

The Next American Awakening Starts Here

As appeared in [*The Catholic Thing*](#)

Mary Eberstadt

SATURDAY, MAY 14, 2022

***Note:** Mary Eberstadt gave this Commencement Address to the 2020 (COVID delayed) and 2022 graduates of [Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts](#) in Warner, New Hampshire on May 7, 2022.*

Some people say that there has never been a harder time in the United States to be Catholic. One can understand why. Public approval weighs against us: today, a furious secularism repudiates ancient Christian teachings about marriage and family, even as rebellion against those teachings produces ever more bitterness and dysfunction. Social cachet weighs against us: for some time now, defending or even mentioning certain parts of the *Catechism* has all but guaranteed exclusion from the headiest parties and most glittering prizes. And, of course, for nearly fifty years – until this very month! – even the magnificent institution of Constitutional law clashed every minute of every day with sacred teaching. Since 1973, the highest court in the land mandated indifference to the incineration of many millions of the unborn, and to the seismic scars these losses have left across America.

The bad news could continue – and in truth, it would be easy enough to go on. Yet on this joyous occasion, let us do something different. Let's put aside the anxieties familiar to today's religious Catholics. I want instead to share a story with you – one with a very different message to remember from your Commencement Day. It's an anecdote that has haunted me, in a good way, for quite a while now. And it is more apposite today than ever, as your Commencement coincides with the news that *Roe vs. Wade* may soon be history – a point to which we'll return in the end. Meanwhile, if, ten or twenty or fifty years from now, you remember nothing else about the other words spoken on this happy day, I hope you will remember this story.

Several years ago, after I gave a public talk on a secular campus, a young woman approached me and said she wanted to share something: she had recently become a Catholic convert. Moved by her sincerity, I asked what, exactly, had brought her into the Church. Was it, say, the glories of philosophy and theology, hammered out over the centuries by some of the greatest minds in history? Was it instead the storehouse of sacred art – all those magnificent sculptures and paintings and architecture, among the most extraordinary ever imagined or built? Or was it instead yet another treasure trove, such as literature and poetry and holy Scripture, also stretching back over millennia?

These were not exactly foolish questions. After all, many a convert has crossed the threshold, enticed by exactly such unrivaled patrimony. But as it turned out, they were nonetheless all wrong. *No, no, and no*, the young woman said. What drew her into Catholicism, she explained, was something far less abstract.

This young woman, an only child, had been raised by her single mother with no religion – what we might now call a classic “none of the above.” During her years in high school, she became best friends with another girl, this one from a large, devout Catholic family. And exotic though she found this friend's home life at first, it also led our young woman to an epiphany. More and more, during her teenage years, she felt drawn to spending time with that family. More and more, she immersed herself in the bustle and company of this household, so lively and full of energy, so different from the home that was her own. In the end, she explained, her reason for entering the Church was simple. She said, and I quote, “I wanted what they had.”

You can scour newsfeeds and social media and even Great Books, and not find one signpost for evangelization flashing more glorious neon than that one. “I wanted what they had.” Graduates of Magdalen College, as you exit this productive and happy home to form new ones of your own, please remember those words. They capture a truth, and they capture it exquisitely. As you live out your vocations, and build your own communities and parishes and hearths, never forget that more and more of the people among you hail from places far more broken and spiritually bereft. Always remember that even if they make an enemy of you, deep down, those people want what you have, too: the transcendent solidity of faith and family, lived as only the true believers live those deep truths.



Addressing graduation

And those unhappy people are not alone. The entire United States of America, at this momentous time, needs you, and the fruits of your extraordinary educations. This is so for three urgent reasons.

First: you are needed as informed witnesses to beauty and to truth, in an age when these precious commodities are grossly undervalued – an age in which some of the most vaunted academic institutions on earth deny that they even exist.

During the years in which you have been educated as heirs and heiresses to Western civilization, many of your peers in other classrooms have been systematically disenfranchised from it. Instead of being nourished by logic and reason, they have been force-fed the junk food of victimhood. Instead of learning from history, they have been told lies about the supposed nefariousness of every great mind, and every great statesman, to have come before. Worst of all, instead of being taught that they have noble vocations, they have instead imbibed the inhuman message that they have no purpose on this earth – except perhaps to view themselves and their prospective progeny as blights on its very face.

These grave losses of heritage and hope are not the fault of the people who bear them. But the miseducation of so many of your contemporaries is a reality with which you will have to contend. When you do, remember that young woman in the story. Remember that atomized people want love. Just by virtue of being human, they, too, want to belong to something greater

than they are – even if all they can find on their own is a pitiful online cult, or some other disastrous substitute for the real thing.

Your schooling is the skeleton key to treasures of humanity that many of your contemporaries have never seen. Use it. Use it often.

Second: the wider world you now enter also needs your public example *as* Catholics.

This, too, is even truer today than before, due to the unseen fallout of secularization. More and more people your age are not only anti-Church, but unchurched altogether. Religious illiteracy is rising. As a consequence, eyes that have never read Scripture will look to *you* for their definition of what it means to be “Catholic.” A passage in Hebrews says, “Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unaware.” We can add, thereby have some Catholics unknowingly entertained converts.

Who knows what that particular young woman saw, in that particular home of her friend, that finally pushed her to church? Maybe she witnessed people welcoming, say, an unexpected baby into their lives – with joy. Or maybe people were caring for an elderly family member, at home – without complaint. Or maybe she observed by example that marriage can be demanding – but lived for eternity nonetheless. Or maybe instead she rejoiced in the sheer absence of loneliness that so often blesses homes like her friend’s, homes resolutely open to life.

As you live out your own joys and sorrows in the years ahead, you remember that you never know who might be watching, or what the result might be.

Third, and perhaps above all: your precious educations in goodness and truth, are needed now more than ever for one more reason, which is the state of the Church itself in our time.

No doubt there has always been confusion in and around the Church. But this moment feels perilously unique. Many Catholics today are not only ignorant about abstract points of doctrine, but about teachings that stretch all the way back to the apostles. The President of the United States, the Speaker of the House of Representatives, and many other public figures court heresy. They jeopardize not only their own souls, but also, so we are taught, the souls of countless others misled by their example. They collude with evil for the sake of earthly advantage. Nor is capital-c Confusion confined to the laity. Some of our bishops today openly fear, and with just cause, that other bishops are misleading the flock about fundamental teachings concerning sex and marriage. Talk of schism has become promiscuous. Here, too, the list could go on.

And here, too, is where your counterexample is critical. The stronger the temptation becomes within the Church to let secularism overrule what is God’s, the more responsibility falls on the laity who *are* formed in the faith to stand as signs of contradiction – to speak truth to scandalous power; to work for the day when a phrase like “pro-abortion Catholic” is scorned as an oxymoron from a discredited time.

You are needed, as a corollary, to embody one of the features that set Christianity apart from the very beginning: the selfless caring for others that helped set into motion what might be called the *first* great awakening – the turn to Christianity by pagan Rome. As the Greek historian Eusebius put it, writing of how Christians behaved during a plague in 312-313 AD:

All day long some of them [the Christians] tended to the dying and to their burial, countless numbers with no one to care for them. Others gathered together from all parts of the city a multitude of those withered from famine and distributed bread to them all.



The Magdalen graduates

Julian the Apostate, the last pagan emperor of Rome, noted the same solidarity, also with wonder. Nor were Christian good works confined to other Christians alone. Rather, as Julian emphasized: “They support not only their poor, but ours as well.”

This distinguishing charity made a lasting impression on the pagans of yesterday. It has the power to do the same even now, and maybe especially now, among the pagans of today. The world that you will go on to transform in ways seen or unseen, the world that includes those people, will have your Catholicism to thank, whether they ever do or not.

There is one final thought that I hope you will meditate upon during the exciting years and decades ahead. Ask yourselves what burst of Providence situated your Commencement in this moment, of all American moments. As we have learned just within this week, sooner or later, in one way or another, the Supreme Court of the United States is about to transform the country you are inheriting. For the first time in the lives of anyone under 49 years of age, the law of the American land will shift its mighty weight on behalf of the defenseless. It will say that the routine trashing of human life is not a constitutional right, after all.

Graduates of Magdalen College: from this day on, the conjuncture of that momentous discovery, plus your launch from this faithful school, makes you unique. It is a clear sign that you are essential personnel in the struggles to come, struggles to

make ours a more loving and humane country. You are missionaries of a whole new order, and to a new group in desperate need of your gifts.

These underattended people include the woke, and the “Nones.” They include the angry, misguided mobs that pour into the streets, seeking identity in all the wrong places. They include even the enraged activists who have swarmed the Supreme Court, ever since last week, and who will continue their theater of rage until they die, or convert.

It is easy – all too easy – for Catholics educated in truth to write these antagonists off as lost causes. But the fact is that they are not lost causes. They are instead manifestly lost souls. And with evil now forced into recession, in however limited and circumscribed a form, good has a new shot at the public square. Do not throw away that shot.

The first Great American Awakening began in Northampton, MA, almost two hundred years and some two hours’ drive southwest of here. The next one begins today, in Warner, NH. For it is incumbent on those who are *not* lost, but who have found themselves in devoted communities like this one, to seek ways of drawing today’s new pagans near. However alien they may appear, those people, too, want what you have. God bless you as you help yourselves, and them, to find your way through this world with honor, and all the way home.

About the Author



Mary Eberstadt

Mary Eberstadt is a Senior Research Fellow at the Faith and Reason Institute and holds the Panula Chair at the Catholic Information Center. This column is adapted from her introduction to Judge Conrad at his book talk on December 13, 2021.



The Baccalaureate Procession