**Address by the President**

**of Assumption University of Thailand**

**at the 37th Commencement Exercises**

**Queen Sirikit National Convention Center**

**Saturday, January 23, 2010**

Chairman of the University Council,

President Emeritus,

Campus Minister,

Members of AU Community,

Honored Guests,

Parents,

Alumni, and

Dear Graduates, Class XXXVII

I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you who are present here today to honor our graduates Class of 2009.

Dear Graduates …

Some of you graduated last year and have entered into the workforce of society. Some are just new graduates. In whatever status you have, and wherever you may be, you are now AU graduates. You deserve the honor accorded to you today with all its grandeur, surrounded by the university personnel, your near and dear ones, your close friends, and a place beautifully decorated appropriate for the occasion.

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the tensions and conflicts which have emerged on the international stage would seem to indicate that the world system is experiencing multiple crises.

Challenges are, in fact, succeeding one after another and are accumulating in areas as diverse as the environment, security, energy, finance or the economy as a whole.

Newspaper headlines, such as the following can readily be seen:

*"Corruption can be seen spreading in corridors of power."*

*"Ethical practices are increasingly ignored in the scramble for profit, according to the annual Economic and Political Risk Consultancy (EPRC) survey."*

*"Key shareholders implicated in billion baht fraud."*

*"World Football Federation charged 5 league footballers with match-fixing after throwing home game with the shocking score of 0-6."*

*"School admission battle costs desparate parents a billion!"* (Bangkok Post, 2009).

And there are many more such headlines drawing the attention of the public.

We live in the age of the individual, a time of greed and cynicism; where personal gain is worshipped above all else, and common courtesy has lost its values. The world of today is awash with meanings suggesting how people should live their lives. This is amplified by the media, especially film and television, where consumerism is all pervasive – this can even give an impression that meaning and satisfaction in life revolve around what one can buy. The extreme pluralism pervading contemporary society and the rapid structural changes, profound technical innovations and the globalisation of the economy affect human life more and more throughout the world (Crawford, 2003). With an ever increasing emphasis on individualism and the material good life, many do not bother to look for guidance from the traditional support structures for meaning which seem to offer few options; their interests and needs are many and varied; they may be so busy enjoying themselves and/or working so hard that they give little thought to an overall meaning to their lives. Today such people may feel that they are alone in their search for a view and purposes of life that can sustain them.

However, being alone also leads people to feel anxiety about the meaning and their purposes in life. They are caught between feelings of despair about the directions of their life, and a desire to find explanations and answers to bewildering events and experiences. They need some interpretation of what is going on in their lives and in the world that helps them cope and plan a hopeful future. In contemporary societies, the pluralism and pace of life have affected the ways in which families and communities used to serve as frames of reference for beliefs and values (Rossiter, 2006). Some of the major concerns of young people today are unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, and the search for meaning and identity. We are in the age of materialism, consumerism, and religious pluralism. People seem to get more education, yet more and more complicated problems arise. The quest for knowledge becomes a quest for facts and acquaintance with the processes that lead to facts. Modern education derives its stimulus from the dictum first advanced by Francis Bacon: "Knowledge is power." But an enterprise dedicated to the "pursuit of knowledge," with the sense of power as the

affirmed or unaffirmed end of learning, constitute many other kinds of problems. The more advanced our technological age becomes, the more intricate these concerns become. Our society as well as other parts of the world faces many problems: either they be in the form of conflicts, or economic and financial crises, or corruption of various forms, or poverty including environmental decadence. His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, in his message for the celebration of the World Day of Peace on January 1, 2010, stated very clearly that "Our present crises – be they economic, food-related, environmental or social are ultimately also moral crises, and all of them are interrelated." Human beings are trying their best to find solutions to the problems. Some are turning to corporate social responsibility (CSR), others find comfort in material offerings to some good causes to compensate in their consciences for their own bad behavioral acts, forgetting that the foundation of life should be constructed as early as possible in one's life. What is expected from each and everyone of you is that you must be truly an AU graduate who is always in the process of transformation, of becoming a (morally) mature person.

At AU, education means the transformation of a person in all areas and aspects of life. It is a holistic approach of which spiritual development is a part. Academic excellence and achievement are often seen as the hallmark of scholarship and status in society. While intellectual preparation is essential, spiritual preparation is even more so. Both are essential for the proper functioning of the body. The dimension of spiritual development has been left out of the picture. At this Commencement Exercise, and as you are about to be released to engage the world, with much anxiety, permit me to keep reminding you of your continued responsibility on your spiritual development which encapsulates the other dimensions of development in a person. As this will be my last discourse for you, I am aware of your willingness to listen to me.

**What do I mean by spiritual development?**

Before any thing else, an understanding of the term "spirituality" is necessary. For many people, the term "spiritual" is automatically associated with a religion, a belief in an absolute being and a religious practice as a source of inspiration, a unifying factor in life and a motivation for commitments.

Traditionally, the word "spirituality" has had a religious connotation – the style of prayer and spiritual practice that expresses a religious faith and a religious perspective on life. But now, in addition to this religious usage, the word "spirituality" has been selected by others precisely to avoid the religious connotation. It has become an ubiquitous term covering many different personal aspects of life and culture. Therefore, a definition of spirituality needs to be

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broad enough to allow for a religious, as well as acknowledging a spiritual dimension to living that includes personal aspects, values and aesthetic concerns to allow us to negotiate both traditional interests and new developments (Rossiter, 2006). There seems to be multiple views of spirituality.

*According to Ronald Rolheiser (1999), spirituality is about what we do with our spirits, our souls. A healthy spirit or a healthy soul must do dual jobs: (i) First, it has to give us energy and fire, so that we do not lose our vitality, and all sense of the beauty and joy of living. (ii) Second, its other task, and a very vital one, is to keep us glued together, integrated, so that we do not fall apart and die.*

*Many believe that the spiritual can be legitimized outside of any reference to religion, and that people can live purposeful, credible spiritual lives without belonging to a religion.*

*Some deal with the spiritual experience of human beings and call for a form of "horizontal transcendence," meaning the capacity of human beings to transcend, or reach beyond, themselves. Others are inclined to see the spiritual experience as an openness toward other people: they find meaning in their lives through their commitments and live their lives in a very incarnate manner, directing their efforts toward concrete social and humanitarian issues.*

*Some, on the other hand, seek to penetrate possible worlds elsewhere.*

*For others, the spiritual experience is so difficult to conceptualize or define that they deal with it with the help of allegories, thereby showing that the spiritual life cannot be limited to a discourse or conceptual framework (Ministry of Education, 2007).*

In a nutshell, the concept of spiritual life refers to people's values and dignity. It is also the intrinsic value of human beings that requires, and provides a foundation, respect for the principle of equality. We are being asked to examine the unacknowledged presuppositions that guide higher education that can stifle the legitimate exploration of larger human concerns, including what we can call our moral and spiritual concerns. In general, the word "spirituality" in this context can be referred to those immaterial dimensions of life that give it meaning and purpose.

## Commitment to Spiritual Development

When we talk of spiritual development, we are speaking of the spiritual dimension of a person's life, or that part of the holistic approach to student development. We see spiritual growth as the core dimension of a person's development, the key to further growth. Physical, emotional, psychological, social, environmental, and intellectual development are inextricably tied to spiritual growth and enhanced by paying attention to this as a vital component of learning – the habits of the heart (Allen, 2001).

A university is to have a significant part in looking to the culture of the human spirit as a responsible end of the educational process. Culture here implies the growth and cultivation of human beings in their spiritual dimension. The university that is concerned to do its task adequately, with respect both to the culture of the human mind in individual thinkers and to the culture of the human spirit within the social culture at large, will set seriously to work to provide resources for this kind of growth in its people. Higher education must satisfy both certain intellectual and moral demands.

AU has a role in communicating a basic set of meanings to students in ways that respect the emerging personal autonomy and individuality of young people. It is presumed that education is not the primary means of resolving the social problems, but what it can do well is help young people become well informed, and learn how to think critically about the contemporary socio-cultural situation and about spiritual and moral issues (Rossiter, 2006). The moral, ethical and spiritual development of students is a fundamental goal of education. All teachers, across all areas of the curriculum, have a responsibility to inculcate in their students positive values and capacity for moral and ethical judgment. AU has a unique opportunity and responsibility not only to foster the growth and development of the individual students for which we are responsible but also to affect the larger university environment. In short, we have the opportunity to create a better world locally on campus. Spiritual principles flow from the belief that we are all connected. We have an interdependent relationship with each other, and with nature. We have Faculties and Departments to mark our territory. We have rules to govern our behavior. But we also have activities which cause us to lose contact with others and even ourselves or fail to develop the relationships necessary for facilitating connection. The pace of our studies often does not allow reflection.

We often define the worth of our ability in terms of getting a high GPA. This creates a treadmill effect that works against reflective questioning and covenantal relationships. Spiritual

relationships are formed in a covenant between people. A covenant relationship extends beyond the legal minimum requirements. If we hold back or relate solely on the basis of legal standards, we also limit the quality and potential impact of our relationships.

Therefore, two levels of support are needed to enhance the spirituality of our students; the first is organizational, and the second is individual.

### (i) Organizational Support

We need to identify ways to shape an organizational culture that reflects spiritual principles. If we are to create a living community that supports spiritual practice and development, we need to shift our culture from one of a fragmented treadmill to one that encourages reflection, caring, community, and integration. We have to form strategies that develop a culture in our university that supports a living community. It should be a place that gives energy instead of draining it. It fulfills and sustains the life of the group itself, and the members in it. The members of a living community recognize and act on the principle of trust, interdependence and treat each other as sacred.

### (ii) Individual Support

Fostering students' spiritual development means activating in them the predisposition to delve into their inner selves in order to discover what makes them live as full-fledged human beings. This task basically consists in helping develop students' humanity, that is, what ensures their dignity and value.

It is only through a voluntary commitment that students can undertake this process, since human beings always retain the freedom to turn away from that toward which their humanity calls them. Spiritual development is related to the most basic concerns of individuals driven by a desire for completeness and, most often, by a need for change. To be able to achieve their full stature as human beings, supporting them in their desire for completeness, that is, fostering their full dignity, elevating them to a higher plane, ensuring that they grow, and nurturing all the dimensions of their being, educating them, shaping them and even ennobling them by giving them " a character of moral greatness."

The role of AU is to facilitate opportunity for student development and to change its paradigm.

1. We must know how to assess one's personal development, develop reflective practices, and creating authenticity in relationships.

2. Treat each other as worthy of reverence and respect, willing to show appreciation and consideration to others.

3. Recognize the strengths and unique gifts in ourselves and also in others.

4. Pay attention to what you do. Your behavior affects those around you.

5. Talk frankly with each other and help develop authenticity and integrity (Allen, 2001).

AU exists to train students for leadership. It has the privilege to initiate and encourage spiritual development in the students through discipleship training and creating appropriate contexts, the student nonetheless has the primary responsibility to desire and own this goal. A formative influence on the growth of the spiritual life of a person is in the imitation of a spiritual model a person holds close to. Spiritual formation is the activity which moulds our lives in the likeness of the master (model). Our cooperation through certain practices makes us open and responsive to the call. AU through its curriculum, the faculty, students, resources within, and society provide an appropriate environment to help the students in their spiritual development.

How to Help Students Achieve their Goals

The starting point for enhancing the spiritual development of our students is their deep soul work, reflection on their own lives and what gives them meaning.

The world of the student is another factor that influences his or her spiritual development. A student that lives in the familiar comfort zone of the university must go into the real world after his or her graduation. Their spirituality is waiting to be tested. A spiritual journey which has never encountered suffering may lead to a false image of spirituality. To help facilitate the students' spiritual development means the University must be ready to do the following:

(1) nurturing their desire to seek new challenges and helping to make them aware of the unsuspected dimensions of human beings, that is, the body, the heart, the spirit, reason and passion;

(2) encouraging them to open themselves up to 'value' – what is worth doing in the life to any human being;

(3) helping to make them aware of the depth of human beings; of what gives them priceless value;

(4) enabling them to gradually come to grips with the freedom that constitutes human nature; and

(5) helping them assume the responsibilities that stem from the sharing of one common humanity.

**Necessary Learning**

It is necessary for students to develop certain attitudes.

(1) **The attitude for freedom**

Freedom is a fundamental drive in human beings that is actualized in several ways. To be free to think, to make choices, to take charge of one's life and to assume one's own identity, to be able to create something new, to dare to try out new behavior, to open oneself to new influences, the ability to situate one's actions in relation to those of others in the social, legal and cultural environment.

It can be achieved by trial and error, or by reflecting from time to time on the meaning of life.

(2) **The aptitude for introspection**

In a world where the quest for efficiency has growing influence, where young and old are pressured from all sides and prompted to live connected to the outside world, young people need to be directed toward their inner world, the intimate space where they can be alone with themselves, where they can reflect and be silent.

They should give themselves time to pause and stop reflecting not only on themselves, but to understand themselves and construct their world-view, by connecting their threads to others and the world.

(3) **The courage to be**

The aptitude to persevere despite the difficulties and doubts that one may have.

It can mean not giving up in the face of lost friendships, failure in school, betrayal, solitude, etc. that make us realize our finiteness of the human condition. Having such courage

builds resilience and enables students to believe in their own ability to lead successful lives. "The courage to be" sets in motion all of one's personal resources.

Developing the "courage to be" means motivating them to have confidence in their own resources (potentials) and to dare to commit themselves despite the risk of failure or disappointment. It may even mean helping students to rediscover deep within themselves a love of life, so as to enable themselves to find their way again and bounce back.

### (4) Identity construction and the meaning of otherness

The building of individual identity through the constant search for balance between the relationship with oneself and openness to others is essential/important. The building of personal identity, marked by otherness, is at the very heart of spiritual development. The ability to "decenter" in order to enter the realm of others is a quality that takes time to develop. At the start of life in school, students are still strongly influenced by a desire to be the center of the universe. Becoming human means learning gradually to make room for others, to take one's place among others and even, at times, to offer one's place to others.

Fostering a sense of otherness means helping students become open to others and engaging in true communication. It means helping students to cope with the limits, harshness and self-withdrawal to which such encounters expose them. A formative experience (the openness toward others) is the touchstone of spiritual development. That openness leads to dialogue and deliberation and gradually learning to see themselves as a subject within a community of subjects and to interact with the members of that community as well as in seeking meaning.

### (5) The aptitude for taking responsibility

Through a variety of activities and situations, students can realize that in life "we live not only with others, but also for others," being available to respond to their requests and needs hence, developing a social conscience. It means being capable of ethical indignation and also being sensitive, compassionate and benevolent in their regard. In concrete situations, students must first understand that justice goes beyond the desire to have one's share at any cost. They need to be supported to respond to the causes that appeal to them and to make commitments within their capabilities. Therefore, fostering in students the development of a

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sense of responsibility means giving them power over themselves and their environment, and providing them with the means to actualize their freedom. It is an effort to make the transition from a world that revolves around oneself to a world that challenges itself.

The students' spiritual life takes a variety of paths and is expressed in a number of ways, including relations with the community. Social involvement activities enable students of different convictions to work together to build a fair and equitable society. Service learning lends itself readily to the organization of integrated, horizontal projects, since its objectives deal with both the personal and the social dimension of individuals. Some of the actions are aimed at opening students up to local and international communities. A network of local or international resources is thereby established, which is devoted to the educational development of the students and can appeal to students or education stakeholders.

## Obstacle Faced

Obstacles seem to be part of life and it is unavoidable. On one hand, teachers and parents may have vocally supported the ideals of a holistic education, and the importance of spiritual/moral studies, but this is usually not seen as important by students. Many students have a poor regard for it. Even when students like the subjects, they felt it has little relevance to their lives or future employment. Subjects that are more specifically concerned with personal development had no such tangible or employment-related outputs. Many treated personal development studies as a nominal, peripheral requirement.

On the other, students have an innate resistance to being told what to do in their own lives. Any school study to do with values, beliefs and behavior can only too easily be perceived as an exhortation, and this is enough for them to keep the study at arms length. Any approach that remotely resembles an exhortation from authority runs the risks of relegation to the irrelevant basket (Crawford, 2003). Moreover, in most of the educational institutions of higher learning, priority is on the attainment of academic excellence to the detriment of the spiritual dimension.

Studies have the capacity to become windows on contemporary life, sensitizing students to seeing things differently in their own experience, helping them become better interpreters of both meaning in the texts and meaning in their own personal experience (Rossiter, 2006).

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Without doubt, where teachers can do this they are educating their students in the spiritual and moral layers of life. What it is being expressed is a holistic education. It is fostering what might be called personal learning. Some parts of the content may occasion personal learning by students. Personal relevance is not an element that can be readily or easily injected. The school has a limited capacity to bring about personal change in young people.

While such studies are "searching" and not "confrontative", they can challenge young people to expand their own understanding of meaning and identity related issues, sharpening their focus on the factors and questions that impinge on their own personal development, and on their physical and social development. All students will not move in this direction, neither will they move at the same pace.

Personal change is influenced by many factors outside the classroom teaching/ learning process; personal change has to come freely from within the individual if it is to be authentic; if personal change is to have repercussions through an individual's personality, beliefs and behavior, it is unlikely to happen then and there in the classroom (Crawford, 2003).

In conclusion, the responsibility for spiritual development lies largely with the individual students. One cannot assume that all will be educated by the formal provisions of classroom and campus life. It is a lifelong venture if it is seriously undertaken at all; and no educational institution has yet sought to provide nurture for the entire life-span of its students. It would look upon these college years as a time of seeding and of serious nurture.

Spiritual formation cannot be left to chance. Attention should be paid to factors affecting trust, openness, and individual traits in and outside classroom setting – in their engagement together with peers and lecturers, they are on the spiritual journey. Everyday they must learn to progress within their own lives, intertwined with the lives of others.

New learning strategies can help them use their knowledge, skills and behaviors. The realities of daily life are determinants of their learning about life and their point of entry into society, where challenges confront them in constantly new ways. It is, above all, on the basis of these daily realities that spiritual support will be experienced, rather than through the addition of structured activities.

Students may go through difficult times or experience grief. They themselves follow a spiritual path and face crises in their own lives. But open-mindedness and open-heartedness,

a firm intention to provide support and attention to one's own inner life are already significant steps in the right direction. In the process of working on spiritual development of students, the university shall facilitate their spiritual development. They are endowed with a unique inner life that enables them to imagine the world, to think about their relationship with others, and to question the rationale for things, their own lives and the universe.

Dear Graduates ...

Development of your spirituality being a lifelong process does not end with graduation. Moreover, many obstacles are unavoidable. If you commit yourself to its growth and development in your daily life, it will pay off handsomely.

As AU graduates, remember that you are our little ambassadors to the society. You must be the salt of the earth and the light of the world. Prove to all how professionally competent and spiritually mature you are and live your life to the fullest.

Once again, I offer my congratulations and best wishes to each and everyone of you on your graduation. May the Almighty God, the source of all lives, grant you the graces and wisdom to continue your life journey, to realize your potentials, to live your life to the fullest, and to be able to face life's challenges. May He accompany you in every step you take. With Him, you can be confident of your success.

May God be with you always.

Thank you

Bancha Saenghiran, f.s.g., Ph.D.
President
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