

Sophia Buono

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First of all, I want to thank, from the bottom of my heart, Sycamore Trust – and in particular Mr. Dempsey – for this award. It means so much to me.

I also want to thank and congratulate Nicole O’Leary, my co-recipient, for her amazing work on the *Rover* as a writer and as managing editor, her great leadership in the Militia Immaculata, and her wonderful friendship.

And thank you to all of you for being here this morning – and to all of those who are watching the live stream. It’s an honor and a pleasure to be with you all.

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When I first came to Notre Dame, I was dragging my feet. It was Ash Wednesday of 2014 -- my senior year of high school -- and when I realized that my dizziness and stomach ache were not merely symptoms of fasting, my desire to visit the distant South Bend campus significantly dropped. But after the rallying encouragement of my mother, I found myself -- half asleep -- at Reagan National airport -- then in a rental car, being driven in a daze through Chicago -- and finally, to the warmly lit stoop of the Morris Inn at 1:30 in the morning. From that moment on, we were greeted with friendly smiles and assistance from everyone we met. At the tour the next morning (thinly attended on a cold day in March), we had our tour guide all to ourselves, and she cheerfully guided us all around campus.

I rapidly fell in love. When I received my acceptance letter a few weeks later, I committed in a heartbeat. I returned to South Bend in August with a spring in my step.

All the same, I never could have guessed what awaited me here at the University of Notre Dame: immense personal growth, daring endeavors, and a beautiful mixture of painful and joyful experiences of love.

Looking back upon my three years here so far, I am so grateful for the treasures I have found here. I have a chapel with the Blessed Sacrament and Mass at my fingertips, a vibrant dorm community around me, a thrilling sense of unity with my fellow students at football games -- and of course, a number of wonderful friends.

Let me elaborate on that last one. I often tell people that my favorite part about Notre Dame is the range of personal connections I have made here. I have formed close bonds with people who share my core values. These friends have sustained and strengthened who I am. At the same time, I have formed equally genuine friendships with people from a variety of backgrounds and with different beliefs. We have bonded through other things -- a shared interest, a common value, or even just our love for Notre Dame.

Because of the treasures I have received here, throughout all the ups and downs that life has brought me, I have never once doubted that this is the place I am meant to be.

Still, I have also learned more deeply that Notre Dame, like any place on earth, is no haven of perfection. Not all my friendships have lasted, not every football game has been pleasant, and not every university action has strongly adhered to the faith at the heart of its mission.

Here's an example: during my freshman year, all new students had to attend three sessions called "Building Community the Notre Dame Way." The second of these sessions focused on preventing discrimination based on sexuality, sexual-orientation, and other related qualities. The presentation emphasized the university's commitment to charity and inclusion –

noble and beautiful qualities, no doubt. However, what struck me about the videos we were shown was that they defined and described a list of terms – such as “bisexual,” “lesbian,” and “transgender” – as if they were normal. To my recollection, at no point were we told that the Catholic Church understands acts of homosexuality and the transgender ideology to be disordered. Nor were we told that according to the Church, sex belongs within marriage.

This gave me pause. If we, *as a Catholic university*, could uphold a commitment to charity and inclusion, why could we not *also* uphold a commitment to proclaiming Church teaching? We could we not say, “We love and include you” to anyone and everyone -- *and also say*, “This is what we believe human love *is* – though you may or may not agree with it”?

At that moment, I felt let down. I knew how beautiful the Church’s teaching about sexuality was – precisely because it embraces human nature and purpose with the truth. It seemed as if we were hiding that teaching in order to avoid offending people – even though we already two theology courses.

“Building Community the Notre Dame Way” is no longer the program the university uses to welcome first year students to campus, but I have been told that the replacement “Moreau First Year Experience Course” can be similar.

From this experience early in my Notre Dame career, I encountered some other students who were also dissatisfied with the program. Many of them have become some of my closest friends. And many of them got involved, as I did, with the *Irish Rover*.

We were committed to the same values and committed to Notre Dame. Writing and editing for the *Rover* has helped me not only pay more attention to the culture and actions of my university but also has given me the skills and the nerve to write about them. I have covered

controversial lectures on campus, commented on student reactions to the presidential election, and shared my thoughts about phrases such as “pro-woman.”

For my last *Rover* editorial, entitled “The heart of the *Rover*,” I wrote about my experience in a psychology class I was taking. We discussed many controversial topics, including the nature of humans and animals, in vitro fertilization, and transgenderism. The class consistently had a climate of free and open discussion, but at the same time, a clarification of the Catholic perspective on these issues was largely absent. As I wrote in the editorial, I do not discredit the professor or the knowledge I gained in the course. However, I felt the need to point out that, as in every classroom on campus, a crucifix hung on the wall. Students come to Notre Dame knowing that it is a Catholic university, and therefore, the university has not only the right but also the duty to present the truths of the Church.

That presentation need not override charity, openness, and a love for freedom. In fact, that is what the Church is all about. With every gift, revelation, and assistance God has given us, he has always allowed us the freedom to choose – or to reject – his offer. That freedom does not devalue the gift; rather, it helps us appreciate the gift far more.

So, when it comes to the classroom, a fulfilled Catholic mission does not demand that every subject be turned into a theology course, nor even that every professor be Catholic. It *does* mean that every professor must understand, adhere to, and transmit the fundamental mission of our university, with full freedom and through their field of study. And even more importantly, the administration must lead the institution to understand and live the mission more deeply.

The liturgical hymn captures the idea: *Ubi caritas est vera, Deus ibi est*; “Where charity is true, there God is.” The use of the word “true,” I think, is not only meant to describe a charity

that is sincere, but one that adheres to *the truth*. Only then can God really dwell in us, and only then is the Catholic mission fully alive.

I also wrote upon this subject after the presidential election, in my editorial “The search for true dialogue.” I noticed that many students had excluded and even been hostile to those who disagreed with their own political convictions. It is true that many sensitive issues were at hand. But at the same time, I am convinced that without a joint effort to listen and engage with each other—even those with whom we vehemently disagree—we will advance neither towards charity nor truth.

The other day, I saw an article in the *Washington Post* about some eighth-grade students who refused to take a picture with Speaker of the House Paul Ryan after meeting him outside the Capitol Building. The reasoning they gave, according to the article, was that they disagreed with Mr. Ryan’s policies. The author of this article called their actions “civil disobedience.”

This scenario, I think, has become all too familiar—not only at our own commencement this year, but throughout our modern society. Excluding the unpopular opinion is seen as an act of heroic resistance and justice. These kinds of protest may be permissible—again, freedom is precious—but they’re limiting, not freeing. And to me, they’re tragic.

My best friendships were born through *conversation*. We learn about each other—our similarities and differences—and we come to understand, appreciate, and help each other. *Whatever* one’s beliefs may be, a pursuit of truth, love, and joy simply cannot proceed without personal connections. Both sides must be willing to hear both sides. The beauty of a Catholic university is that when it comes to matters of faith and morals, it need not be left guessing what the answer is—since it bears the truth.

Through my encounters with many different friends here at Notre Dame, I have learned more about how to share with them the truth I hold dear to my heart. I must listen to everything my friends have to say—with full attention and affection—and I must absorb the truth and goodness embedded within their words. That way, I learn. And then, I must gently share what I believe. With charity, within friendship, but absolutely clearly.

This is my mission as a Catholic—and our mission as a Catholic university.

I love Notre Dame because I have encountered friends who know me deeply and love me deeply. Some agree with what they know I value, and some don't. But that does not stop our friendships. On the contrary. These are friends I enjoy, learn from, and try to help in any way that I can. I try to share myself without compromising myself or the truth. I would walk with any friend of mine to the edge of a cliff—but not a step beyond.

I thank Notre Dame for helping me build these kinds of friendships. I really can't wait to see where they take me and what else I will discover in my final year.

Finally, I hope and pray that these kinds of friendships can permeate this university, and beyond that, our culture. Only then can we transform the world from within into be a place of resounding truth and true love.

Thank you.