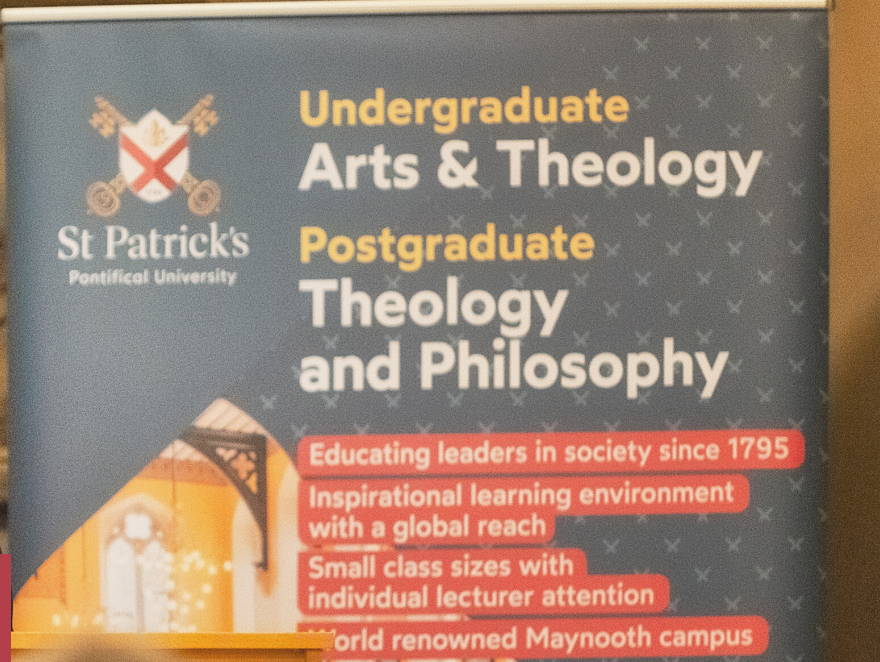




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Keynote speech delivered at our 2021 Student Awards Evening:

Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

It is indeed a great pleasure to be with you this evening and I am indebted to Dr Rogers and the University for the invitation to partake in this celebration and to share these few words.

It's always a pleasure to return to St Patrick's Pontifical University, to the college I affectionately consider my alma mater. Some very happy memories of my student days here have been returning to me as I strolled around the grounds this evening.

On this happy occasion, friends, when your hard work and dedication to scholarship is being celebrated, my first word to you, quite naturally, is a word of congratulations. Well done on your efforts and on your academic success, and I hope you are feeling a real sense of pride in your achievements.

Before I go any further, permit to share with you, simply by way of providing the context out of which I speak this evening, that my day job is as a member of the senior management team of the Bon Secours Hospital in Glasnevin, where I serve as the hospital's Head of Mission. Our hospital is one of six facilities around Ireland in the Bon Secours Group. We are, currently, the largest provider of private healthcare in Ireland; we are a not-for-profit organisation (meaning that our primary purpose is not to make money to pay shareholders). We espouse a Catholic ethical framework that guides both the medical, surgical and diagnostic services we offer, and the clinical research conducted in our facilities.

My role, as a senior leader in our hospital, is to support the governance of the hospital and its activities and, in particular, to bring the perspective of the faith tradition that we espouse to the senior decision-making table on matters as diverse as budgets, staffing, commercial development and clinical practice. Never in my wildest dreams, when I was sitting in Top Loftus enduring....sorry, I meant enjoying a Biblical Greek class, or in Middle Loftus considering the moral dilemma of the runaway train, and how many lives I could save by acting one way as opposed to another, did I think that I would end up utilising the perspectives that my theological training gave me in a context such as healthcare management. It simply never dawned on me back then that, as a distinct discipline, theology could be of value, and hold its own in the commercial cut and thrust of private healthcare. I imagined that ethics might be the extent of the theological in-reach. Yet, in truth, without the study of theology, I simply would not be where I am today. And, in the same vein of truth, without the study of theology I can honestly say that I simply would not be who I am today. The longer lasting legacy is obviously with the later truth, more so than with the former one. Theology has influenced not only who I am, but also the work I do. My identity and my role.

The distinction between one's identity and one's role is a thought that has been a constant presence all through my professional life, ever since it was first raised in the seemingly asinine context of the lecture hall

I could not have known then that it would return and return in so very many guises: in the boardroom, in the training seminar, at staff meetings, during individual interactions. A common mistake, made by so many when considering identity and role, is to confuse or conflate the two: as if somehow one's identity and one's role are interchangeable, equal in some way in their intrinsic value. With the benefit of Christian anthropology, as well as the biblical and Traditional presentation of what it means to be a person, we rightly insist on a distinction between the two. A person is a lot more than what they do, the job they have or, dare I say it on an occasion such as this, the qualifications that they are privileged enough to amass.

Increasingly, in my professional experience, I have a sense that some people, and indeed some institutions, need the reassuring reminder that there is a distinction between their identity and their role. In the case of our fellow human beings ever before they have something, they are someone. This needs constant advertising. Working in healthcare over recent years has been greatly challenging, and at the same time hugely rewarding. In addition to my role as a healthcare leader, I am also an accredited healthcare chaplain having worked as a chaplain in six hospitals and hospices in Galway, Cork and Dublin and in my current role, I am also the Director of Pastoral Care for our hospital. So, I have the benefit of regular close contact with patients and their families, as well as with my multidisciplinary colleagues whose privilege it is to care for them.

In my engagement with patients over recent times, one thing I have observed is that the Covid pandemic has given rise to questions about life, health and relationships at a rate scarcely ever seen before. People, not usually given to reflecting on these matters, have suddenly found themselves grappling with the type of profound existential question that would not be out of place in a lecture hall or in a tutorial setting. Behind all the questioning, there is detectable, however, an unmistakable search for meaning, for hope, for purpose, for connection and for belonging. In a word, a quest: for spiritual connection.

In his play *Philadelphia, Here I Come*, Brian Friel introduces the audience to Gar – a young man on the eve of emigrating to Philadelphia in the hope of making a better life for himself. The action of the play unfolds primarily in the family home, where Gar's father, unaccustomed to displays of emotion and a slave to routine, prefers to honour his weekly standing arrangement for a card game with the local parish priest, rather than engage with the emotional complexity of the impending departure of his son. Friel helps the audience to appreciate what's going on for Gar, by using a theatrical device: he freezes the action on the stage so that the audience can hear Gar's private thoughts via a voice off-stage. So, Gar's character is split in two: Gar Public onstage, and Gar Private offstage. At a crucial moment in the play, tinged with heart wrenching sadness, Gar is desperately yearning for some sign of recognition and affection from his father whose inability to connect emotionally leaves Gar consumed by pain. In his struggle to make sense of the conflicting emotions and feelings rising in his heart, Gar looks across at the parish priest playing cards with his father at the kitchen table. The action onstage freezes once more, and the audience gains access to what's going on in Gar's heart and mind. Addressing the priest, Gar says:

"You could translate all this loneliness, this groping, this dreadful bloody buffoonery into Christian terms that will make life bearable for us all. And yet you don't say a word. Why, Canon? Why, arid Canon? Isn't it your job? — to translate?"

At various moments in life, we will need help to translate what's going on for us so, that we can better understand. This is just as true of organisations such as hospitals, as it is for individuals. An urgent challenge for theologians, it seems to me, in a world that has grown uncomfortable with using explicitly Christian terms, is to offer fresh perspective by finding a way of translating into the vernacular what's going on in the world around us, without losing any of the essential theological truth. This is where I feel that you, theologians and scholars of today and tomorrow, can make a real impact. Keep to the fore of your research and learning, the need to connect and communicate with people in such a way that your theology facilitates the translation of life's joys and sorrows, its ups and downs into terms that are understandable, not merely in the head, but also in with the heart. It is often only with the aid of understanding, that acceptance becomes possible. How often I see that play out in hospital rooms as the journey of sickness unfolds. I might even venture so far as to suggest that, precisely because of your theological studies, an imperative to do this task, falls upon you. We cannot, like the Canon in Friel's play, remain silent when sincere questions are posed. So, dare to imagine yourselves not only as theologians but also as translators!

There is an acute loneliness to be found sometimes in the struggle to articulate even the question, let alone find an answer. When a patient in hospital has a sense that their world is changing because sickness has entered in; that they can no longer rely on their mind or body as once they did in the past; that they are beginning to feel a stranger even to themselves, it is then that profound questions of life and its meaning can and do arise. Writing albeit in a different context, Oscar Wilde summed up that question-caused confusion in his poem *Helas*: "Surely there was a time I might have trod the sunlit heights, and from life's dissonance struck one clear chord to reach the ears of God". Questions can be dangerous: they can bring as much confusion as clarity. Almost universally, however, human questions circle back on the distinction between identity and role. When my role in life is altered because of sickness or circumstance, who am I as a person? What is happening to me, and why is it happening at this particular moment in my life? Maynooth students of the H.Dip and Masters in Pastoral Theology programmes who are undertaking their clinical placement in our hospital, hear me talk a lot about this.

Friends, yours is, and will continue to be, the wonderful task of locating a common space where intersecting worlds representing diverse perspectives can rest in the shared desire to articulate answers to these questions. Therefore, do not be afraid to let your theological studies dialogue with other disciplines and sciences. Theology may claim the title *Regina Scientiarum* – Queen of Science – but she is not the only science. In my own case, I found the study of human rights law and public policy afforded me a new way of translating theological truth into terms that others could more easily access and appreciate. By borrowing from the imagery and language of human rights, I found ways of bringing my theological perspective into discussions. At management team meetings in our hospital would I say that I theologise? No, certainly not! But, by being myself, I undoubtedly bring my theological perspective to the table and let it mingle freely with the commercial, the financial, the clinical and the nursing perspectives. It enriches the discussion. By augmenting your theology with other disciplines, either formally or informally, you better equip yourself for the art of translation. And translation is an art, not a science, drawing on the artistry of imagination, the virtue of compassion and the risk of vulnerability. At its heart, the work of translation, just like the study of theology, is a service of love.

And there is a very real and profound reason for why this work of translation is so necessary today. I've alluded to it previously: buffeted by life's challenges, the greatest aid to navigating a life-giving course, is surety about who you are. If you are sure of who you are, at your inner most level, this becomes an anchor against the ebb and flow of life.

In Christian terms, our identity is, of course, that of a loved and desired child of God. Irrespective of what we do or achieve in life, our destiny is marked out for us and our dignity assured. A deep-seated human need is to sense, know and feel that I am loved. At the root of so much searching in life is that deceptively simple question: can I be sure that I am loved? At the same time, learning how to love appropriately is, likewise, a lifelong endeavour. New situations both global and personal, demand that we continually reflect on how best to express love. The global pandemic showed us the myriad forms, previously unimagined, that love can take – staying indoors, wearing a face covering, reducing contacts.

What a fantastic time to be studying theology, growing in fluency and articulation and engaging with these and other important considerations! I know that you will be aware that your studies are not simply for your own academic advancement, but will become the basis, if you chose, of how you live your life. Your theology studies have the potential to shape both who you are and what you do, just as it did with me. With your own distinctive creativity and imagination, perhaps using digital platforms and other means of communication, you will develop ways of offering theological truths about our fundamental human identity and the fact of our God-loved nature to those who are not possessed of a faith perspective or who find faith language difficult. And the wonderful thing is: your theology has the potential to influence worlds as diverse as the worlds of business and finance, of education and environmental care, of farming and marketing, of healthcare and retail; the only limit being that of your imagination. So, the world needs to hear from theologically articulate and socially aware people. You – in other words!

It was way back in 1948 that the American singer Nat King Cole released a single called Nature Boy. The song has been covered many times by various artists since its initial release, including earlier this year by the unlikely but delightful duo of Lady Gaga and Tony Bennett. There's a wonderful line in the song, that I think is very apt for this evening and with which I will conclude: "The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return". If I were asked to put into a soundbite, how my theological studies here in Maynooth and at the Gregorian University in Rome have shaped me, in terms of my identity, my role and how I try to translate theological truths at work, I could think of no greater summary than those words from that song. "The greatest thing you'll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return". The value of a theological training has helped me to learn how to love and to know that I am loved in return. May it do to the same for you. Thank you.