

University Convocation

Rev. Stephen A. Privett, S.J., President of the University of San Francisco

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This afternoon I would like to try something a little different as I explore what it means for USF to be a university “with a global perspective” where faith and reason are equally valued in the search for truth, as we say in our [Vision, Mission and Values Statement](#). The prologue to my comments is a painting by Jonathan Wright called *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump* [cf., *Is There No Other Way?* Michael N. Nagler, pp. 277-78]. This picture recommends itself for several reasons. There are some who argue that universities exist in a vacuum. If universities provide a safe and tranquil environment that allows for contemplation and reflection, they may also inure themselves to the hopes, fears and frustrations of the majority of the world’s people.

I would like us to step back this afternoon and look at USF educating, much as those persons in the painting look at the unfolding experiment. The painting depicts a variety of reactions — from the enthusiasm of the lecturer, to the attentive curiosity of the adults, to the self-absorption of two lovers, to the reflective interest of the philosopher and the utter horror of the children at seeing a bird being killed to illustrate the scientific principle of a vacuum. Notice the wide spectrum of reactions to the same phenomenon.

Let me try to situate higher education in its global context by removing what some call the “bubble” that seals us off from the world beyond. It is by now well known to all of us that if we reduced the entire world to a single village of one hundred people, one person in the village would have a college education; seventy of the villagers could neither read nor write; and only one person would own a computer. The individuals who owned 60% of all the village’s wealth would be the six North Americans in the village. While you and I may not consciously avert to it, we comprise and work with the most privileged individuals in the entire world.

Here’s another interesting lens through which to look at ourselves. If you have never seen a relative die in a war, or been a slave or experienced torture, you are more fortunate than 500 million persons around the world. If you keep your food in a refrigerator, your clothes in a closet, have a roof over your head and sleep in a bed, you are wealthier than 75% of the world’s population. If you have a bank account, you are among the wealthiest 8% of the world.

In the aftermath of September 11, we have at least learned that others see us, Americans, differently from how we see ourselves — that America’s image of itself is not widely shared, even by our friends. A recent poll of “influential leaders” – not extremists of any kind – but “influential leaders” in business, government and media from 24 countries and five continents, produced some startling findings. When asked if U.S. policies and actions were a “major cause” of the terrorist attacks on September 11, 58% of the non-Americans said “yes”; only 18% of Americans did so. Forty-two percent of non-Americans felt that the United States was overreacting to the attacks; no American shared those feelings.

Fifty-two percent of the Americans believed that the world likes us because of the good we do around the world, while two-thirds of the non-Americans [63% of Europeans and 86% of Middle Easterners] cited “scientific and technological innovation” as the major reason for their admiration of the United States. In other words, we are loved for our labs, not for our democratic ideals or good works. Fifty-two percent said we are disliked because our leadership of the global economy has made the rich richer around the world, and the poor poorer. There is much to be learned when we stop looking at ourselves in the mirror and focus our attention, instead, on the people outside peering in through the window – whether they are looking at The City or the university “on the hilltop.”

I wonder if a poll about the role and responsibility of a Jesuit university conducted among USF faculty, staff and students would yield dramatically different results from a similar sampling of the three billion people in the world who live on less than \$2 a day? How would the 75% of the world who don't own a refrigerator, keep their clothes in a closet or sleep in a bed react to what we are doing here at USF? Should they matter to us, at least as much as our ranking in *US News and World Report*? Does our obsession with the numbers foster a solipsistic perspective rather than a global one?

Imagine a number of the world's poor looking closely at USF's education. What would the reactions be from a black South African mother whose infant was born with HIV-AIDS, or a Guatemalan *campesino* whose body was broken by torture, or a land mine victim from Cambodia, or an Iraqi child dying from malnutrition due to the U.S.-led embargo, or a working poor resident of a single room occupancy (SRO) hotel in the Tenderloin? How would they assess the quality of the education that we are offering? Would 94% of them express “overall satisfaction with a USF education” — that's the statistic for our graduating undergraduate students? Recall that the above litany of broken human beings makes up about 70% of the world's population. They are the text; we are the footnotes in the contemporary story of the world.

It is not just the poor I want to take into account. Consider that in the aftermath of September 11, university communities across the country turned to churches, synagogues and mosques, or candlelight vigils or moments of quiet communal sharing in an effort to make sense and find solace. That the nation turned to God in prayer and faith with a new intensity was evident on cell phone calls from hijacked airliners, or stairways in doomed towers, in cathedrals and parish churches, synagogues and mosques, at ecumenical and interfaith services, in our homes and hearts.

People look to this Catholic university to shed light on their own search for the significance of life in the face of death, for the meaning and purpose of human history amidst the ashes of the World Trade Center. These nagging and ultimate questions that push up from the core of our graced humanity and are experienced now with a “new intensity” are at the core of our Jesuit Catholic tradition. Author John Updike captured this universal human impulse in his poem, “Religious Consolation”:

One size fits all. The shape or coloration
Of the god of high heaven matters less

Than that there is one, somehow, somewhere, hearing
The hasty prayer and chalking up the mite
The widow brings to the temple. A child
Alone with horrid verities cries out
For there to be a limit, a warm wall
Whose stones give back an answer, however faint.
Strange, the extravagance of it – who needs
Those eighteen-armed black Kalis, those musty saints
Whose bones and bleeding wounds offend good taste,
Those joss sticks, houris, gilded Buddhas, books
Dictated by Moroni, each detail?
We do; we need more worlds. This one will fail.

To “give back an answer, however faint” to the questions that have spontaneously arisen after September 11 is both an opportunity and a responsibility for us as a Jesuit Catholic university. We may be proud and confident that here, as Fr. Michael Buckley wrote:

“...it is not only ok, but expected that you will talk about God: to affirm or deny, to search for or to turn away from. And this, not simply as a comment on Hopkins or Schopenhauer, James Agee or contemporary history, but also in theological and philosophical disciplines ... Whether one affirms or denies the reality of God, the Catholic University insists upon the unspeakable importance of God, at least as a question every person confronts” [Georgetown University, October 20, 2001].

I believe that USF must embrace the hopes and frustrations of the world’s poor as well as the renewed interest in religious faith and reason as companions “in the search for truth and authentic human development,” as we say in our Core Values within the [Vision, Mission, Values Statement](#). The concerns of the poor and the importance of God, at least as a question, must be primary considerations in recruiting and hiring faculty or restructuring the former GEC or determining learning outcomes for the new learning core curriculum or mapping an academic major or promoting student activities to supplement and complement the curriculum. Not to do so risks our integrity as a university. Getting it so right in declaring our Vision, Mission and Values only heightens expectations about our getting it right in translating these ideals and values into educational structures like curriculum, departmental majors and recruiting and hiring faculty who will take us further down the road we have marked for ourselves.

I know that the Board of Trustees share my especially strong concern that USF’s Vision, Mission and Values are adequately and explicitly reflected in the specified outcomes of our new learning core curriculum. It is these outcomes that we judge crucial for a well educated person in the new millennium that define us as a university in the Jesuit Catholic humanistic tradition. Our core values must be constitutive of the core learning of our students. This challenge is one that I am confident our faculty committees will successfully address.

We cannot reassure ourselves about the “global” quality of a USF education by simply

pointing proudly to the significant percentage of international students in the University community. They are an important learning resource for us and we for them, but together we do not tell the whole story.

When one looks at Jesuit education from a global perspective or the renewed interest in the faith's role as a catalyst for human development, its goals become all that more compelling. Whatever else one may say about our Jesuit tradition of humanistic education, there is no denying that the desired result of associating with and absorbing the very best of the human spirit—whether a speech by Demosthenes, a painting by Leonardo, a genetically engineered gene, a tightly argued decision by William O. Douglas or the complexities of micro-circuitry—that the desired result is the fullness of our humanity. Jesuit Catholic education prizes knowledge and understanding for the essential, though not exclusive, roles that they play in our development—all of us—as truly human beings.

The measure of USF's quality, when all is said and done, is not the size of our endowment, not the SAT and GRE scores of our students, nor the sophistication of our technology, not even the research of our faculty, but the humanity of our graduates. The ultimate question behind Jesuit education is, "how does one be humanly in the world as it is today?"— a world where the Jesuit poet reminds us, "all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil; And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell." [G.M. Hopkins, *God's Grandeur*] We all know the bible story of the Good Samaritan who exemplifies the best of humanity and religion in his reaching out to the person abused and abandoned in the ditch. How do we chart our life's journey through a world where 75% of the people are pushed off the road into a ditch out of our sight line? The University's statement of values declares that the least human way to be in the world is for an individual or group to prosper at the expense of others. Are students learning that here?

Folk wisdom tells us that where we stand determines what we see, and whom we listen to determines what we hear. David Brooks spent time on the campus of America's elite universities and wrote about his experience in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Brooks observed that students at these elite schools "work their laptops to the bone, rarely question authority, and happily accept their position at the top of the heap as part of the natural order of things." He noted the failure of America's elite universities to offer their students "a concrete and articulated moral system—a set of ideals to instruct privileged men and women on how to live, how to see their duties, and how to call upon their highest efforts." He concludes his essay with the observation that, "It's hard to know what eternal life means, but if you don't smoke you can have a long life. It's hard to imagine what it would be like to be a saint, but it's easy to see what it is to be a success." The distinctive contribution of USF's Jesuit Catholic education is our deeply-rooted desire to develop saints who are also successful. That is our glory, our tradition and, if you must, our "market niche." Perhaps we should be grateful that we are not numbered among the elite!

At USF we are blessed with a number of direct learning experiences available to students and faculty—in South Africa, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico and here in the Bay Area. It is difficult to underestimate the power of these experiences. One nursing student in our

program in San Lucas Toleman learned that in the Mayan culture to be a midwife is a vocation—a response to a call from the community. She observed, that while these Mayan women have the call, they do not have the requisite knowledge and skills. This student learned that nursing was her vocation – her response to the world—and she wanted the knowledge and skills necessary to be a really good nurse. An accounting professor was moved at seeing her students working with residents of the Tenderloin whose poverty level entitled them to a tax rebate that they had never claimed because they had no idea they were entitled to such a benefit. She talked about the tears rolling down the cheeks of a young woman when she realized that the government would be sending her a check for \$2800. This USF perspective on accounting is different from that of Arthur Anderson and Enron.

Educating from a global perspective and challenging individuals to take seriously the reality of God require that we disrupt the regular rhythm of campus life to look at our education through the eyes of the world's poor, to listen to their stories and to let their stories inform our own. We cannot be humanly in this world, if we mistake our world of privilege for the world as it actually is—or should be—for the vast majority of its inhabitants. We need to figure out how to listen and respond with rigor, discipline and compassion to the other 99 people in our global village who do not have a college education or own a computer, if we are to fully develop into the “socially responsible learning community” that is so central to our educational mission.