



Address of Rev. Father Hady Mahfouz, USEK President

2015 Commencement Ceremony

and

Conferment of Doctorate Honoris Causa to Mr. Anthony Asher

Kaslik, July 18, 2015

1. Our story this evening, dear graduates, is narrated, in its details, by several stories that revolve around your own story. Faces, feelings and memories are shaped into words that tell the very content of these stories. It is the story of your parents, your families and your loved ones. It is the story of your University and of the Lebanese Maronite Order, which established it and nurtures it still. It is the story of Saint Charbel after whom your class is named. It is the story of Anthony Asher. It is the story of your life, your story.
2. The story of your parents is a reflection of the mystery of life and of the mysterious course of history. Your parents have seen you come to life. They have witnessed your first days, your first words, your first steps, your first concerns. They have borne witness to your compliance, your revolts, your hard moments and problems, and your interaction with

studying at school up until university. They have made so many sacrifices and given their hearts and souls for their families. Some of them may no longer be present among us but wherever they are, they remain the foundation for each of their children. They remain close to us, or rather in us. Your parents were also children whose parents witnessed their life achievements and you are continuing the journey, dear graduates, thus bearing witness to the mystery of life and the mysterious course of history. To each father and mother present with us today, we pay tribute for all the good deeds they bestowed on each of their children. Dear parents, you know your own story only too well as emotions and pride well up in each of you, putting into words many stories about your unique relationship with your children and generating souvenirs with them. I also think about each of your close and loved ones, dear graduates, and I see the story growing and mixing with love, friendship and well-wishing on this special occasion in your lives.

3. Your story is partly the story of your University, the Holy Spirit University, which is the daughter of the Lebanese Maronite Order (OLM). Through the University and the Order's many schools, the OLM perpetuates the tradition of education and higher education, which goes back to many centuries. One of the OLM's monasteries, the Monastery of Saint Anthony – Qozhaya, is home to the first printing press in the Middle East (1610), and the University is now home to the first book to have been printed there. It is the story of being true to tradition and to our past history, a story of loyalty and faithfulness to

those who have bequeathed to us our present, our identity and our creed. At the same time, your University is still taking giant steps forward towards modernity, computerization, new techniques, and making local and international overtures into the world of universities and the labor market. Your University has adopted, this year, new bylaws, as it has started the journey of the American accreditation, after having acquired the European accreditation 3 years ago. Your University will remain by your side through its development and through the Alumni Association. Day after day, we are striving to ensure the University's permanent development in every field and to activate this Association. For, the University and the Alumni development will render great benefits for you, dear graduates; as a matter of fact, your name in life will remain linked to that of the University, as these two names are written on your degree. Allow me, here, to address my heartfelt thanks to the deans, directors, members of the University Council, teachers and administrative staff, for their devoted service and tireless work to ensure the prosperity of the University. The University is taking these steps confidently, knowing that it is nurtured by its mother, the Lebanese Maronite Order. In so doing, it firmly believes in the need to achieve everything that contributes to the growth of each and every human being without any discrimination and the whole human being in all his or her all dimensions, including the spiritual one. It contributes to the start of every person who is full of life, free and unrestricted. Such is the teaching of our Church whom we obey as a mother and a teacher. It is

the Catholic Church that is guiding human beings in life through its teaching and its mission. Last Sunday, His Holiness Pope Francis addressed the youth during his visit to Paraguay, speaking about the place from which they derive life in these terms: “Freedom is a gift that God gives us, but we have to know how to accept it. We have to be able to have a free heart, because we all know that in the world there are so many things that bind our hearts and prevent them from being free. Exploitation, lack of means to survive, drug addiction, sadness, all those things take away our freedom.” Dear graduates, mark these words, for in them you will find life. Do not exploit anyone nor be subject to exploitation; rather, let freedom adorn your lives, and it is only the truth that will set you free. As for our Order, I would like to express to the Most Reverend Father Abbot Tannous Nehme and to the honorable General Council my heartfelt thanks for all the care which they bestow upon our University.

4. The story of the Order and the University it nurtures brings us to the story of a monk from this Order, Saint Charbel. Who among us does not give homage to this great saint? His story comes to mind, for tonight coincides with the eve of his feast day, the third Sunday of July. At the same time, your class is named after him, as we celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of his beatification in 1965. Saint Charbel is a monk from the Lebanese Maronite Order, the Order that is behind your University, like Saint Rafqa, Saint Neemtallah Hardini and the Blessed Fr. Estephan. I go back to his story because it teaches us to discover the essence of life by cracking its outer shell. He teaches us where life

springs from. So rejoice and take off in the world, achieve big dreams and live life to the fullest. Yet, never forget that there is an essence, a prospect that is beyond any earthly prospect. This prospect is the prospect of God and when we open up to Him, we live our life with joy and dynamism. We get involved in building and developing our society and in so doing, we love every human being and abstain from exploiting any human being for personal ambitions that will never give us happiness. The purpose is life and joy, both of which can be achieved only by opening up to the eternal prospect of God, the giver of life and joy. This is true success regardless of the kind of life we are living.

5. Speaking of success, I come to the story of Anthony Asher, the keynote speaker in our commencement ceremony, who will be awarded in a few moments a *Doctorate Honoris Causa* from your University. A *Doctorate Honoris Causa* is an acknowledgement of a person's success in his/her career and this holds particularly true for Tony Asher. I will not anticipate what he will tell you and us, but I cannot hide my admiration for what he wrote in your graduation book and the main points he will explain in the address he will be delivering in few moments. His life experience is beautiful, successful and full of life. His father, who came from a modest family, emigrated from the West Bekaa village of Kherbet Qanafar in Lebanon to the United States during World War I. Following college studies in law, he started working in another field, namely management, and particularly the management of buildings and properties. He achieved tremendous

success, but he remained unchanged with much humility. He is highly respected by everyone who knows him, especially the Lebanese community there. Allow me to pay tribute here to all those who came from his homeland of Cleveland, Ohio to take part in this ceremony, and in particular to Mgr. Peter Karam, the Cleveland parish priest. Tony will also tell you, dear graduates, that every success starts with admitting that everything we have in this life comes from God. I tell you that he is a man who is committed to his faith, his parish and his church. He will tell you about success in life and some of its constituents. I take pride in knowing this man and in being able to call him a friend. Tony Asher works hard in the United States for your University in his capacity as a University trustee and a member of the Board of the Holy Spirit University Foundation that supports the Holy Spirit University in the United States. He is a good-hearted and generous man like no other, one who sows joy in the hearts of all those who meet him. I would like also to thank all the members of the Foundation who are present with us today for their devotion for the sake of the University, especially Dr. Elias Ayoub, the former chairman of the Foundation who gave it a new momentum and who is held in high esteem within the Lebanese diaspora throughout the United States. Every time I express my thanks for what Dr. Ayoub has done for the University, words fail me, for they cannot possibly express any proper thanks. Thank you, Dr. Elias Ayoub. Tony Asher's story is a very beautiful one, for it is a success story in which every good person takes pride. It is a story of success in the United States, but Tony will tell

you, dear graduates, that success is possible anywhere in the world, and he will call you to remain attached to the love of your homeland wherever you are. Therefore, Tony, it is an honor for me to be putting on your shoulders, in a few moments, the Doctorate gown and to be conferring on you this Doctorate as a testimony whereby our University acknowledges your special and successful journey, which meets with the values of the University and its aspirations for quality, distinction and excellence. Tony, thank you for your wonderful journey, for the beautiful words you wrote in the graduation book and for the words you will say in few moments. They all confirm what I already know about you, your spirituality, your depth, your dynamism and your life.

6. Last but not least, comes your story, dear graduates. I congratulate you from the bottom of my heart. You, all of you, are our pride and our strength. Take off in life, rejoice, be successful and do not be afraid. Above all, do not be afraid. Whatever happens in our life, I would like to repeat what I said to the graduates of last year: Let fear be our prey and never be the prey of fear! I would like also to add that fear tangles and paralyses, but we, we are the people of freedom, dynamism and life! Arm yourself with good, benevolence, love and freedom and move forward, equipped with everything you have taken all over the stages of your life, the latest of which is your University life. I have no doubt that you will one day search your memories for the meaning of this evening, especially as you delve deeper into the mystery of life and the mysterious course of history. Now you should know, and you certainly know, that your story is our story. Thank you!