

Bishop JOHN's Commencement Address to the 2012 Graduating Class

From my youth up, an old lullaby echoes in my head.

Mumma see the tiny ducks  
On the shore the old hen clucks  
Mumma tell me what's the matter  
Why she's making such a clatter  
She is running to and fro  
While the ducklings paddling go  
Mumma she can't understand  
Why they're swimming from the land  
She's afraid the water'll hurt them  
Into chicks she can't convert them.

Mumma see the tiny ducks  
On the shore the old hen clucks

I begin my message today with this lullaby lest we take ourselves too seriously and because I believe it time to get back to basics. For those of you not familiar with the lullaby story, farmers who didn't have cable or satellite TV, and no place to go for entertainment, might find a duck egg or two and slip them into a hen house. When the ducklings hatch, they follow the hen that hatched the eggs, thinking her to be their mother; the hen thinking them her chicks, until one day the ducklings waddle into a pond. The hen, knowing her chicks can't swim, panics,

unable to save them from their certain fate! This is almost ancient farm-time entertainment.

You might think this an illustration about imprinting. You might think it a lesson about the age old nature/nurture debate. I call it to your attention to speak about our human nature. God creates ducks to swim, something the ducks can do without instruction or example. They somehow are naturally drawn to the water, and there they paddle with webbed feet our God gave to them. Because man is in the image and likeness of God, the nature of man is to love God and to care for each other. This natural call is reinforced by the revelation of the scriptures and the example of the new-Adam, Jesus Christ Himself. Just as our ducklings find delight in being ducks and paddling around the pond, so too we find joy and comfort from loving our God and caring for each other. The chickens of the world, and even of our parishes, panic when seeing us delight in our mission as ducks. They are about some other business, a business often unnatural for man, and unnatural for churches. They cluck and they clatter, running to and fro. They make such a clatter. Like the ducklings, may you always enjoy your swim and not become distracted by their racket on the shore.

I believe it time to get back to the basics. For me, these basics are God is great, God is good and God chooses to love us and chooses for us to

share in His love. We are created to reflect this God who is great, good and love. We will only find happiness and contentment when we accept and return His love. To do so is as much in our nature as swimming is in the nature of the duck. Real joy and happiness can come only when we are clear in understanding these principles. We can not be content to live like chickens on the sidelines nor can we be content when we deny our nature and serve anything other than God and His people. You as graduates must ensure that His people follow the example of the duck, and do not become chickens clacking from the shore. You, the graduates, are to model and teach God's people how to serve God and His people in whatever job or vocation the people practice. This is to fulfill your nature and find satisfaction and joy in life. I believe that there can be no real happiness, joy or contentment without fulfilling our humanity in God's image by serving the Father and His people. This is the royal priesthood of Christ that the Word became incarnate to accomplish. The royal priesthood is simply our God given nature. To be a Christian is to bring God to man and man to God.

I began by saying that God is great. Like God, we can move mountains. God's greatness encompasses His indescribable and immeasurable power, understanding, knowledge, and immortality. God's goodness is equally without measure, caring and loving without any holding back or malice. Lastly, we affirm that God says in the Gospels of Matthew and

John that He wants us to have life and be saved. God is on our side. We need to hold these truths and teach them.

While our God reveals Himself as both good and great, our experience of God has been filtered and distorted by our relationships with our parents and authority figures. Man is in the image of God, but man's images of God are mostly in man's image. We project our limited attributes as humans onto God, confusing ourselves and each other. We project the shortsightedness and limitation of our parents and teachers onto God. You church leaders are to build relationships with people that will challenge distorted thoughts and images of God and to correct them. Use the parables of the Kingdom as your source and authority. Use your relationships to model love, forgiveness and Christian joy.

Already three or more years ago you came to this venerable and historic place to be prepared to live among God's people and to share the abundant life that God has given you. Some of you will be ordered or ordained for specific ministries in the Church. Others will simply witness to God's people without holy orders. Without orders is not without responsibility and is not without order. To whom much is given, much is expected. Surely you learned here that the Church, like the Kingdom of God to come, is ordered and orderly. Order like cleanliness

is next to godliness. It is your responsibility as Christian leaders to work with your bishops and clergy to lead God's people into the Kingdom. You are to keep the unity of the Church and at the same time maintain the truth delivered to us from the Apostles. No simple task.

You are commencing a life in the Church to bring this world to reflect the world to come. You are doing such in a society that is very different from the society and norms that Sts. Tikhon and Raphael met. This world today is more hostile to Christianity and God's message. The level of this hostility and contempt for Christianity has not been seen since the "tolerance of Christianity" under Constantine. You are entering an American Society that so values self and self direction that people believe they stand in judgment of you, your Church, and your God. Modern Western man, and I would even say modern Western Christians, some of whom are baptized and sitting in our pews, don't believe that there is objective truth or reality rather that each person has equal truths and frames his own reality. Modern man doesn't think that we can know anything that happened outside of his individual experiences, regardless of proofs and witnesses. You can hardly convince today's youth of Washington crossing the Delaware, let alone an empty tomb of an incarnate God. They don't trust history or witnesses.

Nevertheless, I am excited about you and your life in Christ's own ministry. I have had a most wonderful life sharing God's love with His people. I have had countless relationships allowing me to witness God's healing grace in the lives of the people I served, and often with non-Orthodox neighbors and friends. By living a faithful life among people, people have come to God and changed their lives. We, the graduates today and the fathers and graduates of my generation, share the same priesthood in Christ Jesus. We share the same faith and same tradition. We share the same apostolicity, vision and life. It is the same Holy Spirit that enlightens and guides us. Learn to trust the Holy Spirit and His work in you. Learn to trust the Lord Jesus Christ who models and whose scriptures will guide you. Learn to trust in the forgiveness and love of our Heavenly Father. Learn to trust each other so that God can speak to you through the God-given relationships that we share in His Church. Learn to trust the Church, and institution of God that like Christ is both human and divine. The Church is an organization that God still uses despite the people in it who are still maturing and being purified. Learn to trust yourself and your ability to discern within the Spirit of God; within the tradition of our faith.

I am excited for you as you begin your journeys in the Church. God has given me, and I know He will give you, countless opportunities to express His love for His people. Acting in His priesthood, you will bring

modern man to God, and God to modern man. You will share the delight of God the Father when each prodigal returns. You will share God's joy when each lost sheep is found. You will share in God's peace when your presence brings God's peace to his frightened children in crises. No vocation can be more rewarding than the vocations this class embarks on, whatever they might be.

Some of the chickens in churches you will live in and serve are really ducks who need to discover their God-given vocation. You will convert some of them when you show them God's love. Some of the chickens you will simply outlive and bury. When you give them back to God, pray for His mercy, even if the chickens annoyed you royally. Still other chickens will be like an irritant in your skin that will produce pearls. They will purify you and help you grow. Think of them as gifts and challenges. Show them God's mercy, and learn from them how much humor and love God really has.

The chickens and unconverted ducks of this world will tell you that the Church is full of hypocrites. This charge is true, but Christ took on flesh and hung of the cross for all us hypocrites. The chickens of this world will tell you that belief in God is not scientific. Question whether there is enough science to prove they exist and are not someone else's dream or delusion. Point to you own relationship with God which could not

exist unless God loved. The chickens and unconverted ducks of the world will speak of injustice in the world. There has not been any justice on earth since the fall, this is a direct result of mankind's choice to be gods themselves and not follow God and His justice. This is the sin of modern man, the very sin of Adam.

Don't be converted by the chickens. We are God's ducks. God loves us, He chooses us and He ministers to us as we minister in His name to each other. Stay close to your Godly relationships; they are the water of God's unending springs. You need them because without God and each other you too will be a duck who thinks he's a chicken. Don't run to and fro. Rest each day having been honest before God and honest before the people you serve. Don't take on responsibility for the relationships between God and each parishioner. That would hinder the relationship. Simply be faithful. May God bless you and keep you in His ministry; keep you in His care.