

**The Geneva School**  
**Opening Convocation for the Academic Year 2016-17**  
**“A Realm of Grace”**  
**Rev. Robert F. Ingram**

The Geneva School’s fourth grade is a perfect example of what I call a “realm.” Everything about the experience of being in fourth grade fits together like the most marvelous jigsaw puzzle. The millennia-long study of medieval history is ideally suited as the place to begin Latin studies; the capstone of the year is the Knighting Ceremony; art, drama, and music classes mimic the great achievements in European history; Monastery Day embodies the “*ora et labora*” rhythms of monks; literature becomes a window into the life and times of ordinary and heroic people who lived in that age, and science instills wonderment as the capacity to understand the created world becomes increasingly possible. There is an amazing internal consistency about the year that leaves students with the sense that they had become time-travelers to a distant realm.

This idea of a “realm” is experienced by those who read *The Lord of the Rings*, or *The Chronicles of Narnia*, or *Harry Potter* or the *Aubrey/Maturin* series by Patrick O’Brian. Each one of these incredible works of literary genius envelops its readers so thoroughly into the drama that you really think you are part of the story. You can practically taste the food they feast upon; you tense and sweat during the battles; you learn their languages, poems, and songs; your immersion into their world allows you to nearly finish the sentences in the dialogue of the main characters. Like fourth grade, each book in the series fits beautifully together, crafting a cohesive and intriguing world. By the end of the series you long not only for another book to be written, but you also long to live within the story itself. You regret that your world is not their world.

The reason you want to leave this world and go to theirs is because you believe theirs is enchanting. So many things about their world have captivated your heart, soul, mind, and emotions that you find yourself wishing there was a wardrobe you could slip into that would magically transport you into their realm. I've had that desire numerous times—we all have. Our imaginations were meant by God to be stirred in this manner. There is, after all, a true heavenly realm more enchanting than anything we have experienced or read about here on earth. In Ecclesiastes the scriptures tell us that God has put eternity in our hearts that we might long for him in heaven. Even here on earth rumors of transcendence abound, provoking curiosity, fueling hope, awakening faith, and quickening the heartbeat of all who love our Savior. "Could there be such a place as heaven?" we ask ourselves. It seems too good to be true. Well it's true, and it's better than we can imagine. Let us not suffer the chastisement of C. S. Lewis who scolds us for thinking otherwise. He writes, "If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels it would seem that our Lord finds our desires are not too strong, but too weak.... We are far too easily pleased." Imagine the most exotic vacation possible, and that, he says, still falls far short of what God would have us imagine is in store for us in heaven.

But alas, as enchanting as other realms might be, we are earthbound creatures. Our feet are mired in clay and our thoughts are so easily distracted from entertaining the prospect of other realms. We are, as Shakespeare lamented, as inconstant as the moon—ever changing and never the same from day to day. However true this may be, I stand before you at the start of this new academic year to encourage us all to make The Geneva School a Realm of Grace. The good news is that the school is already a gracious community. Consciously, and unconsciously, many folks within the student body, staff, and parent community have been striving toward this goal since the inception of the school twenty-three years ago. By no means are we currently lacking in grace—Geneva in fact has a commendable reputation in Orlando for the loving and charitable way in

which we treat one another. However, if we were intent upon experiencing even more grace within the school community, how might we go about achieving that over the course of this year? What would it take to make Geneva more of a Realm of Grace?

At the outset it would be important for each and every one of us, students, staff, and parents, to become disenchanted with the sinful ways we imitate the world. C. S. Lewis states the same in unequivocal terms in *The Weight of Glory*, "... you and I have need of the strongest spell that can be found to wake us from the evil enchantment of worldliness which has laid upon us for nearly a hundred years." There is no escaping the sad realization that we have been badly formed in thought, word, and deed. We have disordered loves and disordered minds. Sin in all its deadly effects has taken root, and its tendrils have crept into each nook and cranny of our lives. The world has been our tutor, and we have been attentive students. We can be selfish, unforgiving, and lacking in charity. We conspire and inflict pain. We have neither the affections nor the mind of Christ that we ought to have. Redeemed though we may be, everyone of us has attained only a measure of the maturity of faith necessary to establish a Realm of Grace. It is imperative that we each individually acknowledge the truth of this biblical assessment. Only then are we able to confess our lack of charity, repent, and plead with God the Holy Spirit that he would strive with us toward more godly pursuits.

Following our disenchantment with our sin, I encourage each of us to become re-enchanted with the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember, we are a people who love stories about other realms, and here in the scriptures we have THE Story upon which all other stories are based. Both in scripture and in the life of Jesus Christ, God has written the ultimate story of the life of the world, the plight and redemption of his people, his own loving intents and the prospects for the faithful to live with him forever. Oh such a story! Oh such a God! Oh such a realm that even now exists and awaits the crowning consummation of God's work in the world!

No human author could pen such a story as that already published by God. Tolkien and Shakespeare alike would shrink at the notion that their works portrayed a more glorious realm than the one contained in Holy Scripture. However inspirational their writings, they pale by contrast to the God-breathed inspiration of the biblical text. Let us, this year, be re-enchanted with the scriptures. How else may our hearts be stirred for this promised realm? By what other means could we have a foretaste of what is to come? What other book contains a treasure map to navigate our way there, as well as containing the Treasure himself, even Jesus? May we read the Bible with such ardor that we would thrill to the exploits of the heroes of the faith. How exciting it would be to learn and study the doctrines we profess, allowing these truths to arouse holy passions within us to live in accordance to their teaching. What a difference it would make in our communal life at the school if the stories of scripture excited virtue, nobility, charity, forgiveness, and grace upon grace.

Relationships, of course, are at the center of a Realm of Grace. Of primary importance is the relationship each one of us has as we stand *coram Deo*, that is, before the face of God. Dare we come into his presence by our own merit and unrighteousness, or do we rather exult in the unmerited favor bestowed upon us by the lavish love and grace of God? Only by faith in the atoning death of Christ may we stand faultless before God. He is, after all, the uncontested King of Heaven, seated upon his judgment throne.

Having received God's grace, then, and only then, is it possible for us to be gracious to one another. It is in the essence of grace to be gracious; grace must not be withheld but rather extended to other people. Grace by its nature seeks to be gracious. Many things in life are hoarded for fear that they might become in short supply. May it never be that grace is held in reserve! The God of Grace is endowed with an inexhaustible reservoir, ready to be freely gifted to those who are being gracious to others. There is not only "present grace" to supply our dispensing now, but "future grace" to

meet the needs of tomorrow and beyond. What an incentive to be magnanimous in charity. Can your imagination even fathom what it would be like to live in such a charitable realm?

Lastly, permit me to remind us that we have already prayed this morning, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” This kingdom is none other than the heavenly Realm of Grace. It is real, and it is really coming to earth as an answer to our prayers. Every time we recite the Lord’s Prayer we are imploring the Father to make the realm of earth like the Realm of Heaven. In effect we are signaling to God that we are dissatisfied with life here on earth and long for heaven to come in all its fulness. This petition of the Lord’s Prayer challenges the status quo. By reciting it we are telling God that we regret that our world is not more like his kingdom. In other words, our prayer is a bold request to make earth a Realm of Grace, and let it start right here, with me, at The Geneva School.

We are all “longers.” That is to say, our desires are for things we do not have. We lack math skills, and long to be able to succeed in calculus more easily than we do. We lack musical ability, and long to create beauty with our voices or instruments. We long for athletic prowess, for money, for more time, or more faithful friends.

Do you long for grace? Does the prospect of “amazing grace, how sweet the sound” stir in you an eagerness to be both a beneficiary and dispenser of it? Are you enticed by the prospect of such a Realm? Hear again the echo of Lewis’ words: “... our desires are not too strong, but too weak.... We are far too easily pleased.” May it never be so at Geneva! At the start to this year let us covenant together that our longings would include a heavenly realm more enchanting than anything we have yet experienced on earth. May we long for a Realm of even **Amazing** Grace to pervade our school community.