***Xavier High School Graduation 2013***

* I would like to acknowledge all of you guests–not just those with lordly titles or high government positions, but all of you who helped produce this crop of young men and women who are graduating today. Let’s start with you father and mothers and relatives of the graduates. Then, of course, the faculty and staff of the school–from Fr. Rich and Martin Carl, to the teachers, down to the cooks and watchmen. Without you we wouldn’t be celebrating this event.
* But let’s not stop there. Let’s invoke some of the spirits of the past who have helped make this school what it is today–Fr John Hoek, the first principal; Br. Paul Acer and Br. Cyp Moses; Fr. Andy Connolly, who is buried next to Cyp near the main building. Then there is Fr. Bill Suchan and James Mormad. The spirits of Jack Curran and Ken Hezel and Jim Croghan and Arthur Leger, still very much alive, could be invoked. All institutions have histories, and these are a few of the individuals who contributed greatly to this school’s history and made this school what it is today.
* Theme today is the usual one for me: “Back to the Future” (Christopher Lloyd), or we can give it the name I used when I last gave the commencement address 17 years ago: “Forward to the Past.” In any case, it’s important to understand where we’ve come from so that we can use the resources this understanding gives to face the future with confidence.
* Sixty-plus years is a long time–that’s how long Xavier has been in operation. Let’s look back at some of the features of the school over the years that you may not remember, but which I certainly recall. I know that the school has a very visible present, but let’s recall a bit of the past.

The Past

* Opened in 1952 as a minor seminary–St. Francis Xavier Seminary, the fulfillment of Bishop Feeney’s dream. But someone had forgotten to tell the first students that they were seminarians, not just high school students. When they found out at the end of the year, they threatened a walkout until Fr. McManus prevailed on the bishop to change the name and purpose of the school. So it became a high school, the only full high school in Micronesia–at least for a few months until PICS opened on Pohnpei.
* But the seminary days continued for another ten years: night prayers kneeling beside the bed each evening, rising at 6 AM, with the prefect waking up students (shaking them out of bed), and getting everyone to obligatory mass at 6:30.
* Part of the Xavier tradition was the tough things that we hated when we went through school but spent the rest of our lives bragging about: Pacific soup was a favorite topic. But when I arrived on the scene students were talking about eating whale meat, horse meat, and even kangaroo meat–anything that could be digested was served at mealtime.
* Another hated part of the tradition was fitness. In 1963, just fifty years ago, the venerable tradition of physical fitness began for 15 minutes every afternoon. There were a host of stories that survived over the years: the “postage stamps” (they came in the 25 cent and 50 cent variety, depending on how hard the whack on the back) for those who lagged behind on their laps; clever ways of avoiding fitness; the Yapese boy who fainted on his third lap around the field and had to be carried into the rec house.
* But there were other trials as well: freshmen writing home to ask for money to buy clothes when their underwear went missing, the result of Xavier “borrowing.” The water shortages in those long months of drought during the dry season (Xavier only had the Japanese-built 60,000 gallon tank at that time). The fateful day would come when showers were banned–so it was off to the lagoon with our saltwater soap, knowing that we would have itchy skin that night.
* Some of the trials were self-imposed–for example, the three wars between Pohnpei and Palau, the last one in 1969. A Pohnpeian student lost all his front teeth when he was hit in the face by a rock thrown by a Palauan. But Palauans could toss rocks, too. A skinny Marshallese senior surprised everyone when he picked up a huge spare tire in the back of the truck to shield himself from the rocks being thrown at the Pohnpeians who were being brought downtown for their own protection. A faculty member, Bill Suchan, tackled a Pohnpeian sophomore as he was running down the stairs carrying a handful of machetes to arm his colleagues.
* We had our share of system breakdowns at the school. One evening in February 1975, a year and a half after I was appointed principal, I had to leave for a meeting in Florida. I felt as if I was deserting a sinking ship since we had lost our four W’s–no water in the tank, the Witte generator was broken (in a day long before government power), and we had no wheels–our one truck was not running. The fourth W (wampum–the Indian word for money) was also missing, since we were down to our last two thousand dollars in the account. By some miracle of grace, everything was taken care of two weeks later when I returned. Xavier owes a lot to human effort, but times like that suggest that divine assistance perhaps plays a huge role, too.
* A year later, the famous senior walkout occurred when the whole class refused to return from Town Study Project downtown unless two of their members were pardoned for crimes committed when living off the campus. Consequences: start of the Community Service Project in senior year; and end of graduation (at least for 15 years or so). Our solution to “senioritis”–the apathy that afflicts seniors in the final months before graduation–was to knock out the whole tail end of senior year.
* The next year, we accepted girls for the first time, and the climate of the school changed. Boys began wearing shirts around the campus and changing their shorts regularly. We faculty, who were afraid that we would make girls cry if we used the same teaching style we were accustomed to, began to relax when we saw that the girls were tougher than we had imagined.

Continuity

* We could tell Xavier stories all day long, and you graduates will be able to do the same some years from now when you return for your reunion. The stories might be different, but the point of them, I suspect, will be the same: Xavier is tough, but we loved it and learned from it. Xavier High School is a part of our mind and heart that will never fade.
* Some things change, or at least seem to change, even if they don’t. The three X’s of the 1970s (Excellence, Christ, and crossroads) have become the three C’s (Competent, Conscientious, and Compassionate). The change is more apparent than real. Then there are the uniforms, distinctive. But I like to think that XHS students always wore uniforms, even if they were invisible to others–they knew they were a team, a band of brothers (and sisters).
* “The more things change, the more they remain the same” is the French proverb. I like to think that this applies to Xavier. So the new chapel, the new student center, and the new coat of paint on the old building, as impressive as they are, are really just externals. Inside there is a core of continuity in the school. You can almost hear the whispers of the old voices, teachers and students, in the classroom.

Future

* The Future? We may be unsure just where the road leads when we leave Xavier, and uncertain of what happens next. But we leave with something very important–a sense of confidence.
* Confidence in ourselves and what we can do. We’ve been tested, really tested, academically and in other ways. In the course of this we have developed a sense of who we are and what we can do.
* Confidence in others. We have found brothers and sisters here. We’ve had to depend on them and they on us. We have turned into a team that does more than just win track and field days or basketball games. We are a team in the game of life.
* Confidence in God. When the road gets rough and darkness falls, we have someone to call on. That still, small voice that is sometimes frighteningly quiet guides us. Sometimes the voice whispers, sometimes it practically screams at us. But always it is directing us forward.

Conclusion

* “Back to the Future” or “Forward to the Past”–whatever way you want it. But the point is that the past (with its trials and successes) prepares us for our future. Yet, as we go marching off into college (or where we will be going), the new challenges will redirect us to the past. After all, it’s from our past that we draw the courage and confidence to keep moving forward.
* Your past has been blessed here at Xavier, and I’m confident that your future will be blessed as well.

Thank you, and God bless you.