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Life after graduation

By Elise L. Moore, C.S.B.

Graduation is almost an anticlimax. How can one ceremony capture the tears and trials, the laughter and love, of the past few years?

You have bonded with friends, broken from others. You have discovered more about yourself. Perhaps you realize how much there still is to learn. You've pushed past limitations. You've tasted success. The diploma and handshake, your fleeting moment of recognition, are more for friends and family than for yourself. You've learned the lessons, gained the ground, made the memories.

Graduation is the starter's gun at a race. There's this big bang, but it signals the beginning of the race, not the end. What I do with what I've learned, how I perform in the world, that's the race. School and all that it includes are the preparation. It's the training that helps us get in shape. But there comes a point when we need to use what we've been taught. This is life after graduation.

Whether you graduated *magna cum laude* or just barely, there are two qualities that lead to success: character and charity.

Character is the combination of moral and spiritual qualities that form the fabric of an individual. An ethical character puts integrity before self-interest. Unselfishness, persistence, honesty, humility, form the foundation of a trustworthy character.

I believe the best book for character building is the Bible. Each book of the Bible (and there are 66) contains stories and allegories illustrating moral and spiritual lessons. When people in the Bible acted morally and sought the spiritual, they found safety and prosperity. When they resisted the teachings of prophets and inspired teachers, they wandered and struggled. Learning the lessons of the Bible is a recipe for success. In fact, it leads to eternal life where character is a reflection of the divine.

Charity is mercy and benevolence toward others. One dictionary defines charity as "love directed first toward God but also toward oneself and one's neighbors as objects of God's love." Long after monetary success or media attention dwindles, how a person treated their family, friends, and enemies is remembered. Perhaps that's why Paul says, in his first letter to the Corinthians, "Now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity" (13:13). While faith and hope will start a project and even persist in it, charity or love for God and His creation brings the inspiration that makes a project successful.

After graduation, when I started my first job, I felt a lot of pressure to succeed. But the usual benchmarks for success were lacking. There were no quizzes, no exams, no papers to write. No one asked questions to assure themselves I was learning the information correctly. At the end of six weeks, I told my boss I missed the academic format. Where were the interim grades that let you know if you were doing all right? He looked at me a little puzzled and laughed. But I was serious. How could I tell if I was measuring up to accepted standards of employee performance? Everyone was so busy doing their own job, they didn't have time to tell me how well I was doing mine.

So I did what I'd done as a student when presented with a problem. I prayed. I turned to God as the divine Mind, the source of intelligence, the giver of all good. I asked God how I was doing. Talking to God is actually more listening with one's heart than talking with one's mouth. So I opened my heart to God's guidance and waited expectantly for an answer.

The answer came in the form of this Bible verse: "Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth" (II Tim. 2:15).

To me, this meant I needed to go beyond dependence on exams and verbal feedback. I needed to focus on God's approval rather than any person's. As I continued praying, I developed a checklist of moral and spiritual qualities that seemed to me to express the type of character and charity that God approved. The list included qualities such as integrity, diligence, patience, promptness, being uncritical of others, and spiritual sense. If I expressed these qualities, I trusted that success would follow. And it did.

As you begin life after graduation, consider searching the Scriptures for the qualities that build moral and spiritual character and express charity. God is ready to crown your efforts with success.