

## **Maryknoll Fathers School 2020 Graduation**

Dear Graduates,

This is an extraordinary graduation year and ceremony. Never have we held such a ceremony before - wear face masks, keep social distancing, virtual participation, no hugging or handshaking, etc. A month ago, when the epidemic's situation was still quite fluid, we thought we would have to cancel the event altogether. Thankfully, things have settled down more favorably and with the diligent efforts of all teachers, we are able to hold this formal farewell for you. Please thank your teachers, in addition to their coaching and care in the past six years, for making this memorable event possible.

In the first term of the year, classes were disrupted by social events and in the second term, the Covid-19 pandemic closed school for more than a hundred days, with the weighty DSE exam delayed for 2 months.

What reflections and lessons have you learnt from this singular experience?

During school closure, I had more time to read. One of the books I read is especially relevant to our current predicament. It is "Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed" by Jared Diamond. The author researched on the reasons for the demise or subsistence of many societies, past and present. Three of them should be well known to you.

The first is Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean, the second the Maya civilization in Mexico, and the third the Vikings in Europe.

Easter Island, a small island in the middle of the vast Pacific Ocean, is well known for its monumental stone statue heads. The Maya society was the world's leader in art, science and politics in 250 – 900 AD. The Vikings conquered more than half of Europe in 9 – 12<sup>th</sup> century and are legendary for their militarism and might. However, all of them are obliterated from the face of earth today. Why?

According to "Collapse", Easter Island had a vibrant and civilized population. Life was respectable with a fairly organized social structure. However, the people lived complacently without foresight. Instead of solving looming problems such as dwindling firewood and food sources, they exhausted the island's fragile ecology with erecting colossal stone statues to idolize their leaders and gods. Tribes fought one another on

petty grudges instead of working together to sustain their diminishing supplies. With irreversible exploitation of its natural resources, the entire society died when it chopped down the last tree on the island.

The primary reason for the Maya's demise is water shortage. Its main water supply is from water stored in underground rock layers. As the society grew and flourished, the underground water was being depleted. The Maya people, lacking the science and technology that is available today, was of total vulnerability to Mother Nature. When climate change (like today's global warming) prolonged drought, it was defenseless and went to extinction before it was able to find new water sources to save its life.

The Vikings are well known for their valor and brawniness. They conquered more than half of present-day Europe in their hey days. However, they only knew how to use physical might to subjugate but nothing about conciliatory governance. They forced their values and habits on their conquest and did not engage, bond nor learn from them. For example, when they conquered Iceland and Greenland, places of ice and snow with scant vegetation and resources, they assigned their limited supplies to build with wood and herd cows that cannot live in the extreme weather. They did not learn from the indigenous people, the Eskimos, on using readily available mud and ice to build, or to get food that is abundant from the sea. They isolated themselves from and oppressed their subjects, and as a result had to drain already wanting resources to fend off dissidents. At the end, their empire crumbled to nothing.

Dear Graduates, the world is now at similar crossroads.

We did not safeguard Mother Nature. We exploited the planet for immediate comfort even though global warming has entered our doorstep. The human race has only itself to blame for the origins and spreading of SARS and COVID-19.

Besides wrecking the environment, we are impairing humanity as woefully, if not more. In this twenty first century, we are replicating the enmity, brutality, tyranny, repression, self-righteousness of the Crusades, the Black Death, the World Wars, the Holocaust, the Chernobyl disaster, and many other horrendous historical events in different forms. Nations and people in positions of power continue to selfishly and callously amplify their own glory and supremacy at the expense of the greater common good. Societies continue to reject and oppress those of different race, color, gender, creed

or political views. The current “Black Lives Matter” movement illustrates the irrationality, parochialism and brutality in human society that exist to this day.

Dear Graduates, you are our future. *“Let no one disregard you because you are young, but be an example to all the believers in the way you speak and behave, and in your love, your faith and your purity.”* (1 Timothy 4:12)

The school has tried its best to equip you with knowledge, skills and moral values for you to take up responsibility as pillars of society. On leaving this haven of assurance, care, and tolerance to face the real world, God’s creation riddled by mankind’s conceit, deceit, apathy, bigotry, authoritarianism, please always remember the school’s motto - seek Truth and uphold it Loyally.

Learn from history, because those who do not will be doomed to repeat its failures. Learn from Easter Island, the Maya’s and Vikings so we can survive and thrive, instead of decay and die.

Learn from Easter Island – don’t be complacent with immediate contentment, sacrifice for the future. Be serious with environmental conservation – Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Learn from the Maya’s – appreciate and rely on science and technology. Be informed and analytical, don’t hide your heads in the sand. Learn from the Vikings - that Might is Right is unsustainable and self-destructive. Make peace and conciliate with your neighbors, learn from one another, help one another, make the best of one another.

If you want to restore the world to a place of peace, justice and happiness, you will have to fulfill your duty as its responsible citizen with conviction, courage and compassion. When you meet trying times, lean on the Catholic ethos you learnt from the school – seek Truth, uphold Justice, practice Love, respect Life and cherish Family. Go forth and be the *“Salt of the Earth, Light of the World”*. (Matthew 5:13-16)

Wishing you wisdom, righteousness, knowledge and competence in your quests ahead. May God bless you and keep you always.

**Agnes Yeh**  
Supervisor