Your Excellency Bishop Rhoades, Your Excellency Bishop D’Arcy, priests, and religious men and women; Father Jenkins and esteemed faculty, administrators, conference participants, and students of the University of Notre Dame:

It is a joy for me to be with you at Notre Dame, and to celebrate Holy Mass at Our Lady’s University, in this beautiful Basilica dedicated to her Son’s Most Sacred Heart, on this closing day of the conference: “Seed of the Church; Telling the Story of Today’s Christian Martyrs”. Please try to understand, if my words seem more directed at times to the student body, it is only because of my sincere solicitude for their well-being. But know also that there is profound gratitude to all those who are present who have brought the students, present and past, to this moment in time through their dedication and devotion, their example and their deep concern, for building a future filled with hope.

Having before us the theme of the Conference, we are reminded that in this very Basilica rests the relics of some of the early Christian martyrs. We invoke their intercession, at this Mass, and in this month of All Saints. There is Saint Marcellus, the Roman centurion who became a Christian. He was beheaded after making the following profession of faith: “I serve Jesus Christ, the Eternal King. I will no longer serve your emperors and I scorn to worship your gods of wood and stone, which are deaf and dumb idols.” His relics are preserved within the altar on which we offer the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

In the reliquary chapel are the bones, along with the replica of her body, of Saint Severa, virgin and martyr, brutally slain during the Roman persecutions because she kept the faith. I have been told that this relic is one of the oldest antiquities at Notre Dame. So you see, this “Seed of the Church”, this saintly witness, surrounds us.

Dating back to over seventeen hundred years ago in the Nicene Creed, we proclaim every Sunday with the whole of the worshipping People of God throughout the world,: “I believe in the Communion of Saints…” First and foremost, we must remember that we are
always in communion with the saints. The Church is the Body of Christ. We are that part of
the Body of Christ that wages war with the forces of evil, that struggles at every moment to
bring about in this world the Kingdom of God. That struggle sometimes, as we know,
involves the shedding of blood, of drinking the chalice of Christ's Blood to its depths.

For some people today the idea of martyrdom might be very hard to connect with our
daily lives. And yet, different forms of persecution of Catholics are taking place somewhere
in the world as we speak. By virtue of our Baptism, our incorporation into the Body of
Christ, we are in union with these people who pour out their lives in loving sacrifice.
 Martyrdom represents a profound witness of faith. To the extent that we are willing to give
that witness ourselves, we are drawn closer and closer to those who are willing to let go of
it all for the sake of Jesus, who did not hesitate to make the supreme sacrifice.

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, whose personal representative in the United
States I serve as, has begun a “Year of Faith” just a few short weeks ago on October 11th,
the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council, which has made such
a profound impact in the history of the Church. It was that same Council which wrote that
we “…must be willing to acknowledge Christ before all and to follow him in the persecutions
that the Church will always encounter on the way of the Cross” (Lumen Gentium, 42). And so
today, fifty decades later, the Holy Father said at the opening of this Year of Faith, in
speaking of that Council: “Its true meaning was and remains faith in Christ, the apostolic
faith, animated by the inner desire to communicate Christ to individuals and all people, in
the Church’s pilgrimage along the pathways of history.”

The Holy Father has also been referring to this time as the era of the New
Evangelization, a wonderful opportunity to focus our attention on making the message of
the Gospel more relevant and meaningful for the people of this age - in the Holy Father's
words, “to revive in the whole Church that positive tension, that yearning to announce
Christ again to contemporary man.”

Where do we stand in light of this awareness, in view of the summons to greater faith,
to live out the message of the ‘Good News’?
First and foremost, we must remember that we are all called to holiness of life. Does this sound strange in the midst of such widespread and penetrating secularism, and such blinding and choking materialism, in a world of self-gratification and continual pleasure-seeking? Yet, St. Paul reminds us: “This is the will of God; your sanctification” (1Thessalonians 4:3).

My dear students, what are you doing, and what will you do, with all the fine learning you have received here at Notre Dame? What are you really becoming as a result of such a valued education? Ultimately all that really matters is who we are before God. If the experience of Notre Dame has only been for you an opportunity to exist more for yourself, to gratify yourself with your sense of accomplishment, then ultimately you have learned nothing. If you choose to be unhappy your whole life, then live for yourself. But if you chose to live for others, to really love others unselfishly, to sacrifice yourself everyday, even in the smallest things, if you chose to be Jesus for others in this world, if you chose to drink the cup of suffering with Him, to lay down your life in service to others, to be a voice for those who have no voice, then you will begin to understand what we are talking about when we speak of the martyrdom of today.

Let us talk in practical terms. We cannot cry out for justice if we are unfair and dishonest with ourselves and others. We cannot condemn others if we ourselves are not willing to be accountable. We cannot speak of the ‘sacredness of human life’ if we neglect those around us, those who have given so much to us, watched over us, provided and cared for us. We cannot build a better world if we mistreat and even destroy others in the process of so called ‘self-fulfillment.’ We cannot work for healing if we are not willing to be wounded. We cannot give life to others if we are unwilling to die to ourselves.

The martyrdom that is love cannot just be a matter of words and ideas, of a mere fantasy that you are living through. It begins with small things. Martyrdom is the ultimate contagious experience of love being poured out day by day, minute by minute in the whole of the Body of Christ. That is the beginning of our understanding of true martyrdom – dying to ourselves every day. For many of us who sincerely try to be faithful, martyrdom is a slow process, but its reward in the end is the same – eternal life.
Faith will inspire us on our journey. It will give us the courage and strength we need to make meaningful sacrifices. Faith in the teaching, guiding and sanctifying reality of the Church, faith in the sacraments, especially Eucharist and Reconciliation, that feed and nourish us, faith in the power of God’s Word revealed in the Scriptures – this is what is so essential to live out our true call. Our communion with Jesus in prayer will lead us on. We will not be lost. He will reveal himself in his own good to time to us. Perhaps even among us now is that inner voice that speaks to some in a special way in the depth of their hearts and says; “Follow me… do not be afraid… I want you to be my voice, my hands in this world.” Do not reject his call.

Remember always – please never forget – you are a consecrated people; you have been anointed with the Holy Spirit; you have been set apart; you are a people of faith; you are a holy people. Sanctity, according to Pope Benedict, is what reveals the true face of the Church; sanctity is what makes the eternal ‘today’ of God enter into our lives, and into the ‘today’ of the men and women of our times. (October 12, 2012). God has known each of us from all eternity. We are His own unique image in this world.

My dear students, as you continue your studies here at Notre Dame, discerning all the while your call in life, I leave you with the exhortation to love found in Saint Paul’s letter to the Philippians, the first reading of today: “Be of the same mind, with the same love, united in heart, thinking one thing” (Phil. 2:2). Show your continual gratitude to those who have walked the journey with you, to those who have fed and nourished you in so many ways, especially by their own sacrifices and example, to those who believe and hope in you.

Remember, that Notre Dame truly is much more than the name of your school; she is our Mother, the holy and blessed Virgin Mary. She is the Queen of Martyrs, that ultimate faithful ‘witness’ to the very end. Through her holy example and her powerful intercession, she helps each of us respond generously in our vocation to holiness and charity, and to a renewed commitment to Christ and the spreading of His Gospel. In the familiar words of Alma Mater – may “Notre Dame, our Mother” help us to be “tender, strong, and true”.