I am very pleased to break bread with you this morning as we signal the start of yet another school year. Being with you is a consolation for me, for in you I see the morrow of the Church. In a particular way, I would like to express my gratitude to and regard for a man who has helped steer this institution to greater heights. Fr. Joel Tabora will be leaving us soon, but he has definitely sowed a rich and valuable legacy. To you, Fr. Joel, I offer my thanks, prayers and best wishes.

The Church as a Garden

On the 9th of October 1958, having heard of the death of Pope Pius XII, one man found himself writing these lines in his journal:

We are not on earth as museum-keepers, but to cultivate a flourishing garden of life and to prepare for the Church a glorious future.

That man was Angelo Giuseppe Roncalli, who eventually succeeded Pius XII as Pope John XXIII. It was he who called for the Second Vatican Council, which has so changed the face of the Church; a Church which has become more equipped to face the challenges of the contemporary world, and is thus a little more assured of its continuation into the third millennium.

A "garden," not so much a "museum"—the good pope could not have used more appropriate imagery to convey the idea of what he believed the Church should primarily be. A garden is a place where growth is always present, where there is freshness and the promise of continuous renewal. Leaves wither, flowers fade, branches dry up, but only to spring forth and give way to life reborn: more beautiful, more alluring, ready once again to join in the endless cycle of God's creative work.

How apt to describe the life of the Church in this way! John XXIII was a genius in his own right. He saw that there was a real danger that the Church would not be well equipped to face the challenges presented by the swift pace of change in the world; and that, instead of making the most of its being in the world, it would set up a massive fortress around itself, protecting itself in fear of the unknown dangers that lay outside its thick walls. Thus, during his address to the bishops at the opening of the great council, Pope John reminded them that, while there is an undeniable need to safeguard the "deposit of faith" as this has been handed down to us by the tradition of the Church, there is an equally pressing need to always present this "deposit" in a form understandable to the men and women of the age, and in a manner that speaks not only to their heads, but to their hearts and hands as well.

The pope who would "open wide the windows" of the Church would have none of the closure and fear that besets the hearts of many even today. For these only serve to stifle the Spirit of God already at work in the world in which the Church finds itself immersed. Instead, the Church is to discern the movement and action of this
Spirit within the world itself. It is to hear the voice of God audible through the lips of ordinary men and women who yearn to live godly lives. It is to see the face of God in ordinary individuals, but most especially in the poor and the downtrodden. It is to live the life of Christ amidst the day-to-day experiences of the people of this age. It is to discover God where he disguises himself — veiled in the very trappings of humanity.

The ministry of the theologian in the Church

We are gathered here today to celebrate the continuing work of this same Spirit, the Spirit that emboldened John XXIII and the men and women of that great council whose work we continue today. It is this same Spirit that Jesus Christ breathed on his disciples two thousand years ago and sent upon them on Pentecost, enlightening their minds and inflaming their hearts with zeal for the gospel. The flames ignited by that initial outpouring continue in the dynamism of the Church, which today stands on the threshold of the third millennium.

Today, we focus in a very special way, on the calling and gift that the fire of the Spirit awakens in the work and service of *the theologian*, whose role is the pursuit of an ever deepening understanding of the Word of God found in Scriptures and handed on by the living Tradition of the Church.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul speaks of the variety of gifts bestowed by the Spirit on the community of believers. This variety of gifts manifests itself in many forms of ministry and service to the body of Christ. Thus, the ministry and service of the theologian in particular is one that is performed in loving communion, not only with the magisterium which has been charged with the responsibility of preserving the deposit of faith, but with the entire community of believers whose life and struggles both theologian and magisterium must embrace.

It is the task of those whose calling is to form and inform in faith
the hearts of men and women to draw from their lives and struggles — as these are embedded in their cultures and histories — those elements which will allow for the better illumination of one or another dimension of the mysteries of faith. This is by no means an easy task. Rather, it is arduous and fraught with risk. Nevertheless, this work must be encouraged, for as the good Pope John had so brilliantly seen, this endeavor to bind the minds, hearts, and hands of God’s people in the truth of the faith can only lead to a deepening of the loving communion which defines the life of the church as a community of faith.

The theologian must remain in communion with the Church

It is from out of such loving communion that theological study and reflection arises. And it is from such loving communion as well that the theologian must draw his strength and nourishment in his pursuit of obedience to the impulse of truth and its clear articulation. This obedience is the reason, of course, why a theologian must be attentive to the requirements of his discipline, to the demands of rigorous critical standards, and hence to a rational verification of each stage of his or her research. Nevertheless, this obligation to be critical should not be identified with a critical spirit that is born of mere feeling or whim, or simple prejudice. The theologian must discern in himself or herself the origin and motivation for his critical attitude and allow his gaze to be purified by the light of faith. His commitment to the scientific study of theology must go hand in hand with a spiritual effort to grow in virtue and holiness. The theologian is called to deepen his own life of faith and continuously unite his scientific research with prayer and a continuous openness to the promptings and directions of God’s Spirit. For only in this way will he become open to the supernatural sense of faith upon which he depends, and which will disclose itself to him as a sure guide for his reflections and a dependable aid in his assessment of the correctness of his conclusions.

For the theologian must never forget that he is a member of the Church, the people of God. As such, he must foster respect for this holy people and be committed to offering them a teaching which, while
challenging them at times to reconsider the expressions of their faith, does no harm to the sacredness and integrity of their faith. The theologian, when approaching the faith of another, must take off his sandals, for the ground on which he treads is holy ground and God has been there, long before he has set his discerning gaze. Hence, the freedom proper to theological research is always to be exercised within the domain of the Church’s faith and with a constant consciousness of the integrity of this faith.

While the theologian therefore, might often feel the urge to be daring in his work, he must remember that his labor will not bear fruit or “edify” unless it is coupled with that patience which allows for genuine maturation of insight to take place. New proposals for articulating the faith and making it more understandable to men and women of every age, while definitely encouraging as signs of growth and renewal, remain but an “offering” made to the people of God. Continuous broadening of perspectives, nuancing of concepts, and even modifications within the context of fraternal dialogue may be necessary prior to the moment when the whole Church can accept the fruits of theological research. Thus, freedom of research, which the academic community rightly cherishes as precious, must be regarded as signifying an openness to the acceptance of the truth that emerges at the end of a rigorous and often painstaking investigation.

The task of theology is one of service to the faith; and the task of the theologian is one of loving and committed service to God’s faithful. These two tasks do not merely go hand in hand; they are dynamically entwined. For “faith” is not mere abstraction, distinct and isolated from the “community of faith.” Rather, faith and its articulation find their origin as well as their “point” in the living, growing, maturing and journeying community.

It is in this sense that we who receive the sacred task of ministering as theologians and teachers of the faith are truly, in the words of Pope John, “gardeners” and not merely “museum-keepers.” What is entrusted to us is the furthering, the extending, and the enkindling of the
fire of God's Spirit that swept the hearts, minds, and souls of the disciples on that glorious day, in that upper room, on the first Pentecost.

Prayer to Mary, model for the theologian

Thus, let us implore the assistance of Mary, the perfect icon of the Church, the community of faith. From the very beginnings of the New Testament, she has been called “blessed” because of her unwavering assent to God's Word which she kept and pondered in her heart. In this way she has become a model and source of help for all who are entrusted with the task of opening the treasures of God's word to the hearts, minds and hands of men and women of today — you, my dear theologians! Let us join Mary therefore, as the apostles did at Pentecost, in receiving the Spirit who will show us the way to the goal on which our sights should be set — the salvation won for the world by her son Jesus Christ.

My best wishes for the coming academic year and may God bless you!