

University Convocation

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

August 25, 2003 | Presentation Theater

At the risk of opening myself to charges of false advertising, I do not intend to speak to you this morning about the State of the University, rather I want to begin a conversation with you about the “soul” of the university. This convocation marks the first time that faculty and staff have come together to open the academic year – USF’s 148th. I hope that this morning sets a precedent.

In just a matter of days, you faculty will be deep into class preparation, committee meetings, paper correcting, student advising and scrambling to meet a publication deadline in the midst of it all; you staff are already engaged in, if not consumed by, the multifarious services and activities that run the university.

This convocation is a moment for us to step back and reflect on what it is that we are doing or trying to do here at USF. An old story makes my point. There were three bricklayers busily working in the hot afternoon sun. When asked what they were doing, the first bricklayer answered gruffly, “I’m laying bricks.” The second replied, “I’m putting up a brick wall.” But the third bricklayer said enthusiastically and with obvious pride, “I am building a cathedral to the glory of God.” None of the answers were incorrect; each of them accurately described the activity in question. The first bricklayer focused on the immediate task at hand; the second, on the project goal for his particular unit; the third bricklayer realized the grandeur and beauty of the entire enterprise, and he was proud to be contributing to it.

There is a plaque on sale at Fisherman’s Wharf that illustrates the same point in more colloquial terms. It states: *when you are up to your elbows in alligators, it is difficult to remember that you are draining the swamp.* In other words, the crush of immediate demands may blunt our sense of purpose and blind us to the significance of what we are doing. Life’s purpose and significance are central considerations for any thoughtful human being.

So what are we doing? Our Vision, Mission and Values Statement says that we are “*educating leaders who will fashion a more humane and just world*” and that we hope to accomplish this lofty goal by promoting “*learning in the Jesuit Catholic tradition.*” The creation of a more humane and just world is expressive of, but not unique to, the Jesuit Catholic tradition. This goal is not a religiously sectarian one arbitrarily imposed upon us from the outside, but rather one that is deeply rooted in the nature and character of humanistic education, which has always concerned itself with full development of the human person, in all her complexity.

What contemporary education brings to this most radical — that is, “deeply rooted” — educational goal is an awareness that we do not achieve our humanity in a vacuum. Being human is not an abstract Platonic ideal valid for all persons at all times and all places. To

paraphrase Janie, in Zora Neale Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, humanity "ain't somethin' like a grindstone that's the same thing everywhere and does the same thing to everything it touches. Rather it's like the sea. It's a moving thing, but still and all, it takes its shape from the shore it meets, and it's different with every shore."

One undeniable aspect of globalization is our heightened consciousness of the whole world and how closely interconnected we all are. The Dalai Lama talks about the principle of Universal Responsibility as the key to human development. He wrote in his autobiography, "*The more people come to realize that we do not live on this planet of ours in isolation – that ultimately we are all brothers and sisters – the more likely is progress for humankind, rather than for just part of it.*"

As you know, the deans, the vice presidents, and I spent a week together in El Salvador this summer. This was an opportunity for us to look back at our world and this university through the lens of El Salvador, a country where 60 percent of the population live below the poverty line – 60 percent consume fewer calories than the minimum required to function as a person; where illiteracy runs as high as 50 percent; where the two biggest infant killers are diarrhea and respiratory infections – both directly related to the lack of clean water and basic sanitation. We were constantly reminded that El Salvador is not an anomaly; the world looks more like El Salvador than it does like the United States. As one Salvadoran told us, "*you educated citizens of the first world are the footnote to the contemporary story; the text is the two-thirds of the world who struggle daily to simply stay alive.*"

Our week together in Central America illustrated the truth of the Brazilian proverb that our head thinks from where our feet are planted, and highlighted for us the significance of planting our feet in the midst of innocent suffering, so that we might experience what Robert Bellah called "the practical syllogism."

If the major premise is that basic human rights are to be met and the minor premise is that in some situations basic human rights are not met, then the logical conclusion is not just about knowledge but about action. What is the just thing to do about it? The practical syllogism does not tell us what to do. For that we need all the wisdom and knowledge and all the judgment we can bring to bear on it. But the practical syllogism tells us that we can't just stand idly by. Often the reality is, we can't do much; but the obligation to do what we can do remains.

It is precisely that sense of obligation to do what we can do — which I believe is hardwired into every human being — that is the key to realizing our full humanity in a rather inhumane world. A faculty member from the University of Central America suggested to us that in this 21st century the question for persons like ourselves is "how can we live without feeling shame." That question was particularly poignant coming from the Salvadoran context in which we had planted our feet for just one week.

This morning, however, I want to underscore the central and perhaps easier-for-us-to-get-a-handle-on aspect of Bellah's observation: the knowledge, wisdom, and critical

judgment that enables us to function effectively and successfully in society. I am talking about academic rigor, the *sine qua non* of a humanizing education. *Educating minds and hearts* is not an *apologia* for neglecting academic rigor. It bears repeating that we are about mind *and* heart, knowledge *and* love, intelligence *and* compassion together; we are not ceding pride of place to the latter component in each of those dyads. I repeatedly remind our students somewhat crudely, the last thing the world needs is dumb activists. Students are here to learn, and our responsibility is to hold them and ourselves accountable for maintaining “excellence as the standard for teaching, scholarship, and creative expression and service” as we declare in our Core Values Statement.

We all know that good thinking does not of itself make good persons, but good thinking may make a substantial contribution to that project. Philosophers distinguish among at least three types of knowing. First, knowing or learning for the sheer pleasure and delight of it. Such learning satisfies our basic human desire to know and to understand, and we may experience it in the natural and social sciences, the humanities or the visual and performing arts. Then there is the practical knowing we must master to achieve the goals that we set for ourselves. To be a lawyer, a nurse, a teacher, a chemist or an accountant one must master a body of knowledge and a set of skills particular to that profession. Finally, there is that knowing which enables us to judge whether or not our career and personal goals are worth pursuing, the relative importance of those goals and what is ethically allowed to achieve those goals. This final type of knowing is wisdom. The richest learning environment blends all three forms of learning without hierarchizing or marginalizing any one of them. That such interplay takes place here at USF is evidenced in a recent email to a USF faculty member from a former student:

“...the skills I gained and the information I learned in your classes have been monumental in my success throughout my college career.... In the years since I attended USF, I’ve often thought of emailing you to thank you for the guidance you provided me during my time there. I’m presently filling out the form to be included in the National Dean’s List, and one segment asks me to honor my most inspiring teacher – without a second thought I am entering your name in the fields. Thank you again for dedicating your life to education. You are an excellent teacher, writer, and human being.”

You faculty are keenly aware of what the above email expresses: that “learning” extends beyond knowledge and skills – although it is at least that – to inspiration, guidance, and basic humanity. Where learning pushes beyond practical knowledge and skills to such fundamental human questions as, “what will satisfy the deepest hungers of my heart?” or “how do I live well in the face of certain death?” – that is where the academic enterprise and the Jesuit Catholic tradition intersect and where USF acquires its distinctive character.

That Jesuit Catholic tradition, at its best, institutionalizes a set of beliefs and practices that support the most human of enterprises – making sense out of life, creating meaning in an apparently senseless world, honoring our mutual dependence rather than exploiting our apparent individuality. In her book, *My Grandfathers’s Blessing*, Dr. Rachel Remen, recalls one man’s reaction to a diagnosis of lung cancer.

“Doctor, I have wasted my life. I have two ex-wives and five children. I support all of them but I don’t know any of them. I never took the time to know them or anyone else. I have spent my life doing business, building my company from an idea in my basement to what it is today. I do not think they will miss me. I’ve nothing behind me but a lot of money. What an old fool I am, a stupid old fool.”

Similarly, when I asked a young friend of mine who works at a prestigious Wall Street firm how he liked his job, he replied that he loved what he was doing because he was learning about international finance which would help him achieve his ultimate career goal of working in sustainable international development. But, he said that most of his colleagues hated the work and only stayed in the game for the perks. Frankly, he said, many of his co-workers are angry, frustrated and exhausted, but they can’t give up the perks. I suggest to you that a fundamentally religious question lurks behind the experiences of those young Wall Street wonders: is life about the perks? Are our deepest desires for love and meaning doomed to ultimate frustration and should we, therefore, suppress them and go for the perks? Or are those desires the catalysts that open us to our full human potential and final destiny?

Anyone who is willing to seriously engage these questions at the core of our humanity plays a role in promoting our Jesuit Catholic tradition. As we state in our values statement, USF welcomes “persons of all faiths and no religious beliefs in the search for truth and authentic human development.” A member of the leadership team told me that El Salvador showed him that religion is not about a privileged set of experiences, but a way to talk about the dynamism that drives one to engage, not evade, the basic questions that confront us most starkly in human suffering. Religion is about life; it is not about itself.

A political science professor expressed his commitment to our mission of educating leaders who will fashion a more humane and just world as follows:

“The students who take the final exam in my course aren’t the same human beings who walked into the classroom on the first day. The difference isn’t simply that they know more than they once did; or that they have gained in their capacity to analyze, synthesize, and criticize a body of material. The difference also has to do with what they might do with their lives once college is behind them. I teach in the hopes that the next generation will explore careers that are also callings, vocations they wouldn’t have otherwise considered in which they can reach far beyond themselves to the wider world.”

In my mind, to teach out of this hope is profoundly religious, whether recognized and named as such by the practitioner or not. To teach out of this hope promotes and advances the Jesuit Catholic tradition that gives USF its distinctive character, whether or not that is the teacher’s intention. How we talk about what we do will vary according to our backgrounds and perspectives. That we talk, argue and even disagree about what it means to be a Jesuit Catholic university and what the implications are for how we conduct this university is a sign of health and vitality. Far better a healthy and spirited debate than a dismissive, “I can live with it” approach to our Jesuit Catholic vision and

mission.

My hope is that that this year will begin a sustained conversation about our Jesuit Catholic character. Some of us come to this conversation with a clear commitment to that tradition and some do not. In any case, a commitment to one's tradition, as Rabbi Merold Westphal argues in *Conversations*, can be conversational and need not be defensive, dogmatic, and doctrinaire [*Conversations*/Fall 2000]. It is a truism that we all stand somewhere. Exploring where we stand and explaining why we stand there should not be confused with demanding that others stand where we do. To assert the centrality of our Jesuit Catholic tradition is not a subtle form of proselytizing or ceding the podium to an "in group" so they can persuade or coerce an "out group" to one way of thinking. The conversation I am hoping for focuses around the central concern of humanizing education and the Jesuit Catholic tradition: the full realization of our common humanity.

Toward the conclusion of *The Secret Life of Bees*, August explains to young Lily the significance of a religious ritual centering around an image of Mary that the women regularly celebrate together. I think it is a wonderful expression of the religious dynamism that I believe is the heart and soul of the human enterprise that engages us all:

"Listen to me now, Lily, I am going to tell you something I want you to always remember, all right?"

"Mary is not some magical being out there like a fairy godmother. She's not the statue in the parlor. She's something inside of you."

"All those times your father treated you mean, Mary was the voice in you that said, 'No, I will not bow down to this. I am Lily Melissa Owens, I will not bow down.' Whether you could hear the voice or not, she was in there saying it."

"When you're unsure of yourself...when you start pulling back into doubt and small living, she's the one inside you saying, 'Get up from there and live like the glorious girl you are.' She's the power inside you, you understand?"

"And whatever it is that keeps widening your heart, that's Mary, too, not only the power inside you but the love. And when you get down to it, Lily, that's the only purpose grand enough for human life. Not just to love – but to persist in love."

I return, by way of conclusion, to that story about the bricklayers with which I began my remarks. All of us, no matter what our role at the university, are educating minds and hearts to change this world – where peace is consumed by ever escalating violence in the Middle East and Africa, where the flames of an intolerant fundamentalism burn brightly, where terrorism casts its dark shadow across the globe and the abiding plagues of poverty, disease, illiteracy, and human misery are as widespread as ever. Educating minds and hearts to change this world into a place where every person can realize her full humanity is building the cathedral that glorifies God.

At this point in time, I don't think there is a more compelling, timely, humane or – I would add, religiously significant – enterprise than the one that we have undertaken together. And frankly, I have no doubts that together we are educating leaders who will fashion a more humane and just world. So when anyone asks you what you are doing at USF, you tell them that you are creating a better world for all.