

**USJ Congregation 2020 Speech by
Rev. Prof. Stephen Morgan, Rector of USJ**

12th September 2020

USJ Class of 2020, congratulations!

Only a few months ago, less than a year, when we started our Chinese New Year break you were approaching the end of your studies at USJ. You had one semester to go. You knew what to do. You knew when you had to do it. You knew where you had to be and when you had to be there. You knew it wasn't going to be easy - sometimes it even looked like a mountain you had to climb - but you knew the terrain, you had the necessary equipment and you were more or less comfortable with the task ahead.

And then came the pandemic. Everything - absolutely everything - was turned upside down. Nothing, or virtually nothing, panned-out as you had been expecting, as any of us had been expecting.

Completing a University Degree or Diploma is always a challenge. It always requires determination and perseverance, hard work and application, often long-hours and grappling with ideas that make our brains ache just thinking about them. The support and encouragement of families and friends, of work colleagues, professors and classmates are always necessary to give the very best account of ourselves in our assignments and examinations, our dissertations and theses. Doing all this against the background of COVID-19 has made that whole process for you much, much more difficult. And yet you have done it and you've done it superbly. You have risen to this extraordinary challenge - a challenge no graduating class of students has faced in perhaps three generations - you have risen to that challenge in a manner that fills my heart fit to bursting, my heart and the hearts of all the academic and administrative staff of the University with overflowing pride. You are a credit to USJ and to your families, but most of all you are a credit to yourselves. USJ is blessed to have had you as our students.

Part of today's ceremony is about thanking those who have helped you get to today but, of course, even that this afternoon has to be done in the context of the pandemic prevention measures. How we wish our families and friends and colleagues could be in the room, rather than just watching online, so that we can thank them and share our joy with them. On your behalf I want to express that thanks and acknowledge with gratitude the support they have given you and, often, the sacrifices they have made to enable you to get to this point.

Over the last few months, since I became Rector, I have had the real pleasure and the immense privilege of seeing the exhibitions and graduation shows, the theses, internship reports and capstone projects of students across the University. I have been constantly impressed and daily delighted by the work you have produced. It would be a credit to you in any year but this year - against the backdrop of lock-down, on-line classes, uncertainty and fear - you have excelled. Before he left Macao, a month ago, the man who was Rector for almost all of your time at USJ, Fr Peter said to me that every year at the time of the Congregation, as he reflected on the graduating classes, he had reason to thank God for the students at USJ but that this year that gratitude was joined to profound admiration. In that, as in so much else, I find myself echoing the feelings and words of my predecessor. Indeed, as Rector for almost all of your time at USJ, it was Fr Peter who was to have presided over your graduation. With the event postponed and he returned home to Portugal, this joyful task falls to me. I particularly wanted to recognise the part played by those who led the faculties, institute and schools in which you studied and so, rather than ask the Deans of the new academic units to present your diplomas, I have asked those former Deans, to which we all owe so much, to do so.

There is one other group of people who I want to thank today: the staff of USJ. Here again this year has demanded an extraordinary effort from an extraordinary group of people. The normal rhythms of the operational and administrative life have been upset, the demands on supporting students and staff have increased dramatically and all this whilst coping with the strains of the pandemic on their own lives. The administrative staff have done all this with dedication and cheerfulness. On your behalf, I thank them.

Your professors deserve particular mention. The commitment, effort and sheer hard work that they had to put in, to adapt their courses and learn new ways of teaching was deeply, deeply impressive. The good humour and resilience with which they did so was utterly remarkable.

So what now?

If 2020 has taught us anything, it is that none of us can see what is in the future. Nevertheless, I know that the flexibility and creativity, the determination and agility which you have shown over these months, will serve you very well in the next stages of your lives. At USJ we want you always to remember the lessons you have learned - not just the academic lessons as you seek to master your chosen disciplines - but to remember the way in which you have learned, the way you have learned to think. I, particularly want you to remember who you have learned to be. I want to close with a word to you from my own intellectual and spiritual hero, St John Henry Newman. His life was often difficult, confusing and far from straightforward. The next steps for him often seemed to involve uncertainty and great personal sacrifice but his words of consolation to himself speak to me and should, I would argue, speak mightily to you:

God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons.

He has not created me for naught. I shall do good.