

SJU Convocation Address, 30 August 2021

*Sister Mary Grell and Robert L. Spaeth Teacher of Distinction Award
Recipient*

Dr. Ana Conboy, Associate Professor of Languages and Cultures

President Mullen, Abbot John Klassen and Monastic Community of Saint John's Abbey,
Father Dale Lauderville, Dean Bacon, Esteemed Faculty and Staff, Students of the School
of Theology, Students of the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University, Class
of 2025,

WELCOME TO THE 2021-2022 ACADEMIC YEAR. Be ready to be surprised, be open to
being in awe, be willing to be transformed by your surroundings. Strive to be always, in
the present moment. YOU. ARE. HERE. NOW.

As you embark on your four-year adventure here at CSB/SJU, there will be a lot
of change, a lot of newness. How do *you* react to change? No matter how tough things
get, how stressed you might feel, how cold and windy it will be in January, February (...
in April... in May...), strive to live in the present moment with your total
consciousness—Mind, spirit and physical senses. YOU. ARE. HERE. NOW.

All we know about the future is that it will be different from the present. The one
thing in life that is lasting, reliably permanent and durable is change. Life *is* change.

Sometimes change happens quickly and unexpectedly, as we recently saw in Haiti
and in Afghanistan, and as we've experienced this past year and a half with Covid-19.

Sometimes change is a long-term process we can see coming and prepare for. For instance, based on UN projections, around the time you graduate, in 2025, there will be more people in Africa than in China. By the year 2050, when you are at the height of your careers, one-quarter of the world market will reside in Africa. And many of the people in that market will speak French or Portuguese. *Hint hint, nudge nudge, Perhaps it's time to enroll in that French class...*

Regardless, change is happening. Each one of you recently left home, perhaps with great eagerness to come to Saint John's, perhaps with mixed emotions about what was to come. One particular Johnnie, let's call him... Johnnie... learned an important lesson about patience, change and the challenges of college life just before leaving home¹.

It was early in the morning, the car was packed to the brim, and Johnnie was ready: "Let's go dad..." he urged. His dad signaled him to follow into the kitchen, without saying a word. He told Johnnie to sit down and gave no explanation. He went to the cupboard and took out three pots. He filled the pots with water and put them on the stove to boil.

"*What* are you doing, dad? What is this about? We've got to get going... it's no time to be cooking." But there was no reply.

¹ This story was adapted from Fr Aidan O'Kane's homily, 9 August 2020 and from "Potato, Coffee and Eggs" (<https://mrsmindfulness.com/potato-coffee-eggs/>).

The father went into the pantry and brought out a potato, an egg and ground coffee. With a large spoon, he put the potato in one pot, the egg in another and the coffee in the third one.

Impatient, Johnnie stood up and raised his voice, "Seriously, dad... WHAT are you doing? What is this about?" With a fierce look, his dad signaled Johnnie to sit back down. They sat and watched the pots... and still the father kept silent.

Twenty minutes went by. The father took the pots off the stove, placed the potato on a plate, the egg in a bowl and poured the coffee into a mug. Finally, he spoke, 'What do you see, Johnnie?' Even more frustrated than before, Johnnie scoffed, "A potato, an egg and coffee. Happy? Can we go now?"

"Look closer and touch the potato," his father urged. Johnnie poked at the potato...it was warm, soft and grainy; "Now, peel the egg." Johnnie reluctantly removed its shell and touched it... it was hard to the touch and white on the outside; "Now, smell and taste the coffee." Johnnie obeyed and the smell brought a smile to his face. He sipped it slowly... it was rich and strong. "Ok? I don't get it," he said.

The father replied, "The potato, the egg and the coffee all faced the same obstacle: they were all put into boiling water. However, each reacted differently. The potato went in hard and unrelenting, but the hot water made it weak and soft. The egg was fragile, but the hot water made it hard. The ground coffee was different—it was not changed by the water. Instead, it *transformed* it and created something new."

"In life, when you meet change in your environment, it can make you weak, it can harden your heart, or... you can turn the challenge into an opportunity to make something new.

"So, Johnnie," the father concluded, "Which one are you? Which one do you want to be?"

College can be a boiling pot. Let it transform you. Be coffee. Let go of any preconceived notions you might have, of judgements, of expectations about what your college experience *should* be... Rather, just let it *be*.

There is an expression in Portuguese that I particularly like: "Dar tempo ao tempo," or "Give time to time." It takes *time* for water to boil, it takes *time* for a potato to soften, for an egg to harden and for ground coffee to be infused. It takes time for transformation—let it sit, let it simmer. Give time to time, reflect on your experiences, and act on those experiences.

As you set off on your journey today, begin a new "ERA," and remember these three words: **1. Experience. 2. Reflect. 3. Act.**

Experience. Use your senses to take in your surroundings—be adaptable, open, infused. There is so much to learn, so many disciplines are available to you—you can't do everything, so focus on what you can do, and do it well. Don't feel the need to have every waking hour of your time occupied. Leave your phone in your drawer once in a while and see where that takes you. Be attentive to what brings you joy—what *truly* brings you joy. And by joy, I don't mean "happy," I mean what moves you, what

inspires and captivates you, what sticks with you. Try something new—our only real shortcoming is the failure to try. A challenge is like a wave: resist and you will be knocked over; but dive in and you'll swim out from under it. During the next four years, dare to challenge yourself. Wake up each morning ready to experience, committed to learning at least one new thing *and* one new thing about yourself. Experience.

Then, **reflect** on your experience. Encounter experiences with a child-like curiosity and sense of awe, be open to the unexpected. Be open to not knowing. Be willing to go down a different path from that which you may have expected to take. What are the desires of your heart? This question goes beyond a simple need, a simple want. It asks you to contemplate as you behold each moment. What is the larger purpose of your life? What gives your daily life meaning? Value questions as much as answers and welcome the restlessness that comes with them. Embrace silence and an unconditioned attentiveness to your surroundings. Do not fear being *with* yourself. Slow down, cultivate your interior life, listen with the ear of your heart and discern intentionally, discern seriously, discern responsibly. This is how you **reflect** on your experience.

Finally, **act** on your reflection. Let your action be informed by your reflection: Reflection is empty if uninformed. What are you good at? What do others say you're good at? Work with those around you, and don't hesitate to reach out to them when needed. Celebrate your strengths and ask yourself what your communities, near and far, need you to do for *them*. We are still living through a pan-demic. It has affected each one of us, *everyone* in the world. It is not a natural disaster, a war contained in a geographic region *far away from you*. We are truly all in this together. And we've

witnessed how simple actions, like the wearing of a mask, or getting a vaccine, can have an immense impact on those immediately around us, *as well as those distant*. In our small bubble at CSBSJU, our local communities of Colledgeville, Saint Joseph, Saint Cloud, a small action can transform those around you. And in transforming those around you, it can transform *you*. Action can be something as simple as a kind “hello” or “good morning,” a genuine smile that can make a stranger’s day and help *you* along the way. Working for the common good is also working for your own good. Your “hello” can be transformative. **Act.**

Experience. Reflect. Act. In the classroom and out of the classroom. During college and in life after college. In his *Pedagogy of Indignation*, Paulo Freire asserted that students “learn that through learning they can make and remake themselves, because [they] are able to take responsibility for themselves as beings capable of knowing—of knowing that they know and knowing that they don't” (2016, p. 15). In the next four years, you will develop knowledge in your area of study and critical thinking skills... You will gain insight, through multiple and global perspectives, into how society and how the world function. During your college journey, you will inevitably deepen your understanding. I challenge you to go farther: deepen your understanding, all the while strengthening your connections and your communities. As liberal arts institutions, we value the *cura personalis*, that is, the caring for, and teaching to the whole person. Life is about learning and converting all of our experiences into something positive, into action, through reflection. You choose how you respond to life’s experiences and changes: **Act in**

accord with your reflections and discernment. Discern according to your experiences.
Experience with your senses, with attentiveness and an openness to the unexpected.

To the class of 2025, I wish you four extraordinary years of experience, reflection and action. May you know how to create and make them good years. We will be here for you every step of the way. May you strive, may you thrive and may you give time to time. May you be transformed into a better version of self, one that has a purpose and finds meaning in life through service to others, near or far. Life *is* change: how you choose to react to it will determine its course. So, Johnnie... Will you be potato, egg... or coffee? It is in *your* hands—all you have to do is experience, reflect and act and transformation will follow.

May *you* be coffee.

Thank you.

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