I should like to begin by welcoming family and friends, those who have supported our graduates in countless ways, some for many years, and still others, the parents for all of their lives. You are very welcome today and you will continue always to be welcome here at CUA. Thank you for all you have done and are for our graduates.

I want to acknowledge the faculty who have worked with these graduates, some for many years, often with countless unexpected tasks as well as with the never routine tasks of teaching, advising, mentoring, directing and reading. It is nothing less than an honor to work with this group of faculty colleagues.

At the same time in a “community of scholars” please know that as you graduates have learned from us, we have also learned from you. And we look forward to learning from you in the months and years ahead in what you research, write and do for the academic and the ecclesial communities to which you will belong.

Allow me to thank publicly Associate Dean Charles Jones as he completes his first year in that position. For many of you “Chuck” has been the liaison between yourselves and the University whose job description will never list all the tasks and details he needs to attend to. And I wish to thank his Assistant Ms. Abimbola Akintolayo, herself finishing her first year with us. In most cases she has been your immediate contact with the School and again for numberless tasks on your and our behalf I want to thank her publicly.

I want to thank the other graduate dean in our School, Fr. Mark Morozowich for his leadership in seminary and ministerial programs, represented by several of our Masters and Bachelors graduates today. And finally I want to thank Assistant Dean Karen Korol who has worked with several of our doctoral students in their apprentice work in assisting professors teach courses, in teaching courses themselves and especially this year in the new university wide “First Year Experience” initiative. I don’t think anyone will ever know the amount of additional work this has placed on her desk which she has managed with both passion and equanimity.

I welcome our guests to Washington, D.C., a town familiar to most of us here and known to far more as “inside the Beltway.” I like to say that D.C. it is a town of “movers and shakers” -- from which eventually all the shakers move! As grand as is this city with its concrete and steel monuments, its impressive buildings and corridors of power, it is also a city that is in essence always “in transition,” and on the go. It is a city that many plan their whole lives to get to. And then by the elections decided by others or by self selection they eventually move away, most to return home. In Washington many come and they eventually go. In the meantime they often leave us with memorable accomplishments, words and ideas.

Today is a day to acknowledge and celebrate our graduates’ memorable and notable accomplishments in words and ideas. Today this School boasts a bumper crop of doctoral degrees conferred – twenty-nine in all – each of which reflects enormous effort
on the part of these graduates about deciding what to write about, how to research and how write about it with the assistance of your faculty mentors in helping you think, research and write more and more precisely.

While all of this could be said at any other time in our university’s history (or any other university’s history) I would like to focus these remarks about words and ideas in light of the life and intellectual contribution of John Henry Newman who will be beatified next September in his native Birmingham, U.K. For us gathered here his book *The Idea of a University* has always held special resonance and I suspect that it will in the months leading to and from his beatification. It is regarded as a classic in the modern Catholic intellectual tradition. I would argue that it is a masterpiece in the way Newman goes about thinking through the inter relationship of subjects and topics that comprise any university and the way the Catholic tradition bears on them and they on Catholicism. We serve Newman well and our Catholic intellectual tradition well by reviewing this classic text and allowing ourselves to be drawn into its breadth and depth, especially in the way it challenges us to be broad and expansive in our understanding of Catholicism and Catholic theology.

John Henry Newman was an Anglican priest who converted to the Catholic Church in 1845. Part of this faith journey coincided with his involvement in the Oxford Movement which sought to recover the Catholic roots of the Church of England. He wrote about his faith journey in his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* and in the *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*. Many of you students and dare I say almost all of the faculty have been influenced by Newman’s writings on doctrine and by the example of his conversion. Several of our faculty are deeply engaged in ecumenical and interreligious dialogues, both national and international. And I daresay that our students have been well influenced by those involvements. Some of you have studied here precisely because of those involvements of this faculty. Those dialogues reflect the worldview and commitment of this church sponsored university. Those dialogues are about words and ideas, about how to craft into more precise words what we believe and how what we write separately and together can assist us in fulfilling the command “that all may be one” (Jn. 17:21).

But if in the ecumenical world ideas and words are not translated into deeds then where are we? I have wondered more than once since last fall what would have been Newman’s understanding and reaction of the document *Anglicanorum coetibus*? Here words and ideas have spawned an action, acclaimed by some, disdained by some, ignored by many. Caricatured as a “power grab,” in fact the text itself indicates that it is a response to a number of requests for some years to offer a path for joining the Catholic church by congregations as well as clergy. I must admit that it was only after spending several days in the U.K. during this academic year that I realized how broad was the use of the pastoral provision initiated in 1980 for Anglican clergy to become Catholics, a much more far reaching practice than we have seen in the USA. I acknowledge my own real American provincialism and presumption that everyone did it the way we did! Clearly questions remain about the implementation of this document, with implications for
ecclesiology yet undefined. This is a case where words, ideas and contemporary actions deserve the respectful dialogue which a university setting provides.

Allow me to return to the structure and contents of *The Idea of a University* and raise a few questions which occurred to me on my latest reading of it in terms of what we might glean from him and yet go beyond what he has said.

With Newman we need to evaluate how we in this school engage philosophy. Going beyond Newman we need to name today’s philosophical currents and philosophers who offer frameworks to look at life in this 21st century, not the mid to late 19th century. But we also need to continue to name and dialogue with the social sciences to be credible in our world.

Like Newman we need to engage literature and letters. Going beyond Newman we need to name not only today’s authors and works of literature and poetry, we need to name the contributors to the phenomenon we glibly call the “world wide web” when in fact blog and journal entries on one side of the globe can show up on our computer, Blackberry, cell phone screens and (alas now!) our iPads literally in an instant.

Like Newman we need to engage the physical sciences. Going beyond Newman we need to name contemporary issues such as the very survival of our planet in terms of our use (or misuse) of natural resources, the way industrialized societies hoard and exploit a disproportionate amount of such resources for our (selfish) use, the way we presume on an almost endless supply of electricity and feel inconvenienced when we have to ration it -- which rationing is almost always caused by a crisis in what is available which is eventually restored to full power, rather than simply because the common good requires it.

Like Newman we need to engage the medical sciences and look for ways that physical and mental healing are important values of the Catholic tradition. Going beyond Newman we need to look at root causes of physical suffering, to see what kinds of personal and communal behavior are really at odds with Catholic ethics, such as mindless pollution and the raping of the earth of its goods with the result that the next generation’s very survival on this good earth is in peril.

Like Newman we need to express and profess faith in a relational, three-personed God. Going beyond Newman we need to realize that faith itself is in peril and that theodicy is as pressing an issue today as ever. We need to ask where is this relational and deeply concerned God in the post January 13, 2010 earthquake in Haiti when 230,000 died and one million were (and some still are) homeless, or in a post 2005 Katrina world, or in a post 2004 Indonesia tsunami world. These natural disasters confound us all. To ignore them as we study about God is to risk having our work and theology to be regarded as from an ivory tower rather than from the earth on which we dwell.

Allow me to tell a story that I think captures something of Newman’s genius about ideas.
Two years ago during the spring semester the faculty and student body of STRS were engaged in the process of hiring no fewer than seven new professors, whose teaching and mentoring I daresay have already been very influential on our School and on the work of those we salute as graduates today. That in itself reflects the “moving and shaking” that is a part of Washington D.C. life and that is always a part of a university’s life. During one of what seemed like endless search committee meetings and public lectures one of the esteemed faculty (now retired) engaged in a round of questioning that drew on his knowledge of a field, not his own, gleaned some forty years ago. In the end he asked the applicant “do you mean to say that I am incorrect?” The applicant stared at the questioner and was silent. At that moment I dared to assert my Dean’s role as meeting Chair and said to my esteemed senior colleague “yes…you do need to change your opinion.”

As you graduates go forth from CUA today be proud of all you have accomplished and learned here. But as you continue to research, think and write do not think that the answers you have now are all the answers, and please continue to raise new questions in light of what you now know and will come to know. Be prepared to change your mind.

In his essay On the Development of Christian Doctrine John Henry Newman wrote: “to live is to change, to be perfect is to have changed often.” This university is located in a town that is about “moving and shaking.” For some of us gathered here today is literally about moving. But for all of us at The Catholic University of America sometimes “moving” means moving forward the craft of theology and religious studies with new ideas, new concerns and new solutions. As we do so let us not be afraid to change our minds. “To live is to change, to be perfect is to have changed often.”