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Class of 2021 Commencement Address
Salve Regina University

Congratulations to the Salve Class of 2021.

You reached a major landmark and a significant achievement.

You left home as a teenager and now a young adult in your 20s.

You were dependent on your parents, now you have gained certain capacity to stand on your own.

You were uninitiated, but now stand at the door of the professions in which you will make your contributions.

These are big steps: both exhilarating and intimidating, but you will find your footing as you have many times before.

Recall the journeys that you have taken: they are memorable and fun for how plans worked out, and when the unanticipated presented valuable and treasured experiences also.

This Class of 2021 has the bragging rights to say that it went through a most consequential year; not dissimilar to the iconic status of 1929, 1945, 1968, 2008. You will be watching your experiences in many documentaries of 2020 at its 10th, 25th, 50th anniversaries.

As you look back, you will recall the losses and the fears:

Friends and relatives who succumbed to COVID.

Loss of routines, rituals: spring breaks, all-night chats with classmates, senior-year rituals, in-person Commencements, family gatherings.

Loss of various freedoms, including visits with families and hugs that are instinctive to us.

Filling our summer were also the brutal, unnecessary and wasteful deaths of African American citizens such as George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Stephon Clark, Philando Castile and others.

We had an election so divided that it led to claims of a stolen election and the “Big Lie,” and culminated in the historical riots at the Capitol on Jan 6.

There is no question that the losses, sadness, disappointments and anger will take time to process. These may raise at their heads at unexpected moments. They will sink into the deep to form lasting conceptions of how the world works, what you can count on, and what you want your life to be about.

In these reflections, there is one thread I hope you will also weave into your sense-making, meaning-making tapestry.

This is the thread of goodness, kindness and generosity.

Recall the sacrifices and efforts of many people.

The frontline workers who brace public transport and serve the public when the spread of coronavirus was rampant; they did so often with insufficient economic, health and family protections.

The medical staff who were not only exhausted, depleted but bore the burden of patients who died alone in their care without the presence of families.

Closer to home, neighbors who made grocery runs for those who are most vulnerable.

Those who sewed masks in March and April before they were available on the market.

Relatives who took in family members.

Children who displayed their colorful pictures at windows and on sidewalks to cheer us.

Restaurants which provided food for frontline workers when they themselves had no income.

Food pantries with their volunteers and donors which packaged hundreds of thousand of boxes of food seemingly out of a few loaves and fishes.

People who played music for us in streets and balconies to give us joy.

People who marched in big assemblies and volunteers who staffed voting stations.

Those who stood in line for hours, in rain or shine, to vote.

Do spend time to note the incidences of kindness and solidarity that you have observed. Please make sure that they become the threads of your personal tapestry.

In the midst of ugliness, there is goodness.

In the midst of suffering, there is generosity.

In the midst of injustice, we open our eyes and our hearts.

In the midst of failures and mistakes, there is another chance to do better, to make amends.

In the midst of a threatening crisis, there is ingenuity to develop a vaccine in record time.

In the midst of vulnerability, we deepen our gratitude.

Goodness is in each of us, in others, even in the ones with whom we disagree and those we judge and condemn. Goodness is God's imprint on us: we who are made in God's image. It is the divine life that flows in us, here and now, as branches of God's vine.

It is true: we do not always do the right thing, or even the kind thing, or act as the best version of ourselves. But we do not act on our own power to be good: not only do we have God's spirit in us, but we are never left to our own. The good shepherd looks for us, calls us back.

Our part is to spend time with God, intentionally and mindfully, to put ourselves in the presence of God: to claim our goodness and choose to act from our goodness. If we fall short, try again. There are unlimited second chances: this is the good news of the gospel. So, Salve Class of 2021, go with God and you will go in goodness.