



INTEGRITAS

Wyoming Catholic College

“An Education Like No Other” *Remarks from the Annual President’s Dinner*

May 23, 2021

Reverend Fathers, Directors of Wyoming Catholic College, Mr. Martin, Parents, Grandparents, Friends, Siblings, and Graduates of the class of 2021

This evening before we enter the formalities of the Commencement Exercises tomorrow, I want to say a little about this class, the world they will be entering, and the power of the education they have received. As I told the graduates two weeks ago at their Senior Retreat, I have not had the privilege of knowing them all in the classroom, where the characters and minds of students emerge most vividly. I did have four wonderful thesis advisees—Brianna Bell, Isaac Gibson, Jane Quispe, and Peter Tardiff. We used to meet in my office to talk through



Dr. Glenn Arbery
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their progress, and at some point during our conversations we would come to one of those moments of **shared insight that illuminates everything**. We started calling it nirvana. It got to be a joke. I think a word search would reveal that they

all embedded the word *nirvana* somewhere in their senior thesis.

I also had one section of this year's class a year ago in Humanities 302. We began the semester reading about Satan's successful temptation of Adam and Eve in *Paradise Lost*, the poetic account of the fall of man which led to "all our woe," as Milton puts it. Little did we suspect in late January or even February of last year what "all our woe" was going to look like.

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Descartes' *Discourse on the Method*, some readings about the Enlightenment, selections from various writers in the French Revolution, and Burke's great response in *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. On the morning of March 11, a Wednesday, we read Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* — that eerie tale of sin and redemption — not knowing that it would be our last class together in person. As that day went on, Pres. Trump suspended travel from 26 European countries and the National Basketball Association canceled the rest of its season. At the time, there were only 1200 cases reported in the entire country, but the virus was spreading exponentially. By Friday of that week, Pres. Trump declared a state of national emergency, which meant that domestic travel was going to be restricted soon and state regulations were coming. That afternoon, the first case in Fremont County emerged at a nursing home close by in Lander. In a series of difficult meetings that day, we recognized that we were going to have to **close the campus and go online.**

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Wyoming Catholic College, if I may say so without sounding too proud, was beautifully, supremely, *uniquely*, unprepared to go online. Since our founding, the encounter with reality, the experiential, in-person character of this education has always been

our hallmark. Most of us had never even heard of Zoom. But we mobilized quickly to continue the semester. Dean Washut urged us on. From the space of over a year, it's possible to see the comedy of it. Faculty and students

scrambled to learn how to be virtual in their various very real settings, with spouses and children or siblings and parents all sent home from work or school, all vying to get online, often with overloaded Internet connections. We experimented and adjusted. For example, Dr. Tiffany Schubert and I recorded some good conversations on the Romantic poets and the Russian novelist Turgenev before we realized that we could just resume our classes as seminars on Zoom. We made it through, and I came to know my section of 14 students pretty well. Within a class or two online, they had already figured out how to have side chats. By the end of the semester, they had also discovered how to change the names that appeared with each other's images. I would be making some serious point about Raskolnikov and Sonya, and they would suddenly all start smiling—the usual tip-off. It would take me a minute, but then I would see that Rinju had been renamed Rasputin.

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Am I worried about how this wonderful class, whose orations were the best we could remember, will do out in the world? I am not. Graduates, the world lies all before you, and I wish you a lucky passage. But what does that world look like? This past week, I read an alarming story in *Cowboy State Daily*, the Wyoming news site run by our board member Bill Sniffin. It was a warning from a geologist that the immense mass of magma beneath Yellowstone National Park is going to explode. It has exploded every 600,000 years for a while now, and it has been 600,000 years since the last eruption, so we're due. When it goes, the geologist assured us, it will bury the nearby states in three feet of volcanic ash and pretty much devastate

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the rest of the United States. I say that it was an alarming story, but it comes closer to Wyoming humor. We can use it to startle new citizens fleeing from the apocalyptic taxes of California. We joke about being the first to go. Yes, it's going to explode, but probably not until a thousand years from now, maybe 10,000. But the fact of all that

magma underfoot gives a little more intensity to any tour of the thermal wonderland of northwest Wyoming. I wonder if we feel it as a metaphor for the culture of the present day—that sense of apocalyptic threat that has haunted the imagination of popular culture for decades.

We see the vastness of geological time all around us in this rocky state. Our century looks like the flickering of an eye in comparison. What can it matter what we do? It matters because we inhabit the mystery of God’s time, a mystery whose depth

encompasses all creation. As the old hymn puts it, “A thousand ages in His sight/Are like an evening gone.” Yet this awareness of immensity makes us focus more intensely upon our responsibility to the present moment we have been given, the “right now” where we find ourselves and where our decisions shape the future toward

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good or bad ends. Let’s compare 2021 to 1973, when I graduated from college. American troops had just withdrawn from Vietnam under the Paris Peace Accords, the Watergate hearings were under way, the Roe v Wade decision had come down in January, and the massive race riots and protests and political assassinations of the late ‘60s and early ‘70s were still fresh on everyone’s mind. Surely, the second coming was at hand. Instead, we got Jimmy Carter. (I realize that this is a generational joke.) In any case, after Jimmy Carter came Ronald Reagan, the end of the Cold War, and real possibilities—however inadequately realized—in the aftermath of the fall of Soviet communism.

Almost 50 years after 1973, though, many of the same national tensions have reemerged, though the political parties today seem much farther apart. The pressures toward **critical race theory, wokeness, and other phenomena** of contemporary American academic life have their genealogical roots in **the radicalism of the Sixties**. But the strongest counter to those influences also comes from that era, the

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founding or transformation of colleges strongly emphasizing fidelity to the Church and a curriculum rooted in the Catholic intellectual tradition—the University of Dallas under Donald and Louise Cowan, Benedictine, Thomas Aquinas College, Franciscan under Fr. Scanlon, Magdalene, Christendom, Thomas More, and last born, unique among them, Wyoming Catholic College.

What do our graduates face that is different from what my generation faced? Recently, I started listening to the audible version of Walker Percy's comic apocalyptic novel *Love in the Ruins*, published in 1971. So many things that he writes about racial tensions, political divisions, and the sexual revolution could have been written this year. It's so funny that it's dangerous to listen while you're driving.

What's missing, though, that Percy does not anticipate at all is the extraordinary rise and global pervasiveness of personal technology. The first personal computer was still three years away in 1971, and it was inconceivable that within a few decades everyone would have a pocket-sized device many times more powerful than the large, ventilated machines

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that used to take up whole rooms and be fed with punch-cards. *Something like the internet, much less a Zoom seminar, was the stuff of science fiction.* What difference does that make? Fifty years ago, reading the newspaper or listening to the radio or turning on the television allowed an individual to participate in a larger, shared awareness that more and more closely approached real-time, a kind of group consciousness. Some people had to have the TV on all the time. Now, many people do not feel fully conscious unless they are online, almost as though being offline were the loss of a vital avenue of sense experience.

The phenomenon did not begin in modernity or with the internet. Plato's Socrates had already described **this immersive realm of opinion, *doxa***, in his allegory of the cave. In his time, it was constituted by plays, religious festivals, recitations of Homer, speeches in court or in political settings by skilled orators trained by sophists—the whole discourse of public life. Plato recognized that real public power lies much less in physical force than in control of this consciousness-in-common, which today means mastery of

the internet in all the variousness of what it makes available. The danger lies in coming to feel that our lives *exist most fully* in this realm of shadows, this hive mind of *doxa*, which mediates what we are.

The antidote is reality. The real world used to be what you entered when you finished college, but at Wyoming Catholic College, it is what a student enters freshman year with a 21-day backpacking expedition in the mountains. **The seniors we celebrate tonight carry within them an experience of their college years unique in the world.** Obviously, they still use the internet in ordinary ways, but our policy against cell phones since the college was founded has distanced them from the ubiquity of its influence. Their four years have been shaped instead by an intense and integrated curriculum everywhere informed by constant meditation on the nature of God and the Incarnation, and everywhere illuminated by *real experience* of the created order in its ancient, elemental forms of earth, air,

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fire, and water. Their consciousness-in-common is community, something so real and so joyful it’s difficult to describe, after an education that has been sometimes almost too real, too much, impossible to take in.

Tomorrow the experience ends with the usual celebrations, as though this were just another education. But this has been an education like no other. Let me close by opening three questions about it. First, what is this education like in the person who receives it? The whole of it can never be present at once, just as the whole of a book or a piece of music can never be present in any one instant. Perhaps the presence of it in memory—all those vivid experiences of books and conversations in class or the dorms, all those struggles with language in writing papers—perhaps the presence of it exists like a continent’s cities and towns seen from a satellite, a great web of larger and smaller clusters of lights, each one of which could be reentered in all its complexities. It would take an Augustine to describe the depths and mysteries of what this education is within the mind and soul, this unfolding form, always growing in complexity, perhaps never to be apprehended in its wholeness in this life. We could describe it as a constellation of things known and speculated, a mapping that allows new things to find a place and an order, but the

question is always particular, and I ask it of each graduate: **what is this education like *in you*?**

My second question is what *motion* this education has in the world compared, say, to training in a skill or profession. Clearly it is good for its own sake, but does it also have the kind of implications that beauty has? Responsibilities that come with it? St. Thomas Aquinas describes ambition as the sin of forgetting that one's gifts come from God, but suppose that you think of the same gifts in terms of vocation and hope, patient openness to Providence as it subtly shows itself, and then wholehearted response to the divine summons? Suppose you enter into marriage or work or graduate school with the spirit of *invention* as we use the word at WCC?

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Third, what might the fruit of this education be thirty years from now, when you graduates look back on it with a clearer sense of the workings of Providence and greater awareness of the hope and the calling? What will it have meant that much has been asked of you and that you have entered the world with knowledge and courtesy and courage and the habit of real presence? **I hope it will have meant more than you can say.**

Again, before the ceremonies of tomorrow, let me offer you my own blessings and those of all of us who have come to know you with such joy. I wish what I wished you before, but harder.

Glenn Arbery was born in South Carolina and grew up as a Protestant in Middle Georgia. A convert at 25, he entered the Church at the University of Dallas, where he later took his Ph.D. Prior to coming to Wyoming Catholic, he taught literature at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Thomas More College of Liberal Arts in Merrimack, New Hampshire, the University of Dallas, and Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts, where he held the d'Alzon Chair of Liberal Education. His novel *Bearings and Distances* was published by Wiseblood Books in 2015, and his second, *Boundaries of Eden*, was published in 2020. Dr. Arbery was inaugurated as the third president of Wyoming Catholic College in 2016.