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Form critics of the graduation address might identify two distinctive literary patterns. First, there is the long and rambling reflection on the speaker’s own life, sometimes only faintly connected to the *sitz im leben* of the audience. Second, there is the address that is primarily exhortation to the graduands (exhortation sometimes built upon the speaker’s own experience, but always intended to send them out on a mission to use the education that they have just received for the betterment of the world).

Well, to save any future form critics some work, my intention is to locate this particular graduation address very firmly in the second tradition. This address is exhortation from beginning to end. But unlike the usual form, it is not you graduands that I want to admonish. For this ceremony marks not only a great day in your personal or professional life, it is also a great day in the history of MCD: it is its first graduation as a University of Specialisation. This might be a personal *rite de passage*, but it is a collective one too. And there are, predictably enough in the genre, three things that I want MCD to remember, three things core to its vocation as a university.

First, MCD should never forget that it has, just by its very existence, a distinctive and prophetic role in the Australian university system. Some weeks ago, in a public meeting, an alumnus of my University asked me how we navigate the morass of subjective opinions that is religious belief and keep the university true to the objective and scientific. I would like to be able to say that I carefully unpacked the epistemological naivety of his question, and that he left with a better philosophical tool kit than he had arrived with. In fact, I mumbled something about the potential objectivity of theology and the potential subjectivity of the natural sciences and then ducked the question by pointing out that my own University has a statutory bar on the teaching of theology written into its foundational act and that therefore the question does not arise. It was not a moment of which I am proud.

But that Australia now has a recognised university committed to the study of Christian theology stands as a challenge to such nonsense. It should remind all universities in this country that ultimate questions are not, and cannot be, off the intellectual agenda, and that the Christian tradition has intellectual resources to deal with those questions that can be the subject of rigorous academic enquiry.

This is particularly the case because MCD is not a part of a comprehensive university. Though I would not ultimately agree with him, Gavin D’Costa has argued that because all academic institutions are built upon a consensus as to the approach that they will take to ultimate questions, and usually a secular one, there is an inevitable secularising of theology and religious studies in the modern university. This, he says, means that the religious studies departments of secular liberal universities are inappropriate environments for developing really first class
theology, and that the ideal model for taking the discipline of theology forward is, in his words, “a Christian university within a pluralist academy on the lines advanced by Alasdair MacIntyre.” I have more hope that a liberal university might make space for competing approaches to the ultimate questions than I think D’Costa does, but it is certainly the case that the very existence of MCD reminds our system as a whole that ultimate questions matter and that the Christian tradition can explore them with a storehouse of intellectual resources developed over two thousand years, and still growing. In that sense, its role is prophetic merely in its existence.

But there is another sense in which the work of MCD should be prophetic, should challenge the working assumptions of the modern university. Sydney was founded as a secular institution in part because of a fear of sectarianism. It was not that religion was regarded as altogether unimportant: until 1972 we had a formal requirement that students attend divine worship if it was so stipulated by their parents or guardians. But the University was founded at a time at which candidates still had to sign the 39 Articles of the Church of England for admission to the University of Oxford and the new University was to be open to all. W.C. Wentworth assumed, in his words, that “if they once introduced the principle of sectarian interference, all government of [the University] would be at an end.” In other words, the assumption was that difference leads to argument and intolerance and that this is especially the case amongst the Christian denominations.

Again, the very existence of MCD, and much more its communal life, should challenge these simplistic assumptions. The work of this institution spans the great divisions in the history of the church: there are western and eastern churches represented, protestant and Catholic, episcopal and free. Of course, there will be differences, not only between these traditions, but between members of this academic community. The prophetic vocation of MCD should be to demonstrate that difference does not inevitably lead to disunity, that it is possible for Christians from a variety of theological traditions to study and to live together.

If MCD can achieve that, then it will be a challenge to the assumptions of our community, not only about differences within the Christian church, but to differences more generally. Anyone who works in a secular university knows the power of ideas to divide, and the propensity of academic communities to develop bitter and hateful rivalries. But as St Paul would say: “It must not be so amongst you”.

The working ethos of MCD must be the distinctive unity that Paul so bewitchingly describes in passages such as Ephesians 4. You will recall that in that passage Paul lays upon his readers the charge that they be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”. The commentator Markus Barth says: “It is hardly possible to render exactly the sense of urgency contained in the underlying Greek verb. Not only haste and passion, but a full effort of the whole man is meant, involving his will, sentiment, reason, physical strength, and total attitude. The imperative mood of the participle found in the Greek text excludes passivity, quietism, a wait-and-see attitude, or a diligence tempered by all deliberate speed. Yours is the initiative! Do it now! Mean it! You are to do it! I mean it!” This urgency is not surprising, because the passage also claims that unity is core to the saving purposes of God. So the charge that St Paul lays upon the Ephesians, he would also lay upon the community here. MCD is to be a place where students and staff bear the marks of the lowliness, meekness, patience, forbearance, maturity, and a love of truth that he suggests in that passage are both the products of, and preconditions to, Christian unity. If you can achieve that, then the prophetic role of this institution will extend far beyond its
walls, far beyond the university sector, and be an agent for real change in our community more generally.

Finally, I think that the prophetic vocation to which MCD is called ultimately involves modeling a distinctive attitude to truth itself. In some western traditions, truth is something to be mastered: the thinker strips it back to its foundations and builds a justification for her claim by a careful process of reasoning. At its worst this tradition leads to a kind of arrogance. In other traditions, truth it is at best unknowable and more radically a chimera. At its worst this tradition leads to despair.

In the Christian tradition, truth can be known, but never exhausted, not least because it is ultimately a Person and not merely propositional. This is not the place to tease out what such a claim might mean for Christian epistemology. But we can, and should, emphasise that a Christian approach to truth should, in practice, lead neither to arrogance, nor to despair, but to humility. Remember Romans 11:33:

“O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out!
For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor?
Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again?
For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen.”

In the Christian tradition, the search for truth should always lead to doxology, and doxology leave the enquirer on her face before God. And in that place, she will find not only truth, but also her true humanity. The vocation of MCD is not only to remind the University sector of the intellectual resources of the Christian tradition, it is not only to model unity in difference, it is to be a place where the excitement of coming to know more and more deeply the mind of God is infectious, and leads to infectious worship. It is to be a place in which staff and students are transformed by their encounter with a Truth that brings radical potential for change. They are engaged in a process of discovery to which, if St Paul is right, there will never be an end.

So, it is quite a task you have set yourselves, this University of Specialisation; quite a mission to which you have been called. But there are few specialisations that could be more rewarding, and few tasks that could constitute as wonderful a vocation. It is my great privilege, on this, the inaugural graduation ceremony of MCD University of Divinity, not only to wish all you graduands well in your own personal vocations, but also to wish this great institution all the blessings of our God as it occupies a distinctive – a prophetic – role in the intellectual and spiritual life of our country. Begin, however dimly, to be true to the vocation to which you have been called and the foundation of this University will be cause for great celebration indeed.