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Mark Thamert OSB

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, mthamert@csbsju.edu

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“Wean Yourself”

Saint John’s University Convocation Address

August 27, 2008

People of Saint John’s and friends from Saint Ben’s, I’m going to talk to you today about weaning yourselves.

So I had my hand in this calf’s mouth. ... And it was wet, and warm and slimy. The rough tongue was rubbing the back of my hand. My dad had given me the job to wean this little calf. I was 9 years old and scared. This was the first time I had ever weaned anything.

So I had my hand in the calf’s mouth and the job was to pull the calf as much as possible into the pail of milk with the fingers. And it didn’t want to go there. It wanted its mother. But I had to keep doing it. Sometimes I was almost up to my elbow into the calf’s mouth trying. And it would buck furiously because it was frustrated and it wasn’t getting milk out of my fingers. What’s this all about?

A couple days earlier the calf got its milk directly from its mother; fresh, pure, warm milk from its mother’s body and it couldn’t get enough of it. Sometimes it would be impatient and buck hard against its mother as if it would get more that way. There was nothing in the world more important at that moment. Finally the little calf was satisfied, mouth dripping with froth and breathing heavy because it had held its breath so long so that it could drink more.

Once in a while, when I was trying to wean the calf, I would lean over and say to it, “Someday you will run free in the pastures and enjoy the fresh air and sunshine of the open spaces.” If the calf had understood me, he probably would have said, “You’re crazy. All that I have and all that I need is right here with my mom. I don’t need that other stuff.” What I didn’t know as a 9-year-old was that this would be a guiding metaphor for my entire life — the process of weaning yourself.

Ultimately, that’s what the liberal arts mean: liberating, freeing arts — freeing yourself from one amazing, good life into the next one that is somehow more adequate, more workable in the world. I came here my freshman year knowing that I was going to be an architect. Absolutely sure. By the time I graduated, I had done all my pre-med courses, had spent time in Germany, had become a German major of all things, which I love. And then ultimately, because of one thing or another, I went to Europe right

after college for a year to teach a group of Prep School students, came back and joined the monastery, thinking I would last about two months, but at least I would know what adult, male spirituality is all about.

Each of these phases of my life, I suddenly understood that I had to free myself from one concept of myself to enter another one that meant more, that was closer to my passion, that was closer to what I could do in the world. By the way, this is also one of our Benedictine vows and probably the most important one. The vow is called *conversatio morum* — or the conversion of your way of life — turning from the life you're living toward the one that is more imbued with God's will for you, a constant turning more toward God, toward the spiritual.

This past month, I had one of those Saint John's experiences that changed my sense of who I am in the world. From mid-July to mid August I accompanied a group of Saint John's students with Gar and Kolleen Kellom to India and Nepal, the high Himalayas, for a four-week experience. Trekking in the highest Himalayas is spectacular. You gotta do it. You get a sense of your life from way up there, looking down upon the world as we did.

But what I'd really forgotten about — what the deeper experience was for me — was the poverty that I saw in the first moment of landing in the city of Delhi. We flew over Moscow and came into Delhi that way. The poverty was intense and inescapable. I'd been to Cairo and to Mexico City before — the poorest parts of those cities. I'd visited orphanages and I'd seen the dirt and the garbage. But I'd never been there for four weeks. It has a way of changing you. The water can't be drunk. Mud everywhere. The sacred cows are there but they leave their droppings in the street. And human beings do too. I'd forgotten about all this. We live in an isolation in the Midwest that is stunning, and we forget how millions of people in the world live.

One of our students who just graduated this past May made a transition. He bought a one-way ticket and he said, "I know I'm going to find something that's going to answer a need in the world." And sure enough, in the city of Jaipur, just south of Delhi, John Van Roy found his place in India. We visited a school that is pretty well off, but in the evenings and on weekends, they serve about 300 of the very poorest girls within a ten-mile radius. We saw those girls. They were dirty and hungry, but they loved being there. John Van Roy is going to make an enormous impact.

How about you? This is your chance. At Saint John's, do some volunteer work of a short-term nature even in your freshman year, or for you graduate students, in this first year. How about thinking of yourself, weaning yourself off of the idea that from college you have to immediately get into that job that pays forty thousand, fifty thousand a year so that you can start saving and get on with your adult life? How about weaning yourself off that world into something different, more humane, more needed

right now in the world? How about volunteering for a year or two? For example, in our Benedictine monastery in inner-city Newark that serves very poor families and gives people a chance in life that they didn't have before. A couple of our Faculty Residents this year have just returned from that volunteer experience. Or how about going to Tanzania, to a monastery that runs a school but that is also poor. They have electricity only a few hours each day and that's only in the rainy season when the hydropower can work. Think of yourself, dream yourself into that situation. Wean yourself off of comfort, beyond the comfort zone, into something that's more important for the world.

We have no idea what poverty is like. But we can learn and we can do something about it. A grad of our place just returned from Mother Teresa's compound in Calcutta where there are thousands of children who need our help. Your presence for a year or two after college will make a difference, and you will be changed.

"Unless a grain of wheat dies, it shall not bear fruit. But if it does die, it will bring forth an abundance of fruit." This is the first line of Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* and from the Gospel of John. You gotta die. You gotta die. The calf had to die to the prospect of drinking its own mother's milk. During our lives, we practice this dying. Practice it this year.

Like the phoenix bird, the most beautiful bird that ever existed — it comes from Arabic/Syrian mythology and entered Western thought through Herodotus and Hesiod — the phoenix bird, the gorgeous morning bird in its song to Apollo stunned the god. And what this bird does, and it's different from the calf, is, as it nears what it thinks of as the end of its life, it begins to build its own funeral pyre — of spices and myrrh. It builds its own death. It climbs on the pyre, lights it and burns. It's consumed by the flames. And then, miraculously, from those smoldering ashes arises a new phoenix bird. Brand new and ready for life.

The point here is we can be weaned, like the calf, by other people. But we can also do it for ourselves when we get good at it, when we sense the end of something. For example, what you think you're going to major in. You might find a passion, a purpose that is much more important. We can do it for ourselves. We can emerge with a new life.

I'd like to close with a short episode when I just had become a priest. I was working in the Mayo Clinic, St. Mary's Hospital in Rochester as a practicing chaplain. I knocked on the door of an older man named Adolph. It was dark in his room. He said, "Mark, is that you?" And I said, "Yes." "Come over here." So I went to his bed in the corner. He asked me to sit down on the bed and he took my hand and he said, "Mark, all my life I've been praying that the Blessed Virgin Mary would be with me when I die." He paused for a moment and a light came to his face. He said, "And here she is now. She's putting her arms around me." And he laid back, and he died.

Adolph practiced dying all during his life. That's my message: practice this. Practice moving from your great life now to one that's better. Graduate students, as you move into the academic life again, practice this dying and recreating a new image of yourselves. We faculty do it too. The new faculty are just beginning the process. Monks do it each day. All of us are involved. Practice this dying. It will give you new life.

Mark Thamert, OSB, is an Associate Professor of German. He delivered the convocation address as the 2008 winner of the Robert L. Spaeth Teacher of Distinction Award at Saint John's University.