

## University Convocation

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

August 21, 2006 | Presentation Theater

At this time last year, the University community opened its heart to students whose college careers were traumatically halted by Hurricane Katrina; and immediately thereafter we scrambled to open our classes, our residence halls and our limited financial resources to welcome these students. In this instance, USF led with its heart, in contrast to some other institutions. The response from every one of you — staff, faculty, students — was to welcome as many as wanted to come and figure it all out later — a classic case of head and heart together!

Last September, I attended a forum organized by our faculty — the first such event in the Bay Area — to reflect on lessons from Katrina. They were hard lessons. A student of color noted how painful it was to see herself reflected in the photos and TV footage of those left behind: stranded on house tops, wading through water, lying helplessly on the floors of flooding hospitals. A faculty member offered startling statistics on poverty, unemployment, education, health care and the justice system that exposed the gross inequities and deep fault lines underlying the world's wealthiest and most powerful nation — a nation too quick to leave too many behind.

If the 2005 academic year began with stark images of those whom society leaves behind, USF concluded the year by conferring an honorary doctorate on its 1951 “undefeated, untied and uninvited” football team — a group of young men who refused to play in a bowl game that would have earned them an undisputed national championship, because they would have had to leave behind their African American teammates. We did not honor these men for what they did — which was significant; but for what they refused to do. They refused to sacrifice human solidarity and personal integrity for promises of fame and fortune that too often distort the judgments and taint the lives of less substantive persons. USF can not take full credit for those whom we honored at commencement, but we must accept their word that their USF education reinforced and made explicit what they knew in their hearts — another instance of head and heart in sync.

It would be naïve to think that all of our colleagues in the academy share our commitment to an education that embraces the intellectual, moral and spiritual dimensions that constitute a human being and distinguish the human way of being in world from the inhuman. Stanley Fish, a prominent literary theorist and former Dean of Arts and Sciences at the University of Illinois, writing in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, reminded faculty, “You might just make them into good researchers. You can’t make them into good people and you shouldn’t try” (*CHE*, May 16, 2003). There is every reason — not the least of which is our 460-year Jesuit Catholic tradition — to aim for both good persons and good researchers. USF’s clearly stated mission is educating for “success as persons and professionals,” and so we hold ourselves accountable for offering students “knowledge, values and sensitivities” because all three are needed to lead a purposeful life and make a living (*Vision, Mission and Values Statement*). Both good

persons and good researchers; a good living, but in the context of a good life.

Of course, no educator “makes” anyone into anything, and none of us wants to “mold,” “brainwash,” “indoctrinate,” or “proselytize” students. That is not the issue. Dr. Robert Connor, president of the Teagle Foundation, argues that it would be a “terrible mistake” to dismiss the moral and spiritual dimensions of education as though they were a distraction from the “real work” of a university ([teaglefoundation.org/presidentessays/200151015.aspx](http://teaglefoundation.org/presidentessays/200151015.aspx)).

He noted:

“Along with all the paraphernalia college students bring with them to college these days, are some of the “Big Questions,” often poorly formulated and approached with no clue that anyone in the history of humankind has ever had anything useful to say about them. There’s no need to answer those questions for students, or to try to fashion them into noble people or virtuous citizens for the republic. There is, however, every reason to help students develop the vocabularies, the metaphors, the *exempla*, the historical perspective, the patterns of analysis and argument that let them over time answer them for themselves.”

Solid research findings support Dr. Connor’s thesis. A 2004 survey by UCLA’s Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) polled over 112,000 freshmen before their entry into college. This national sampling of the college bound showed that just over two-thirds consider it “essential” or “very important” that their undergraduate experience: (1) enhances their self-understanding (69% nationwide versus 82% at USF), (2) prepares them for responsible citizenship (67% nationwide versus 79% at USF), (3) develops their personal values (67% nationwide versus 80% at USF), and (4) provides for their emotional development (63% nationwide versus 76% at USF). Nearly half (48% nationwide versus 58% at USF) say that it is “essential” or “very important” that colleges encourage their personal spirituality (HERI, *Spirituality and the Professoriate*).

Despite this high level of student interest in personal development — significantly higher among USF-bound students — a pilot survey from the same institute concluded:

“Colleges and universities appear to be doing little either to help students explore such issues or to support their search in the sphere of values and beliefs. For example more than half (56%) of the students who completed the pilot survey say that their professors never provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life. Similarly, nearly two-thirds (62%) say professors never encourage discussion of spiritual or religious matters... Nearly half (45%) report dissatisfaction with their college experience’s failure to provide religious or spiritual reflection.” (HERI)

My point is that there are at least 225,000 disappointed students currently enrolled in colleges across the country. Expectations that these students regard as “essential” or “very important” are rejected out-of-hand by the likes of Dean Fish, as having no place in a college education. Those frustrated students are not at USF; they are at other

institutions too timid to take on the challenges inherent in providing an integrated educational environment, or too narrowly focused on preparing persons for good research and not good living, as though the two aims were mutually exclusive. It is reassuring to know that what we do out of conviction gives USF a clear advantage in the marketplace. Not only is teaching/learning in the Jesuit Catholic tradition good education; it is apparently also good business because it is responsive to the expectations of the vast majority of the college bound.

USF offers the well-rounded education that the majority of students are looking for. When students really want what we offer, our educational efforts are likely to be most effective. You faculty and staff are *doing the right thing* in every sense of that phrase. I underscore the significance of what you are doing for our students and society. Much of the credit is yours for our undergraduate applications' increasing more than one hundred percent the past five years. This year we processed more than 7,100 applicants, and we expect to enroll 1,050 first year students. Now, we must see to it that their USF education meets their high expectations.

I cannot over-stress my conviction that offering an education that responds to the intellectual, moral and spiritual needs of our students enhances academic quality; it does not dilute it. We all understand that the central mission of a university is to discover, communicate and apply knowledge. The discovery and application of knowledge are the fruit of the faculty's scholarly work, and as I detailed at the town hall meeting in the spring, our faculty have never been more actively engaged in vital scholarly work nor garnered more external recognition for their efforts than at this moment. Faculty scholarly efforts are winning more national prizes and earning more foundation and government grants than at any other time in USF's history in areas as varied as salt ponds, human rights, special education, deaf theatre, Catholic Church history, science policy, short stories and poetry, and film productions. USF students are presenting at professional conferences, publishing book reviews and essays; our undergraduate nurses are passing their license exams at a 94% rate and our masters students at 100%. USF students are matriculating into top graduate schools and are being accepted into medical schools at a much higher percentage than the national average.

It is a point of pride for me that our faculty are involved in significant cross-disciplinary initiatives that reinforce our commitment to educate from and for a global perspective. The Law School's Center for Law and Global Justice has awarded six human rights fellowships to USF faculty members and promotes collaboration with colleagues in Education, the College of Arts and Sciences and the McCarthy Center, in particular, on integrating international and human rights issues across the curriculum. These several faculty work groups have immense potential for enriching the learning environment by laying a well-researched foundation for active engagement in domestic and foreign policy issues. This research is the distinctive contribution of a university committed to the common good. Other institutions — political parties, unions, and social clubs — supply human power; universities apply brainpower. I express my own appreciation and support to those faculty engaged in these scholarly efforts.

The integrated character of USF's Jesuit Catholic education is attracting an increasingly strong national constituency. The Carnegie Foundation has established a new elective category for institutions whose engagement with the local, national and global communities constitute an important and distinctive element of institutional mission. USF is one of only one hundred universities invited to apply for this recognition; we are currently in the process of doing so ([carnegiefoundation.org/news](http://carnegiefoundation.org/news)). *The Washington Monthly Annual College Guide* has long argued that *U.S. News and World Report* and similar guides do a lousy job of measuring academic excellence ([www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2006/0609.collegeguide.html](http://www.washingtonmonthly.com/features/2006/0609.collegeguide.html)). In its own effort to help guide parents and students in selecting a college, the magazine devised a way to measure and quantify the following criteria: (1) fosters scientific and humanistic research, (2) promotes an ethic of service, and (3) serves as an engine of social mobility for first generation and low income students. By those criteria, USF is one of only six Catholic universities ranked in the top 100. USF offers its students so much more than the bland and ubiquitous "academic excellence" that every college and university in the country claims as its distinguishing characteristic. We offer an academically excellent education, but in the broader context of social responsibility and full human development. Our curriculum is supplemented by learning communities, a full set of retreat experiences from University Ministry, leadership training, athletic teams at the intercollegiate and intramural levels, a wide range of professionally supervised student activities, and a number of clubs and organizations increasingly more aligned with appropriate academic departments.

In the above context, the forthcoming re-accreditation review by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) takes on a larger significance than simply insuring the recognition of our degrees by external agencies. This is an opportunity for us to recognize and celebrate what we do well, and identify specific areas or programs for improvement. The WASC review process rigorously examines our capacity to offer students the education we promise them in our Mission Statement. The re-accreditation review report demonstrates to our public that we mean what we say and we do what we mean. More than 60 faculty, students and staff are collecting and reviewing the information that will form the substance of the final report. This process will be transparent, and all members of the University community will be invited to provide feedback and input as the report develops.

An area of concern to us all is that of undergraduate student retention. Our attrition rate compares favorably with national averages, but approximately 14% of our first year students do not return for sophomore year. We can do better, and a task force is investigating this issue in order to make specific recommendations to support students and improve retention. Not unrelated to this issue, USF recently received a \$500,000 grant from the Lumina Foundation in recognition of the broad social, economic and ethnic diversity of our student population. The grant enables us to work with 13 other Jesuit universities on how best to reach and support first generation, low income, and students of color. You will be kept informed about this project.

With regard to keeping the University well informed, I must acknowledge that we simply

have to do better, particularly regarding construction and capital projects. This year, with help from Mike London, new Assistant Vice President for Facilities, and Gary McDonald, Director of Media Relations, we will solve this too long-standing problem. You may have seen our first initiative: a weekly email with updates on facilities and construction. If you missed the e-mail, this same information will be on the front page of *USFconnect*. We are also going to closely coordinate the two main campus sources of information: *USFconnect* and *USFnews*. *USFconnect* is our web-based site for general postings; *USFnews* is our professionally edited online publication with general news about what's going on at USF. Starting September 1, *USFconnect* will automatically post top stories from and directly link to *USFnews*, and a monthly e-mail message will also list key news items.

Information security is a problem receiving much national media attention with the theft and/or loss of numerous government data bases. You all know that right here in River City we have had incidents of information security compromises. Threats to security may come from outside an organization through hacking, viruses and spyware; in USF's case, however, they have come from within, through lack of awareness of our policies and failures to carefully steward confidential information. The free exchange of ideas, issues and information is the lifeblood of a university, but within those free flowing cross-currents we must become better informed and almost hyper-sensitive about how and where we store confidential data. The University will shortly post the draft version of a policy on Information Security to supplement our current policy on the appropriate use of technology. Give us your feedback. Once this policy is finalized, CIT will offer workshops on information security. These workshops will take some time — a precious commodity that none of us has enough of — but participation will ultimately protect you and the University.

A related issue is that of overall campus security. Campus crimes are best deterred by proactive measures like always locking office doors when unoccupied, cable locks on computers, no doors left propped open for any reason, reporting suspicious persons to campus security, keeping an eye out for one another and avoiding walking alone at night. We are also continuing to work on disaster preparedness and recovery, and I am very grateful to those of you who are spearheading this important effort.

If we began last year with Katrina's harsh and stark reminder of those whom America leaves behind, we ended on a contrasting high note by celebrating and honoring the 1951 football team, who embodied USF's time-tested "belief that no individual or group may rightfully prosper at the expense of others" (*Vision, Mission, Values Statement*). Imagine what our world would look like if that University value were universalized.

Last year's sesquicentennial celebration allowed us to look back with pride at 150 years of USF's contributions to every facet of academia and society. Today, we begin to write the first chapter of the story of the next 150 years of the University of San Francisco. Sesquicentennial pride in what we have accomplished segues into a healthy confidence and enthusiasm about what we have yet to contribute.

To re-read the University's *Vision, Mission and Values Statement* in the context of the deadly depressing news from Darfur, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Iraq, Afghanistan and Sub-Saharan Africa is to realize how desperately the world needs the fully human beings we are trying to educate.

On September 11, the University will welcome Paul Farmer, who has both a Ph.D. in anthropology and an M.D. from Harvard, where he holds an endowed professorship in the School of Medicine. His list of scholarly publications would do credit to a world-class academic twice his age. The truth is that Paul is 43 years old and spends the greater part of his time working with the poorest of the poor in rural Haiti. That same day, USF will also honor Fr. Gérard Jean-Juste with an honorary degree for his heroic work on behalf of his parishioners in the most squalid slums of Port-au-Prince, for which he was twice unjustly imprisoned on trumped-up charges without a hearing or trial. Fr. Jean-Juste is currently on furlough from prison for cancer treatment in Miami, due to pressure from concerned Americans and our State Department.

The Rector of our Jesuit Community, Mario Prietto, S.J., often cites a favorite *dicho* of his parents, *Dime con quienes tu andas y dire quien eres*. "Show me whom you walk with, and I will tell you who you are." In the great endeavor of "educating minds and hearts to change the world," we walk the path marked out by former colleagues in the company of Ignatius Loyola and Antonio Maraschi to Esther Madriz, Bob Mackus, and Al Alessandri. We walk with the football team of 1951 and the post-Katrina victims of 2005, with Paul Farmer, Gérard Jean-Juste and with each other. To be in this crucial enterprise of preparing today's young men and women to refashion tomorrow's world and to do so in the company of intelligent, good and caring people is about as good as it gets.