Theology of the Streets

Valedictory Address for the Class of 2020

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Fr. Enrico Eusebio, Jr., SJ, President of Loyola School of Theology, Fr. Rogel Anecito Abais, SJ, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Rev. Monsignor Sabino Vengco, our distinguished guest, LST administrators, professors, and staff, our formators and communities, family and friends, dear graduates of LST 2020—good afternoon!

I am supposed to deliver a 'valedictory speech,' but my mind has been on quarantine for much of the past months, so I had to Google what a 'valediction' actually meant: "an act of bidding farewell." On behalf of the smartest, holiest, and best batch in LST history to graduate on Zoom, goodbye! But doesn't that sound strange? It seems ages since we last met. Hasn't this quarantine forced us to say a silent, uneventful goodbye already? What is the use of a valediction—or graduation—when COVID-19 has unceremoniously stripped us of the 'goodbye' we've always wanted—in togas and formal garb, with our haircut and some fully made up, with lots of laughter, tears, and pictures? Don't get me wrong; we really appreciate how the administration has gone to great lengths just to celebrate this milestone. But as we mumble our goodbyes, it's painful for me as it must be for you, dear graduates, to admit that we won't be able to do it the way we usually do.

But LST has always taught us to go deeper, hasn't it? To not be satisfied with the superficial, the first naivete, the first notion. To go deeper, we can ask: what surprise might God be cooking up for us? What gift might he be excited to spring on us despite the darkness and uncertainty? Might the Spirit of truth be teaching us something more today, our last day in school? If we can't have the closure we so desire, a closure we have earned with the support of so many, perhaps this is not the end. Maybe, God is inviting us to consider that the task—our task—of doing theology continues even beyond our graduation.

At the height of the virus scare, when the masses were stopped, and the churches closed to the faithful, someone pointed out that on the streets, there was a Gospel in the making. There has been an eerie quiet on the streets for much of the past weeks. The streets have always suggested danger, crime, and the unexpected while our homes would stand for comfort, security, and warmth. But in the months of lockdown, there is an even greater risk of going out. Not only could you get mugged or hurt on the streets, but you could also actually die. How fitting that the Gospel is finding a home out there! In proclaiming the Kingdom of God, didn't Jesus place his entire life at risk? Dear graduates, there is a Gospel in the making on the streets, and it is out there that we are tasked to continue being students of the Spirit. Today we graduate, and we must say goodbye, but this is not the end. How then should we imagine this theology of the streets?

This theology of the streets must listen to those who call the streets their home. The pandemic of poverty will remain long after a vaccine; sadly, there will always be those excluded by society. LST has always taught us to place our theology in a context, and today, that context will be in the hearts of the

poor. Listen to them. Hear their stories. And take to heart their burning questions: Where is the Church? How can her doors be closed now when we need to be with her? Who are the People of God? How can we be part of them when we have always been left out? Is God still real? Or is he asleep? If he is there, why can't we see him? Why are so many still suffering? Why are we still dying? Has he abandoned us? Dear graduates, theology's task is not yet finished because the people of God out on the streets are still asking the same questions the people of God asked during their exile. These are the same questions Jesus' disciples had to confront; the same questions the early Church had to struggle to address. The questions persist, and so must our theology continue to offer meaningful, nourishing, saving responses, even if always provisionary. Throughout centuries, especially during dark times, not only do we ask about God's goodness and God's love, we question them!

Thus, not only must a theology out on the streets listen, but it must also speak and speak boldy! Mind you: boldy, but not heretically. To be bold is really to be creative with the Gospel handed on to us through the Church. Bishop Ambo David, at one Holy Spirit Mass, called LST the Loyola Preschool of Theology whose main goal is to "make us properly mature from grownups to children, [and] not the other way around" where theology means "learning the grammar and vocabulary of the Holy Spirit." Dear graduates, be bold and creative with your theology. Our professors have given us the basics of our faith, the grammar and vocabulary to now speak—or even sing!—in tongues. It is not enough to give a good account of and to speak responsibly about our faith. We must mine the gifts of the Spirit to inspire others to believe. The streets have become for us a frontier, a scary space seeking the Good

News. But it is also a brand-new locus theologicus, a place for doing playful and exciting, creative yet solid, inspired, and always relevant theology.

Out on the streets of the 'land of the free', there is something else happening. Thousands have gathered in mostly peaceful rallies to protest police brutality and demand equal rights. LST has tried to instill in us an Asian theology, but we cannot ignore that the division in America is ours as well. In the West, their cry resonates: "Black lives matter!" Here in Asia, or Africa, or the Pacific islands—indeed in every place created by God, we proclaim: "All lives matter!" Even the drug addicts? Yes. Even unrepentant abusers? Yes. Even corrupt police or politicians? Yes. All sinners? Yes. Jesus Christ, who came to heal and redeem all, is still the main actor in the Gospel of the streets. The theology we are tasked to carry on, dear graduates, is theology with Christ's love and mercy as its core and center, drawing all of creation, sinners and saints alike, back to God. This theology on the streets must heal divisions, build bridges, and regather His people. When Jesus prayed for us—yes, he prays for us!—he begged the Father that we may be one and be one in Him. Let not our theology only strive to save souls, but to gather into community flesh and blood human persons, together with all of creation, and bring them back to God's embrace.

Paalam, dear LST! Goodbye, dear graduates! I look forward to the day we meet each other out on the street so that we can exchange stories about the questions we have heard from God's people, which hopefully we would have accepted as our own. Perhaps by then, we would have learned a new language or two, any language that speaks straight to the hearts of the poor and the oppressed, inspiring them, and transforming them. I pray that day, and we can finally take off our masks, smile, embrace as proof of our friendship, and testify to our theology of the streets.