

**Hartford Seminary**  
**Graduation Address by Ingrid Mattson, PhD**  
**Hartford, CT**  
**June 1, 2012**

President Hadsell, Distinguished members of the Board of Trustees, my faculty and administrative colleagues, students and friends of Hartford seminary, and most of all, the 2012 Graduating class of Hartford Seminary, your family and honored guests: Greetings of peace and may God's grace and blessing be with us today.

To paraphrase scripture: How lovely is our tent O Children of Abraham! As the Lord has done for generations of our spiritual ancestors, He has gathered His people under a tent to remember His name and to praise Him for the many blessings He has bestowed upon us.

In this tent are gathered a diverse people whom this seminary has brought together as one community, all yearning for God's favor and guidance by seeking the knowledge of His Word. God makes his Word present to all who seek it with sincerity and humility.

This community is a witness to the divine decree that our diversity creates a path for knowledge. In the Holy Qur'an God says:

And among His wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours for in this, indeed, there are signs for all who are possessed of knowledge! (30:22)

And so, our cultural, racial and ethnic diversity is a divine decree.

And God says:

“O humanity: We have created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may come to know one another.” (49:13)

And so, our gender, tribal and national diversity is a divine decree.

And God says:

To every one of you, We have appointed a divine law and a way. If God had willed, He would have made you one religious community, except that He willed to try you in what He has given to you. So compete with one another in good works; to God you shall all return, and He will then inform you of that about which you differed. (5:48)

And so, our religious and denominational diversity is a divine decree.

So who are those who are truly seeking to know their place, their mission, their responsibility in God’s creation? Is it those who run and hide from this divinely commanded diversity, or those who seek to engage with it, to learn from it, to become better with it?

I am not a particularly competitive person, but God says to “compete with each other in good works,” therefore I will be so bold as to assert today that Hartford Seminary is a superior school because we are a community which recognizes that God created us diverse to allow us to grow in knowledge – knowledge of ourselves, of each other, and of the Most Merciful Lord.

One of the mysteries of being is that we change throughout our lives: physically, intellectually, and religiously, yet somehow, there is an integrity to who we are. The substance of our being is ephemeral and in a state of constant flux. We are changed by what we learn, by whom we encounter, and some people find that change frightening, because they misunderstand what it means to be a person in God’s universe. God created us not as things, but as beings whose nature is to learn and grow and whose purpose is to draw close to Him. Our identity is in our purpose,

and we must move and change constantly if we want to keep learning and try to catch up with God – he has set a path for us and we must keep moving along it.

The Qur'an says:

To God belongs the east and the west and He guides whom He wills onto a straight path. (2:142)

Today, Hartford Seminary class of 2012, you might look back at who you were when you first began your studies here. I am quite sure that things did not turn out quite as you planned. You encountered some unexpected challenges to completing your studies: maybe financial difficulties, or an illness – your own or a family member, or your car gave out on those long drives to an evening class.

It seems a miracle that we made it through all the difficulties: how did we do it? God blessed us, gave us advisors, helpers from our family and fellow students, teachers and administrators. Our imagination is so limited that if we had been told ahead of time how difficult it would be we would have said: We're not strong enough, we can't do it. But God knew what we could do and wanted to see us grow. Praise God!

Beyond that, Class of 2012, looking back, you see that your views on some matters – and not trivial matters – have changed. You have been transformed not only by the knowledge you have gained, but by the encounters you have had, especially with other students from communities and countries near or distant from your own.

I wonder if there are some people close to you who do not like the fact that you have changed. Certainly none of us should ever be arrogant in believing that we have arrived at a state of knowledge that is not to be questioned. But I pray that you have gained confidence in your knowledge, so that you are not disturbed by those who wish there were no differences between you about how you understand and live your faith. Rather, it is now your responsibility to share, compassionately,

generously and humbly, what you have learned with those who have not had a similar opportunity.

Institutions change too, and I am sure that those who founded Hartford Seminary in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, if they could see this community gathered under the tent today, would be surprised, to say the least. Look at these women, people of color, Muslims and Jews – what has happened to Hartford Seminary?!

What has happened, in fact, is that much of the substance of what Hartford Seminary teaches and who Hartford Seminary teaches and who teaches at Hartford Seminary has changed – but what has remained the same is the purpose of this school – to serve God by educating people of faith to serve communities in the world in which we live.

In 2007 Timothy Winter of Cambridge University gave the Bijlefeld Lecture in Christian-Muslim relations and he said this:

Apparently echoing the Eighth Commandment, the Prophet urges us to shun the bearing of false witness, *qawl al-zur*. The loudest projections of religion in Muslim and Christian communities today sometimes pay scant heed to this. But the prophetic judgment remains. [False witness] is one of the (*mubiqat*), the mortal sins, literally the attitudes and practices which cause destruction. . . . To speak in the shadow of Willem Bijlefeld, and in this institution, is to seek solidarity with a community whose history is built on the rejection of this kind of false witness.

Today, I remember Professor Bijlefeld who, in his Vermont home, finds his physical abilities declining. Yet his legacy looms large. His endowed lecture is only the most visible evidence of a career of building positive institutional engagement between faithful Christians and Muslims at this school.

We are a people who are committed not just to personal spirituality, but to the traditions, organizations and institutions that aim to support and transmit spiritual and ethical teachings. Increasingly, Americans, at least, identify themselves as

spiritual, not religious people; this points to a collective failure on our part. We know that people are formed by their social context, and a complete unhinging of spirituality from religion does not bode well for the spirit at all. Of course, the light of God is not bound by any institution, yet God created us to be shaped and influenced by our surroundings, so it is our job to see that we recreate, reimagine and reform our collective religious lives so that we facilitate, rather than block the path to God.

We live in a world where many people think of “religion” as one thing: they say things like, “religion is the major cause of conflict in the world”. While this is certainly not true, this commonplace statement shows how much work we have to do. Many people are disillusioned with religion institutions, have lost trust in religious leaders and see religious diversity as an inevitable cause of upheaval in the world. It is our job to reinvigorate our communities, to restore trust and to demonstrate that our religious diversity is not an inevitable source of conflict; rather it is a great treasure of human civilization and creates in our time an irreplaceable platform for ethical discourse and spiritual experience that is dynamic, life-affirming, and lifts us to a higher level of moral formation.

Healing begins with a transformed vision of religion in the world. We must embrace, in the deepest part of our being, the conviction that we are not separate; rather, we are connected, and our language must reflect our multiple levels of identity and connection. What is the answer to the question: What are you?

What I am is a believer in God, I am a Person of the Book, I follow the tradition of Abraham, I am the follower of Hagar, I am a follower of Muhammad, I am a follower of Jesus, I am a follower of Moses, I am a Muslim, I am a religious person, I am a child of Adam and all human beings are my brothers and sisters. I belong to all of these communities. And so, if someone unfairly attacks another believer in God, out of loyalty and solidarity, I need to respond. And if someone hurts my sister, another daughter of Adam, I need to respond. I cannot sit aside and say, that is not my

problem for each human being is my brother or my sister. And when I drive down Farmington Avenue to work from my home in West Hartford and I see the churches and I see the synagogues lining the street, I think, "Because I am a follower of Abraham, these houses belong to my family." I don't need Facebook to feel connected; I know I am connected and at home in the world because I belong to all these communities.

And it is up to you, class of 2012, as you go forth to teach and preach and engage with your religious communities to show your students and your congregants an identity map that shows from your theological perspective how God has set us in relation to each other, that no one is outside of God's plan, so that they too can feel comfortable in the world knowing how they are connected and related to other believers and human beings.

The Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him said, "Those who are not thankful to people are not thankful to God."

In a society that is often self-centered and asserts that there is such a thing as a self-made man, we humbly give thanks to those who exerted themselves to sustain our educational and religious institutions so that we could have the chance to learn and grow. Even when we disagree with our teachers, or take another path than precisely the one set out by them, we must give thanks for their efforts, for their sincerity, and for the foundation they set upon which we have built our own lives. In my case, I am, through and through, a committed Muslim, but I will also always be, in some sense, a Catholic, because of the moral formation given to me as a child by my teachers, especially the religious women of the Catholic Church. And here at Hartford Seminary, Professor M.T. Winter, a Catholic religious woman, has continued to shape me through her example of courage and compassion. It would be an act of ingratitude to deny those of other faiths who have helped shape the person I am today. And is this not the story of humanity? Our histories, our cultures, our identities are the result of constant interchange and mutual influence.

Hartford Seminary graduation class of 2012, do not forget your teachers; pray for us and forgive us our shortcomings.

The reality is that we faculty are always learning from our students; really, it is the best part of the job. You challenge us and you open our minds to new ways of approaching issues – and, to be honest, you teach us how to use PowerPoint and the classroom projector as well. We thank you and we are grateful to God for you.

Hartford Seminary graduates not just students, but professors, deans and trustees too. This is an added gift of the seminary to the faith community and the way that our collective experience can be shared more broadly with others. Once more, we give thanks to all of those who have built and continue to contribute to this remarkable, miraculous school.

Let us go forth together with hearts full of compassion, with minds rich in learning, with backs straight and strong with courage, with hands ever ready to reach out to our brothers and sisters. May God illuminate our paths and bring us ever closer to His Divine presence.