

**Graduation Address
Benedictine School
Saturday June 4, 2005, 11:00 AM**

Last year friends of mine in Illinois became the proud grandparents of a little boy named Jacob. He is a Down syndrome baby. In their annual Christmas letter they included a story entitled *“Welcome to Holland.”* I would like to share it with you because it is appropriate for this special group of graduates – the Benedictine School Class of 2005.

The story written by Emily Pearl Kingsley goes like this:

I am often asked to describe the experience of raising a child with a disability. To try to help people who have not shared the unique experience to understand it, to imagine how it would feel, it's like this.....

When you're going to have a baby, it's like planning a fabulous vacation trip to Italy. You buy a bunch of guidebooks and make your wonderful plans. The Coliseum, the Spanish Steps, the basilica's, Michelangelo's David, the Sistine Chapel, the gondolas of Venice, the Ponte Vecchio of Florence, the Leaning Tower of Pisa. You may even learn a few handy phrases in Italian.

It's all very exciting. After months of eager anticipation, the day finally arrives. You pack your bags and off you go. Several hours later, the plane lands. The flight attendant comes on the P.A. system and says, “Welcome to Holland!”

“Holland?!?!” you say, “What do you mean Holland? I signed up for Italy! I'm supposed to be in Italy. All my life I've dreamed of going to Italy. There must have been a change in the flight plan. They've landed in Holland and there you must stay.

The important thing is that they haven't taken you to a horrible, filthy place, full of pestilence, famine and disease. It's just a different place. So you must go out and buy new guide books. And you must learn a whole new language. And you will meet a whole new group of people you never planned to meet.

It's just a different place. It's slower than Italy, less flashy than Italy. But, after you've been there for a while and you catch your breath, you look around, and you begin to notice the beauty of Holland, the windmills, the tulips, the wooden shoes, the Rembrandts, the Van Gogh's, the Vermeers, Amsterdam, The Hague. But everyone you know is busy coming and going

from Italy, and they're all bragging about what a wonderful time they had there.

And for the rest of your life, you will say, "Yes, that's where I was supposed to go." That's what I had planned." The pain of that will never, ever go away, because the loss of that dream is a very significant loss. But, if you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to go to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, very lovely, very unique things about Holland.

Here on this stage are nine people from Holland. They are your sons & daughters, grandchildren, students of Benedictine and friends of the school children, faculty, staff and aids. Each of them is as unique as a painting hanging in the Dutch Masters Museum.

When the Dutch Masters finished a painting they always gave it a name. So, let's pay tribute to the Divine Master who gave each of these graduates life, born of the love of their parents, who gave them their special DNA that makes them so unique, who gave them their special gifts and talents. Let's put the finishing touches on this living picture of the Divine Master and give them each a special name born of their years of living and learning at Benedictine.

1. Marjorie Callanan – a Garden State girl – *"I've got mail."*
2. Daniel Ciepiela – a Western Shore boy – *"I only shoot 3-pointers on the basketball court."*
3. Doug Forrester – another Western Shore boy – *"Celebrity Poker Wannabe."*
4. Stephen Hurd – from the First State – *"For being so young, I like Oldies music."*
5. Dominic Marinucci – from neighboring Queenstown – *"I'm the King of the Prom."*
6. Bobby Marks – An Empire State boy – *"I can teach Bill Gates a few things about computers."*
7. Justin Richardson – A Garden State boy – *"I've got rhythm."*
8. Andrea Teleposky – A Garden State girl – *"A Rembrandt smile."*

9. Vicki Wilkinson – A Ridgely girl – *“Bring on the TV show, Reality Shopping.”*

There they are – nine portraits of the Divine Master. Each of them has their own inner beauty, their own imprint of the hand of God.

Benedictine knew that when they first became part of this learning community. In a sense the school has only put on the finishing touches begun by the Divine Master. That approach to education is at the core of the Benedictine tradition. It is a tradition steeped in 1500 years of Western monasticism.

You know what that means. Long before the printing press, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, the Industrial Revolution, the typewriter, the radio, Hollywood, the television, the computer, the cell phone, the Internet, email, and Yahoo.com there were religious women and men teaching students like these nine graduates about the dignity of life, about the God who gave them life and who desires that they make a contribution to the ongoing quality of life for all.

Today, in Ridgely, Maryland, twenty religious women of the Benedictine congregation keep this tradition alive. They are here for you because they have committed their lives to a God who is here for them.

The fruit of their faith and commitment to God and you is evident by what you see on this campus. And what do you see when you drive down the mile lane?

1. A Monastery where religious women pray three times a day for you, your needs, your children and the healing of a hurting world.
2. After you pass the monastery, you see a maze of school buildings dedicated to the care and education of children with exceptional needs.
3. Beyond the school are the playgrounds and ball fields where children with exceptional needs can forget they are exceptional and be like other children in a sandbox, on a basketball court, a soccer field, on the swings, in a swimming pool, on a softball field. They laugh and play and swim just like every other child while adult aids watch over them and God, in the heavens, smiles and grins in delight.
4. In the northwest corner is a farmhouse barn, called St. Martin's, transformed into a mini Wal-Mart where the poor can be treated with dignity and shop for food and clothing without any judgments or prejudices made on them.

5. Opposite the barn is a residence, called St. Martin's House, where disenfranchised women can take their lives back and learn how to jump start them again with new meaning and hope.

Finally, don't miss the 450 acres that surround the campus. Today notice the field corn popping above the ground that will be replaced later with soy beans. The crops are a blessing from the God who approves of the many ways the Benedictine Sisters have been a blessing to the Eastern Shore of Maryland for 123 years.

When they arrived in 1882 the country was still recovering from a demoralizing Civil War. The Sisters, many of them from Germany, having given their hearts to God in a commitment to religious life faced the winds of a new adventure and cooperated with God in building up the kingdom of heaven on these acres in Ridgely, MD.

These graduates like so many before them have shared in the fruits of the Sister's commitment to the sanctity of life and the education of children with exceptional needs. Who are the brave, adventurous, selfless and visionary women in the audience today who will step forward and join the Benedictine Sisters to ensure that the fruits of their labors will continue to multiply in this new millennium?

About fifteen years ago, then First Lady Barbara Bush was pilloried in the press for making biased and uncomplimentary comments in public about women leaders. In a commencement address at the all-women's Wellesley College in suburban Boston she said to her critics, "Somewhere out there is a future President of the U.S. and I wish her well."

Using her words and prophetic outlook I would like to say, "Somewhere out there in this graduation audience is the future Director of the Benedictine School, and I wish her well." In July Sister Jeannette will celebrate 60 years of religious life with the Benedictine Sisters. Joining her will be Sr. Mary Agnes who will celebrate 50 years. They have given 45 years of their lives to your children and hundreds before them. Who will pick up the torch and carry on this love story the Benedictine Sisters have with exceptional children?

Each of these graduates has a story to tell about Benedictine making a difference in their lives. And you, families and friends, have stories to tell of Benedictine making a difference in your lives. Those stories, like these nine graduates, will always link you, not only with the school, but with the Benedictine Sisters who are committed to it and to Almighty God who watches over the school and blesses it abundantly.

Don't take this blessing for granted any more than the Sisters take God and their commitment for granted. To all out there in the audience who are part of the .com generation I say to you, "Cherish this link, click on it often and when God opens a window on your soul be inspired to be someone who makes a difference in the lives of these exceptional children as the Sisters do here at Benedictine.

Mark Twain once said, "It's a terrible death to be talked to death." So, let me honor his wisdom and close with one final thought and a story.

The one thought is this: there are many things I love about the children at the school and these nine graduates in particular. I know each of them by name and enjoy their special uniqueness. But, do you know what I really like most about them, and don't laugh? I like the fact that I can talk with them and not be interrupted by a cell phone call. You may think that silly, but in a culture of chatter such as the one we now live in, I think it's a blessing. Talking with kids with exceptional needs has an advantage that is missing with people who are addicted to interrupting conversations with cell phone calls. When they are talking to you or me, we are the center of their attention.

That says volumes to me about being in the moment and enjoying the people you are engaged with. It also makes me wonder about people who abuse that respect and value cell phone calls over the person in your presence. I mean, who has the disability here?

Finally, a closing story.

Once upon a time a sculptor decided to work on a new masterpiece. He selected the piece of marble and had it delivered to his studio. For days he studied it and listened to what was inside that wanted to be freed through his art.

One day he picked up a hammer and chisel and started sculpting. A little girl passed by the studio and, was captivated by what the artist was doing. She returned each day, sat on a stool and was riveted by the sculptor at work. Days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months. After nearly a year at work, the sculptor completed his masterpiece and stood in delight at what he had created.

The little girl jumped off the stool and with great excitement in her voice said, "Mister, how did you know there was a lion inside that piece of rock?"

For all the years these graduates have been at Benedictine the Sisters, faculty and staff have been chiseling away at the rough edges, and in cooperation with God have helped to create the nine new masterpieces who are the graduating class of 2005. Today, the Divine Master delights in what you helped create.

Unlike the Dutch paintings in Holland, these masterpieces are not meant for museums. Rather, they are meant to leave there and make a difference in society and give God glory. In that respect their destiny is the same as yours and mine. Let us help them fulfill it by believing in them as graduates and the children of God who created them be special, unique, original masterpieces of the Divine whose image and face is visible in living color on this their graduation day.

Thank you.