

Congratulations, gratitude, go!

Keynote address and reflections from ATS executive director

By FRANK M. YAMADA

As executive director, I have had the privilege of offering several commencement addresses. It is one of the most enjoyable parts of my job because graduations are the best time of year for theological schools.



This summer, I was invited to provide the keynote address for the Antiochian House of Studies (AHOS) at its graduation ceremonies. AHOS is one of five accredited Orthodox seminaries within ATS and it is the seminary for the Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America. The Commission on Accrediting of ATS granted the school its initial accreditation in 2022.

To His Grace, Bishop Thomas . . . to President, the Very Rev. Dr. Michel Najim... to Academic Dean, the Rt. Rev. Father Fadi Rabbat . . . Distinguished faculty, honorable guests, and, especially to the graduates of the class of 2024 for the Antiochian House of Studies . . .

I bring greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ from The Association of Theological Schools and the Commission on Accrediting. Many of you know that in June of 2022, Antiochian House of Studies was granted its initial accreditation by ATS. It was a very good day for both Antiochian House of Studies and the Association as the school became an accredited member, joining in the ATS mission of “promoting the improvement and enhancement of theological schools to the benefit of communities of faith and the broader public.” For 106 years, ATS has been the gold standard for quality, graduate-level theological education; and we are honored to have Antiochian House of Studies as a part of the collegium of schools that promote that quality.

I am grateful to have received this invitation to address all of you on this important day. I offer a special word of thanks to your president, the Very Rev. Dr. Najim and to your academic dean, the Rt. Rev. Father Rabbat, for the honor of speaking with you today.

I have three words to offer you today—three words that are appropriate to this occasion.

The first word is congratulations! Congratulations to you, the graduates of the class of 2024. This is a significant milestone on your ongoing journey of living into God’s vocation of bringing all of creation and God’s people into the likeness and image of our Lord Jesus Christ. You have done it:

. . . through your hard work, many hours of study, prayer, and worship together

. . . through the support of your loved one. My spouse used to say my master’s and doctoral degrees were half hers. You have not arrived here on your own.

. . . and most importantly, by the grace of God, you have completed what you sought to finish.

Take time in the next days and weeks to enjoy the fruits of your labor. Celebration is not excess; it is an appropriate

response to the gifts with which God has graced you (the root of congratulations is “to give thanks”). It is good and right to return thanks to God for all the good things that God has done; and what we celebrate here today is a good thing, a very good thing (Gen 1:31).

This leads me to my second word, which is the correct disposition of the life of faith. That second word is gratitude. For what should we be grateful on this graduation day? Let us start with the gift and privilege of the formation that you graduates received through this process of academic study, spiritual direction, and formation within the teachings of the Orthodox faith here at the Antiochian House of Studies. These are not only degrees that you will be receiving today. Indeed, these degrees are a sign of the knowledge and wisdom that you have gained through this process of your ongoing formation for the sake of service in the church and in the body of Christ.

As the Apostle Paul states, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone” (NRSVUE, 1 Cor 12:4-6). Even so, you are not just receiving a degree or certificate today, but we are all acknowledging God’s work in you for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, “for the building up of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12).

For these gifts and these journeys of vocation, we are grateful.

The third word is a charge, and that word is “Go!” It is not enough to have received this grace from God—the gift of study and formation. Seminary education is similar to those times in the gospels when Jesus retreats to pray. It is a time

to be renewed in the presence of our God, to be refreshed, and to be equipped for the journey ahead. But those times of retreat are always followed by times of return to the world and to service to the mission of God.

You do not go into a friendly world. We are living in a time of increased polarization, where people have forgotten the two great commandments that our Lord gave to us—to love God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength; and, perhaps, the one that we have forgotten the most, to love our neighbor as ourselves. We all return to a world from this hilltop experience to do the hard and beautiful work of the ministry, where we live counter-culturally into the love that God has for us by demonstrating love for each other.

So, friends, go with these three words. Congratulations on what God has done in and through you in your time at the Antiochian House of Studies. Give thanks with gratitude for that is the proper response to God’s grace. And go now into this world that desperately needs to know the love of God in Jesus Christ in thought, word, and deed.

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Commencements are a reminder of the gratitude that students and schools experience at the end of the academic year. They launch us into summer, and their messages provide a reminder of what we do in graduate theological education and why we do it. They also provide us with a foundation from which to build a new academic year in the fall.

From all of us at ATS, blessings in this new academic year to the students, staff, faculty, administrators, and boards within the more than 280 member schools of the Association.



Frank M. Yamada is Executive Director at The Association of Theological Schools in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.