

GOD IN ALL THINGS: THE ART OF A PURPOSEFUL LIFE.

Xavier University Commencement Address by Holly Schapker

May 17, 2025

Good morning!

Thank you Dr. Rasmussen, for that generous introduction. I'm grateful to Dr. Hanyecz and the Board of Trustees for this honor that I accept with deep humility and joy.

To the Provost, distinguished deans, faculty and staff who guided these students with wisdom, thank you for your commitment to Xavier's mission.

A special thanks to the Society of Jesus. You taught me the true way of beauty and what is real success. To ask not "What will I do?" but "Whom will I serve?" The meaningful life oriented toward others is how the soul finally feels it's worth.

To the families of our graduates—thank you for your sacrifices. This celebration belongs to you as well.

And most importantly, to the Class of 2025—congratulations!

You've persevered through unprecedented challenges. The faculty has been inspired by your desire to make the world better through concrete action. Beyond Xavier gear, you have clothed yourself with excellence.

When I received this honor, I told my nephew, Josh Fieger, a rising senior. He said, and I quote, "that's insane!" Artists, actually, hear that a lot. This time, I take it as a compliment.

But it's my Xavier education that brought me here today. With God, all things, even insane things, are possible.

Thirty-three years ago, I sat where you are. I was a young artist filled with excitement and uncertainty. Those four years included wrestling with self-doubt, loneliness, and sometimes feeling broken. Sound familiar? And this was even before the endless perils of social media!

Unknowingly, Xavier opened my heart, allowing God to work within me... I began to trust in His goodness.

I wish I could show you my awful freshman paintings. Pink and green straight from the tube. Shapes competing without a focal point. I was clueless. Comparing and judging my insides with others' outsides.

This Jesuit institution embraced me with its *cura personalis*—care for the whole person—while seeing who I could become. I learned to place my focus on God rather than my limited self. My weaknesses became my assets when surrendered to His transformative power.

I entered Xavier seeking an art education, but I received far more—a foundation for purposeful living and a spiritual compass.

Frankly, I don't remember who gave the commencement address at my graduation, back in 1992. And I doubt that you are going to remember me. I do hope, however, that you remember this:

Love is why.

Love is why you exist. Before you were in your mother's womb, God knew you and created you for a unique role in His plan, which by the way, included this university. You were made in His image, and He calls you "good." Now, equipped, you're invited to labor with Him as an apprentice to a Master Artist.

The artist's role is presenting another perspective—making the invisible visible. Your task is to make your Creator's invisible love visible to our world.

As I look at you today, I see artists in every field—people who will paint not just on canvases but on society's fabric. Whether healing bodies, shaping minds, building organizations, or creating art, you have the power to help others see the world anew through the love you show.

Martin Luther King Jr. said, "Love is the greatest force in the universe." And what is love? St. Thomas Aquinas defined it as "to will the good of another... for the other's sake."

Ignatius Loyola (the Founder of the Jesuit Order) challenged the young Francis Xavier with a question: "What would you have if you gained the whole world and lost your soul?" This question transformed Xavier completely.

Like an artist turning a painting upside down for fresh perspective, Xavier abandoned self-centered ambitions to serve others zealously. Ignatius helped Xavier discover what truly mattered—not worldly success, but living for something greater than himself.

Students, you've achieved greatly here. Never underestimate this accomplishment. St. Ignatius would see greatness in you too and ask: "Who or what will you treasure most as you forge ahead?"

Francis Xavier believed what Ignatius saw in him. He fell in love with serving others, and it changed everything. His secret? It was his faith, kindness, and his smile.

Graduates, see greatness in others and don't forget the power of smiling. It recognizes the dignity in each person. Remember, Mother Teresa said, "Peace begins with a smile."

When I'm painting, I blend pigments and create harmony through connected marks. Similarly, in our harsh world, a single act of loving kindness, united with Christ, can have cosmic effects. When we simply do the next right thing, beauty emerges amid suffering and confusion.

Our Great Master wants to make a masterpiece of your life using the Jesuit ideal of *Magis*—meaning, "the more." This isn't about accumulating possessions or achievements. It's about depth, not breadth. Excellence, not perfection. It's asking, "How can I love more deeply? Serve more generously? Create more authentically?" At some point, you realize that your tasks in life are not about you.

Just as Michelangelo transformed a flawed, rejected marble into the David, imagine what God could do with you if you trusted Him. The same Spirit that created the universe breathes life into your most intimate desires, gently nudging you towards all that is good. Who would refuse this assistance?

Trust enables our Sculptor to chisel away excess, setting us free. Gratitude for His work in us becomes the source of our joy and freedom. Offering our life and talents to God mysteriously makes humility our superpower.

Friends, as you leave Xavier Nation, embrace life's entirety—successes and failures alike—knowing that you're anchored in the Master's love and care. While happiness fluctuates, joy remains accessible even in difficult times.

My fellow Musketeers, we gain from the saints' contribution: each is a masterpiece of God who changed the world's perspective. There's no reason why Xavier can't have among its works of art a saint of its own in you.

Today, when you receive your diploma, you're being handed a brush to approach the easel of your future. With this diploma comes a great mission.

No doubt, you're entering a world that needs what your Xavier education has given you—the ability to think critically and act compassionately, to recognize complexity without surrendering to cynicism, to stand firm in your convictions while remaining open to dialogue.

St. Mother Teresa, St. Ignatius Loyola, St. Francis Xavier, Martin Luther King Jr., and St. Thomas Aquinas all ignited our world by carrying a torch with the flame of love.

Now it's your turn.

Go forth and set our world on fire!

How? You might ask. Surrender to become a vessel of Light. This is how our ordinary lives become exceptional, or insane, if you like. We accomplish tasks beyond our abilities, witnessing extraordinary results without feeling like impostors. Knowing all this, is gift.

Remember: God who is Love has chosen you, Love is why, and Love never fails.

Brothers and sisters, may you always carry the light of Jesuit education with you. May you find God in all things, be men and women for others, and always reach for the greater glory of God.

Congratulations, Class of 2025.

Thank you, and God bless you all.