The Lord be with you

Dear Christian friends and colleagues: graduands, students, families, and visitors, and also those who were once graduands themselves: Archbishop Denis Hart; Dr Graeme Blackman; Professor Peter Sherlock; Rev Dr Andrew Menzies; Rev Provessor Michael Kelly; members of the University Council; members of the Academic Board; Heads of Churches and religious orders; Heads of Colleges; members of staff; and all other distinguished persons here this evening.

Firstly, I congratulate all those on whom the University has conferred awards this evening. It requires dedication and hard work to achieve such a result, especially in preparation for a vocation that society does not reward in the usual way. The time, effort, and financial cost of a degree in theology are comparable to those of many other academic awards, but the career path that follows is quite different. The Christian minister, pastoral worker, counsellor, theologian or teacher finds her or his rewards in quite a different set of values to those that enliven the business and commercial worlds. Alan Kohler will not be reporting the rise and fall of your market on the evening news.

From the University’s point of view, balancing the academic requirements and corresponding fee structure against the needs of the churches it serves is quite a sensitive matter. For the student, however, it is usually more than delicate. It is a struggle, one that you can only sustain for just so long. Therefore, I congratulate you on what you have achieved. I pray, it has been good for your soul and for your intellect, but I know it may not have been so good for your spouse, partner, children, family, mortgage, and level of debt.

Let’s not be fooled, however. The ultimate reward of your study, and the benefits you will experience, still outstrip those offered by most other
careers. While over the last 100 years some people have sought to discredit the study of divinity, or theology, the high medieval age called it the queen of the sciences. Whatever that meant in its day, the benefits of theology remain, to both student and society. The vocations you will live out as graduates of the University of Divinity will provide people with priceless ‘products and services’ that they can obtain nowhere else, and certainly not through government or commercial means. You will travel with people into the depths, and you will soar with them into the heights. You will treasure the mundane, and as though through a veil you will catch glimpses of heaven. Yours is a privileged life. You will receive rare access to the dramas, intricacies and intimacies of human existence. You will witness the divine-human exchange at close quarters, made most explicit in the person of Jesus Christ. You will explore our common humanity through encounter with this human yet divine person, our resurrected Saviour, the heart and soul of Christian theology, the one who binds us together.

In congratulating you I also congratulate – or commiserate with – your spouses, partners, parents, children, and whoever has had to put up with everything that your study has meant. This includes your absences of mind as well as of body, your loss of earning capacity, your abstractions as you tackled the higher world of thought and your excesses as you explored practical expressions of your new learning. I hope that your loved ones did not too often become your guinea pigs as you tested new theories and discoveries about theology, love, life, God, salvation, and human works.

So God now be with you in whatever life awaits you tomorrow as you get on with your affairs as a formal graduate of the University of Divinity.

Secondly, I congratulate this University for its resolve to re-imagine itself in the 21st century. It offers Australia its first single discipline university, and that in the field of divinity. This extraordinary achievement defies commonly accepted truths about the state of believe in secular Australia and our social, moral, and educational values. Bringing this into reality
over such a short period is, I believe, a great rarity, if not unique. Rather than accept the general malaise that the study of theology is in decline and the commercially utilitarian ways of the world must prevail, this University seized opportunities as they arose and forged ahead with confidence.

The true gift of the University is, perhaps, its ecumenical and collegial nature. It operates quite differently to the commonly accepted construct of a university in Australia, and it was quite a challenge to communicate this to the registering authorities. The University of Divinity represents a sustained practical response to the scandal of Christian division as it became apparent during the missionary movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The Melbourne College of Divinity, founded by happenstance in 1910, has now intentionally moved to be truly national and ecumenical. It deliberately emphasises its collegial nature, while honouring the theological streams and faith traditions that make us who we are. This is a model of practical ecumenism for Australian churches, including my own. I hope we all take note.

Individual churches and Christians do not stand or fall alone. We serve together. Since God first nominated the people of Israel, since Jesus first called people to come and follow him, and since the crowds first gathered in Jerusalem at Pentecost, faith has been a family pursuit. Notwithstanding the millennia old schisms and separations between East and West, and within the West over 500 years since the Reformation, Christianity remains a family affair. Mutual accountability and collective responsibility are the names of the game. The isolationism of Cain – ‘am I my brother’s keeper?’i – is replaced with the new discourse of the body of Christ, each of us being valued as part of the wholeii.

The vision of this University reads, “Together we empower our learning community to address the issues of the contemporary world through critical engagement with Christian theological traditions.”iii As we go our separate ways after tonight’s ceremony, as we pursue our individual
vocations within whatever church calls us, I hope we do not forget the word that informs this vision: together. May it enervate and inspire us until God ultimately gathers us together as one in the kingdom.

That brings me to my third and final point, of thanks to God. God is the originator and sustainer of our studies, and life itself. We do not yet know the full depth and riches of what it is we study. The thirteenth chapter of St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians concludes: “For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.”

In these words the Apostle Paul, a primary teacher of the Christian church, reminds us that tonight’s graduation ceremony is only part way to our destination. We believe, we explore, we surmise, we hint, and we guess. We trial and test what we think we know. We get up the next day and do it again, and again, and again. It’s a journey, and tonight is a milestone but not an end. If the study of theology teaches us anything, it is that we are part of a greater journey, a larger whole. We long for that wholeness to be revealed, to see it finally for what it is.

Everything we know about life, faith, and theology is possible only because we ourselves are first known by God. Our human lives rest in God as our creator and redeemer. So tonight, I give God thanks for all learning, for all of you, for this University, and for the faith, that illuminates our hearts and minds.

Thank you for this opportunity to address you tonight.

Go with God.

(1296) 140502 UD Graduation Address.docx

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1 Gen 4:9
2 Rom 12:5