

Graduation Speech by Prof. Roland Tomb, Dean of the Faculty of Medicine,
Commencement Day for MD graduates, class of 2021

(Official English version).

July 2, 2021

Mr. Rector, my dear colleagues, my dear friends, my dear students,

It's a great day for you and it's an emotional day for me. It has been 10 years to the day that I have presided over the destinies of the Faculty of Medicine. I have quite a few memories, regrets, joys, challenges, and projects to share with you, but now is not the time. Today we are here for you and it is you whom I would like to talk about, your career, your ambitions, your future. I will be frank as always, but I also will speak to you against the grain.

Dear students of the class of 2021, you wished for this ceremony and you've had it. But we would all have preferred that your parents were here physically to share your joy.

Unfortunately Covid-19 did not allow it!

Yesterday, I heard from several of you. Two students especially appealed to me—a young girl I saw at noon and a young man I saw in the evening. When speaking about Lebanon, they referred to it as “this country” هالبلد with a hint of distaste. I asked them: “If you were talking about your parents, would you have said “these parents? They both observed a moment of silence and I continued, "This country is my country, this is your country. You would never refer to your mother as “this mother” or your father as “this father.” Like every Lebanese, I measure the extent of the economic, financial, social, political, and health catastrophe we are experiencing. As doctors, we have been in the front row to welcome the wounded of the revolution, victims of police violence, the survivors of the apocalyptic explosion in the Beirut port, and Covid patients. In the face of so much effort, there is sometimes despair. Many of us call ourselves Christians, but what is it to be a Christian without hope? "We are the sons of hope," at least that is what we repeat in our beautiful liturgy. Hope is not a blissful attitude of waiting for the storm to pass, hope is the engine of resistance, and God knows how much we need to resist. Resist above all against ourselves, against weariness, surrender, and the contagion of departures and abandonments.

Many of us saw Lebanon as a casino, a casino where you could win every time, a casino where you could get rich, without even playing, even while sleeping. The casino, this casino ended up imploding in bankruptcy. It was then that many began to look for another casino, in a different place.

What if we changed our perspective and dealt with our country as if we were dealing with a close relative, a sick relative, a distressed relative, a relative plagued by disease? Would we abandon it? Would we give up on what we love and those we love so easily?

John F. Kennedy said, using the words of our national poet Kahlil Gibran : "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country." What have we done for our country? We operated it like a casino. We elected and reelected the same corrupt mafia. We surrendered our sovereignty, our national choices, our sense of justice and solidarity, we bowed down before the tyrants, the very people who disfigured our country, who robbed us and left our young generation in despair. After so much cowardice, fleeing would represent the supreme cowardice. To flee "this country" هالبلد, as some say, to flee this situation, to flee the country's rulers. But Lebanon does not belong to those rulers. It does not belong to the president of the republic or the speaker of parliament, or the prime minister, ministers, deputies, or party leaders, much less does it belong to regional powers that wish to put us under their control. Lebanon is ours, Lebanon is yours. Are we going to abandon what they have not yet taken from us—our land, villages, houses, memories, universities, hospitals?

We sometimes call our cowardice resilience, but resilience is a double-edged sword: It allows us to subsist, but it sometimes makes us endure the unbearable. Let's stop bowing down. Let's stop swallowing our dignity. Let's take our destiny back into our own hands.

Dear students, in a few moments you will become our dear colleagues. Do not let yourself be overwhelmed by doubt. Do not let yourself be contaminated by the masters of despair. It is a heavy responsibility to discard that which makes up our identity and abandon the homeland.

During the war, أخوت شناي the madman of Chanay was asked if he had not been tempted to leave. He replied:: بأكد فكرت بس ما قدرت لانه لبنان ما ساع بالشنطة, “Definitely, I have thought of it, but I was unable to leave, because Lebanon doesn’t fit into a suitcase”. And certainly, there is no room in a suitcase for our relatives, friends, homes, and villages.

Dear students of the 2021 class, you are gathered here to receive your diploma and to embark upon a new phase in your life, each in your own. You will deploy your energy, you will flourish, some of you will shine at home and no doubt also abroad. Whatever your choices, I wish you good luck. Our conscience is clear, because we have tried to give you the best education and training possible.

We have achieved many things together. I will cite a few examples. Despite Covid-19, and legitimate fear of the pandemic, we have at no time lowered our standards. We have conducted exams in person—perhaps the only institution in Lebanon to do so. Do you know why? So that we would never have to say that we made you cut corners to receive your degrees. Not once during the civil war, nor recently during the pandemic, has our vigilance been compromised and we have continued to strive for excellence.

Another example: During or because of the pandemic, our research activity has not weakened. The number of our publications in international journals has more than doubled, placing the Faculty of Medicine at the forefront of Saint Joseph University, and even the number-one among medical schools in Lebanon. Tonight, after the 90 medical degrees, we will hand over the Masters degree in research to around 30 of our students. Their presence this evening is emblematic. It testifies to the fact that we are the only faculty in Lebanon to offer a combined MD and Ph.D. curriculum. The number of our students who are also doing a Master's degree in research has continued to increase over the years. The taste for research that we have instilled in our students helps to guarantee the sustainability of our faculty and our university. You know as well as I do that the university is a place where knowledge is transmitted. It must also be a place where knowledge is produced.

Behind me, you see three new buildings. First, the Simulation Center, arguably the largest and most beautiful in our region of the world, which already accommodates students and

doctors. And on the opposite side, the two buildings, linked by a footbridge, and fully open onto a garden, which will be the new Faculty of Medicine. All this is to show you, through our actions, that we are not giving up. The Faculty of Medicine, the Hôtel-Dieu de France, Saint Joseph University are not only fighting for their survival, they are constantly developing in the service of our society and our country.

During his last visit to Lebanon, the French president quoted a song by Feyrouz.

بحبك يا لبنان

We would have loved to hear these words from our own leaders! We would have loved them to love Lebanon, as much as we love it! This Feyrouz song is one of unconditional love, dating back to 1976, but it sounds even better today. I don't know if you know all the words; it continues as follows:

عندك بدي ابقى

ويغيبوا الغياب

اتعذب واشقى

ويامحلى العذاب

واذا انت بتركني

يا أغلي الاحباب

الدنيا بترجع كذبة

وتلج الارض تراب

كيف ما كنت بحبك

بجنونك بحبك

بفقرك بحبك

وبعزك بحبك

وبحك يا لبنان

يا وطني

Long live the 2021 class, long live the Faculty of Medicine, long live Saint Joseph University and long live Lebanon!

Prof. Roland Tomb, MD, PhD