

Ring Ceremony 2011
Our Lady of Dallas Abbey
December 16, 2011
Fr. Denis Farkasfalvy

Dear Faculty and Students, dear class 2013!

I want this Ring Ceremony to be a memorable one. The gospel reading I have just read will help to achieve that. Rarely does it happen that the gospel reading is itself so fitting for the occasion. This gospel passage of today contains our school's motto. It is from the Gospel of St. John, in which Jesus describes John the Baptist, whom he honored as the greatest man ever born as burning flame, or a fire aflame, burning and shining. The two verbs in Latin are *ardere et lucere*. It was Saint Bernard who picked up these two verbs as a description of the Cistercian ideal: it is not enough to be about *ardere*, that is, to be burning with zeal, ideals, high goals, dedication, and an enthusiastic love for God and our neighbor; we must also be a light—*lucere*—that is, we must be a shining example, expressing our burning love with words and deeds, in the way we live, and in the teaching we provide, expressing our love through our concern to teach the Truth, and by caring about each other, teaching and leading them, even if necessary by moving mountains for them by both prayer and action, leadership and care.

Some effective speakers set up visuals for what they say, projects charts or show movies and tapes. I will give, after the speech at this mass and the speech of the junior who speaks on behalf of the class, not just a token, a souvenir or a memento, but a gold ring on which the words *ARDERE ET LUCERE* stand engraved. This ring therefore has written upon it the topic of this sermon; and it will accompany Class 2013, reminding them of what will have been said in this sermon.

When I say *ARDERE*, I think of a candle, a Christmas candle, or a candle burning on the altar. It is not a cheap metaphor. The candle that burns dedicates and gives itself to the task. It is not like a mirror. It does not just reflect light coming from another source. It is not like a fake Christmas candle that is reusable until it is thrown away. A true candle is consumed while giving light. It does not spare itself, it does not hold back: it is ready to burn all the way: it turns into light. Or as the Lord spoke about it: it is not put under a bushel basket, but is put courageously into the middle to be seen, to challenge and penetrate the darkness and conquer it even if it will eventually be fully consumed and sacrificed in the process. *ARDERE* is the primary function of faith and love: it comes from the penetrating power of the intellect and the self-giving determination of the will. At its core there is a wick which is as black as the darkness of the night, yet it leads the fire through the substance of the candle and sees to it that not a drop would be wasted but it may be fully consumed by the fire and thus helps enlighten all who are in the house.

LUCERE means a shining example, but it also means the light of reason; it means the spreading of the truth by enlightening all who come into the world. Light which comes from burning fuel may be thought of as a waste. And you may want to experiment with cold light, with light that involves little of burning, supposedly very cost effective, like teaching somebody by from videotape or by passing out printed books with no human involvement, just staying backstage and relaying information rather than witnessing. You may think that a cold and impersonal argument is more convincing and more persuasive than a passionate plea, or an emotion filled form of self-expression. But I know—most of us know—that only love is credible. Only a life given away is convincing, you cannot argue about the most important truths by cold, detached, non-burning way. When God decided that he wanted to prove his love for us, he became one of us.

When teaching us to get up and walk, he first left behind his heavenly throne and became a child in Bethlehem. Only by becoming a child did he effectively teach about the dignity of being human. To convince us that his laws were given for our well-being, he had to mingle with the crowd before sitting down to deliver the Sermon of the Mount. To convince us that suffering and dying has dignity and goodness, he had to suffer and die so that we would not be afraid of accepting our mortal destiny.

Saint Bernard concluded: *ARDERE ET LUCERE EST PERFECTUM*—to burn and shine is perfect. Human perfection involves both the *ardere* and the *lucere*: the giving away of the self and the turning of one's life into light.

As the Gospel of St. John says: there was light and life in him: the light was shining in the darkness and the darkness was unable to overcome it, to engulf and conquer it. God has begun to live a human life in Bethlehem; he lived to for 33 years; he turned his mortal life into human death, but then raised human life into God's immortal life. There is nothing more to say: life burns and is consumed, but if given to God. He can turn it into light and into a sharing of his way of life.

You will wear this ring: how much, how often, how long, I do not know. You will receive other rings at colleges, at your wedding; I was wearing a ring for 24 years as abbot. The Cistercian ring should signify the motto which is on it: *ARDERE ET LUCERE*. May these words and their meaning be imprinted on your heart.