

## University Convocation

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

August 20, 2007 | Presentation Theater

I begin this morning with something of a confession or disclaimer. I spent the greater part of last Friday afternoon finishing my remarks for this convocation. At approximately 5:35 p.m., I hit the small “x” in the upper right hand corner of the screen to close the file and my day’s work. A message flashed on the screen, “Do you want to save the changes to Convocation07,” I clicked the “no” button and simultaneously screamed out loud as about four hours’ work flew off into cyberspace. I placed a panicky call to IT, and Jason Wu and Gilbert Lee rushed immediately to my office and, with the intensity and skill of experienced surgeons, they worked for almost an hour before giving me the bad news that the patient could not be revived.

Later that evening, in a misguided but well-intentioned effort to revive my spirits, Mario Prietto, S.J., assured me that no one remembers what I say on these occasions, anyway. Similarly, I recalled the words of Abraham Lincoln that “The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here...” Lincoln was wrong about his address at Gettysburg, but I suspect that Fr. Prietto may be right about my talk this morning.

Be that as it may, before I move into my more formal comments in this, the *second* version of my remarks, I also want to welcome the newest members of our community — faculty and staff — and take a moment to acknowledge and thank all of you returning veterans for the tremendous effort that you have put into the USF enterprise during my tenure. At no time are your competence, generosity and commitment more apparent than in these final few days before we launch another academic year. This is the moment when everything comes together...or not!

You probably read the email detailing the successes of our hard-working admissions staff: USF’s acceptance rate has plummeted from 82 percent to 65 percent over the last four years for incoming students, GPA’s continue to rise, gender distribution is more balanced this year, first generation students hit 35 percent, and the overall numbers will probably exceed our enrollment goal by some 25 students. These numbers will not ease the classroom crunch, but Kalmanovitz appears to be on schedule for occupancy by next fall.

With regard to facilities, never was so much undertaken by so few to benefit so many! This summer saw the most ambitious facility renovation effort in the history of USF, including extensive infrastructure and renovation projects in Fromm and Lone Mountain residence halls that added an additional 40 beds to our inventory. These and other campus projects were completed within a very limited summer time frame, on budget and in time to welcome the University community back to campus. We all owe a huge debt of gratitude to our facilities and housing staffs and our University workers, without whose careful planning, strong support and hard work we would never have made it.

An ongoing project of enormous significance for the entire University is Banner on Board, or BOB. If the University's financial investment in this technology infrastructure effort is significant, the human cost is incalculable. We are, in effect, creating a new highway system within the University — not repaving the existing roads, but building completely new streets that will dramatically alter long-time patterns of communication. Familiar paths will no longer take us from A to B; the new highway system will get us from A to B faster and more effectively, but only after a lot of construction work, re-learning a whole new traffic grid, and mastering unfamiliar navigational tools. I want to acknowledge and thank those of you who have expended hundreds of hours in keeping this project on time and on budget, and caution everyone, once again, that learning to negotiate these new roads will be difficult and frustrating at first. What will see us all through this challenging transition are patience, good humor, and the realization that the new system will ultimately give us better information, faster and in more digestible bites. It may not look that way to you now, but trust BOB and our extraordinarily competent and hard working IT colleagues and their allies across the University.

This October, we will celebrate the successful completion of USF's largest-ever capital campaign — \$175 million. The greatest single amount of money from the campaign is dedicated to student scholarships. Our endowment passed the \$200 million mark this spring — so we are slowly closing the gap between ours and Harvard's \$31 billion nest egg! While we exceeded the overall target set for the campaign, two major campaign projects were not fully funded: the new science facility and the day care center. We are now developing strategies to raise the funds to complete these two facilities.

Our self-study documents for the October visit of the WASC reaffirmation of accreditation visiting team was completed over the summer. I mention this document because it represents an immense amount of work in collecting important data, analyzing that data, and suggesting areas for improvement. The document is available online, and I strongly encourage you to read it. I initially started reading it out of a sense of duty, and frankly — to my surprise — found it to be an invaluable source of information and inspiration. It is succinct (only 25 pages) well written, quite revealing and worth your time.

I count the self-study document as evidence of the success of our efforts to be a “learning community” at the institutional level. The report is an evidenced-based analysis of what USF does well and what we need to work on. We are good at many of the things that matter to us: over 90 percent of our alumni were well prepared for their jobs; current students acquire the knowledge they need to solve complex, real-world problems; 95 percent of alumni would recommend USF to others; campus diversity is highly valued by our students; 90 percent of our alumni attribute their commitment to public service to their USF education; USF students overall report higher levels of active and collaborative learning than their peers; over 90 percent of our alumni acknowledge the impact of USF on their values and personal integrity; over half of our students report working harder than they thought they could to meet faculty standards. I am just skimming the surface here. This is a document we will be working with for some time to come and with which we should all be familiar.

If the report gives us much to celebrate, it also highlights areas that require more analysis, attention, and action. Our attrition rate for students between their first and second year is too high. We need to figure out why 15 percent of our first-year students opt not to return to USF for their sophomore year. We know that in comparison to their peers at other universities an unacceptably low percentage of our seniors have culminating academic experiences, such as theses, capstone courses, or projects. We know that only 65 percent of our residential students feel that living on campus enhances their learning experience. We know that academic advising is good, but students want more conversation with faculty about their career plans and life choices.

Seven years ago at this convocation, I told you that USF was a well-kept secret — the proverbial light hidden under the bushel basket. Today, USF is less of a secret, the basket is slowly being lifted, our light is beginning to shine across the city and our story is getting out there. USF's remarkable growth in undergraduate applications is more than a demographic phenomenon. Our draw power in the market place has increased significantly. If I may descend to the anecdotal: two very prominent San Francisco business types recently cornered me at a social event to tell me how pleased they were with the University's progress and how proud they were to be graduates of USF.

The University is currently engaged in a serious effort to determine how we are perceived by our various publics, so that we can more effectively and persuasively communicate our distinctive mission and strengths to our key constituencies. This is not an advertising campaign to sell USF to naïve consumers, but an effort to determine how to talk about ourselves to our various publics so that we connect with the people who are looking for the distinctive education that we offer. To do this we need to be clear, creative, and clever about telling USF's story, about packaging our product, as it were, so that people know who we are and what they may expect from USF. In the lingo of the marketplace, USF needs to establish itself as a preeminent brand in the world of higher education. Then we need to make sure that we deliver the product, and that the USF brand has integrity. Truth in advertising is no small challenge for a University as ambitious and idealistic as USF.

All of us are part of this effort. All of us contribute, mostly by doing what the University says it does: by promoting or supporting learning in the Jesuit Catholic tradition with undergraduate, graduate and professional students. That tradition offers students the knowledge and skills they need for success as persons and in their professions, as well as the values and sensitivities necessary to be constructively responsive to global concerns broader than their own narrowly defined self-interests.

I have detailed for you, much of what has “come together” at this point in the University's history. I think this is the moment for us to step back and reflect on what we are doing and how we are doing it, in order to reassure ourselves that we are moving in the right direction. This is, if you will, a kairotic moment. You know that if you ask, “What time is it?” chronos time tells you it's 9:25 in the morning; kairos time says, “It's time to change or grow-up or assume responsibility or take stock of one's self.” Now is a

kairos time moment for USF. Now is the time for us to seriously contemplate our future to ensure that the path we are on will take us there.

I recall a cartoon whose first frame shows a pith-helmeted team hacking its way through a very dense jungle, when someone standing on a nearby hill shouts, “Stop, you’re going the wrong way.” In the second frame, one of those chopping away at the dense overgrowth yells back, “Shut up! We’re making progress!” This is a time when so much has come together at USF that we should stop and dream and plan for where we want USF to go in the decades ahead so that we move that direction now and ultimately get where we want to go. This next year will see a broad effort across the University, with extensive engagement from trustees and outside consultants, to develop long-term financial, enrollment, facility, academic and programmatic goals for the USF of 2027 and chart a course that will take us where we aim to go.

We come to this effort with a clear vision and a compelling mission. We know who we are and how we want to be recognized. With apologies to our newest faculty members who have already chewed over some of these ideas, I want to say a word about two distinguishing characteristics of USF, two key definers of USF: our Jesuit Catholic tradition and the global perspective that shapes our education.

Let me begin with the obvious. “Jesuit” and “Catholic” modify the substantive “university.” That is as it should be. USF is first, foremost, and undeniably a university. The terms “Jesuit” and “Catholic” specify something distinctive about how we are to be a university. As a university, our mission must be driven by the pursuit of truth, and directed toward the creation, communication and application of knowledge through academically rigorous research and scholarship, creative expression, excellent teaching and learning. These are the non-negotiable activities that we share with every other university. Being “Jesuit” and “Catholic” should never compromise the integrity of the University, but they do add a different dimension or set a higher standard.

To my mind, no one has said it more succinctly than USF trustee and distinguished theologian from the University of Central America in El Salvador, Dean Brackley, S.J.. I quote here from a memo that Dean sent to Gerardo Marin, Associate Provost, in June of this year:

Jesuit education wants to help students understand texts of all kinds and the world in which they live, and, as part of that, to grow in moral sensitivity and practical reasoning and judgment. For Jesuit education, this latter half is not a complementary “pastoral” add-on to academics, but an integral dimension of academic excellence. A major, probably dominant, current of academic discourse separates facts and values, intelligence and morals. In this view, values and moral commitments are ultimately matters of taste, not of reason, which is itself reduced to the analytical rationality of the physical sciences. So, it is tempting — even for us who want to educate minds and hearts — to line up head and facts on one side (academic excellence) and heart and values on the other; or, through ambiguity, to give the impression that we buy into that split. But we do not. While we distinguish these elements, we also integrate them. We affirm scientific rationality but

also practical (moral) reason as indispensable to understanding reality, and therefore as essential to academic excellence. We believe that you cannot adequately educate the head without the heart, and vice versa. [6.2.07 memo]

This articulation of Jesuit Catholic education is not ideological, nor is it based on a set of principles unique to the Catholic tradition, rather it is rooted in the nature of the human person. And it is good to constantly remind ourselves that we educate persons, not talking heads. All human beings, every single person, each one of us is a complex composite of head and heart, body and soul, flesh and spirit. Those of us who aim to educate students for success as persons, as human beings, not just as professionals — as we say in our Mission Statement — cannot educate the head while neglecting the heart; exercise the body but allow the soul to atrophy; nourish the flesh but starve the spirit. What is at stake here is the humanity of our students and us.

I think Fr. Brackley hits the nail on the head when he says that “Jesuit Catholic” holds university education to a higher standard and a richer understanding of academic excellence than what is generally accepted in the academy. “Jesuit Catholic” proposes a more complex set of criteria than those of *U.S. News and World Report* to measure USF’s excellence as a university. We must do what all universities do, but we must do more. We should be as proud of the “more” that we do as the world is grateful that we are doing it. I was told that after yesterday’s student convocation, as a father and son were walking out of St. Ignatius Church, the dad turned to his kid and said, “Well, son, you’ve chosen the right university.” The “more” that we do at USF should resonate with those of you familiar with Jesuit lingo as the “magis” that occurs frequently in foundational Jesuit documents.

Fr. Brackley spoke about understanding the world in which we live and how indispensable scientific rationality and moral reasoning are — not simply for their own sakes — but for understanding reality. This takes me to a second distinguishing hallmark of USF’s education: the global perspective, the world-wide viewpoint, “reality” as it is experienced by the overwhelming majority of those in the global village. We know well that if all the inhabitants of the world were reduced to a village of 100 people, 80 of the villagers would live in poverty, seven would own computers, the six people from the United States would consume 40 percent of all the village’s resources, and only one person would have a college education. To understand the world is to realize that 1.2 billion people have no access to drinkable water and are forced to try to survive on \$1 a day or less.

If we keep our clothes in a closet and our food in a fridge, have a roof over our head and sleep in a bed, we are better off than 75 percent of the world. This is what the world looks like from a global perspective. The reality of the 75 percent with no roof over their head is dramatically different from the reality that we one percent experience.

To educate from a global perspective, as USF endeavors to do, is to educate ourselves and our students to know and understand how the world really is for the majority of its inhabitants; it’s a very different world from ours. Reality is relative! If we expect our

students to take the lead in fashioning a more humane and just world for all, then we must help them acquire some knowledge and sensitivity to the unjust and inhumane conditions that prevail in the global village. It is, by now, axiomatic that such knowledge and sensitivity is learned through contact rather than concepts, caught rather than taught. Students, in the course of their education at USF, must be challenged to directly engage human suffering and the injustices that cause it so that they may learn to feel it deeply, think about it critically, and respond constructively.

It is as clear to me as I am sure it is to you that experience — whether a service learning course, internship, practicum, clinical placement or immersion experience — is necessary but not sufficient for our students to achieve the educational goals we have set. Direct contact with human misery can generate anger, guilt, disorientation and confusion in students. In order for them to move beyond such feelings and the characteristically impulsive response of passionate outrage, we must show them how a Jesuit humanistic education and the tools of rigorous scientific inquiry can enable them to respond intelligently and compassionately to the complex realities of our global village. Such an integrating education must fire their imaginations and spark their critical skills. It must capitalize upon these direct experiences to motivate students to discover where their passion, best gifts and talents intersect with the world's needs, so that they may prepare themselves for the role they are best suited to play in the dramatic struggle for a better world.

Our Jesuit educational process must challenge students to see that such notions as “social justice” and “common good” warrant careful intellectual scrutiny. Intellectuals have long wrestled not only with the meaning of these concepts, but also the most effective means for achieving them, and our students must do the same. Clearly, direct experiences that energize students to work for and with the marginalized must be supported by a pedagogy that engages students with an intellectual tradition that is rich and diverse enough to help them appreciate and respond to the complexities and ambiguities of the world as it is. We are about understanding the world so that we might change the world, and we cannot do the one without the other. Knowledge of the world as it is, knowledge of the harsh reality of the majority of the world's inhabitants makes real claims on us. Knowledge, in this case, clearly entails responsibility. [The two preceding paragraphs draw from a 12.28.04 essay draft by USF Trustee, Mark Ravizza, S.J., on Jesuit mission.]

Let me illustrate the above discussion with the story of a former student. As a college student, she went on an immersion experience to Haiti where she found herself spoon-feeding a mash of beans and rice to one of 20 malnourished infants in an orphanage. It was their only meal of the day. She asked herself how it could be that there was only enough food to feed these infants once a day.

Later, she wrote an article in which she recalled sitting in a class and scribbling in her notebook. She remembers writing:

“...this is painful, this hurts, why does it hurt?”

She goes on:

I am not sure what we were discussing in class at the time, but I know that many of the things I learned in that course shook the foundations of everything I believed...it became stunningly clear to me that people are hungry not because there is not enough food in the world, but because of unjust economic and political arrangements designed by human beings...

“The knowledge that human failure is the cause of so much human suffering combined with other insights to bring me to a very different understanding of faith and action. One of these disquieting, challenging insights was that prayer does not change things. Prayer changes people and people change things. Truths like these hemmed me in, pressed me against the wall, required me to make life changes...” [Patricia L. Sullivan, *Explore*, Spring 2000, p. 25.]

This young woman subsequently earned her doctorate in political science from U.C., and now teaches and pursues a research interest in political violence and war. She admits to be still wrestling with social justice questions in her everyday life choices. What she knows, what she teaches, what she is learning continue to make demands on her — on how and who she chooses to be in the global village.

Let me contrast my former student with two individuals featured in a recent *New York Times* article that was headlined, “In Silicon Valley, Millionaires Who Don’t Feel Rich.” One of the interviewees acknowledged that the environment is so rarified “that people lose perspective on what the rest of the world really looks like.” For another person, life looks like a marathon with no finish line. “Here the top one percent chases the top one-tenth of one percent, and the top one-tenth of a percent chases the top one-one-hundredth of a percent. You try not to get caught up in it, but it’s hard not to.” [NYT, 8.5.07]

I would suggest that the loss of a global perspective, the failure to know and understand what constitutes reality for most of the world can lead to a life that offers professional success but little else; financial success, perhaps, but at the expense of one’s humanity, which, to my mind, is far too great a price to pay simply to be numbered among the top one-one-hundredth of one percent.

This summer, the vice presidents, deans, and I [spent a week together in Nicaragua](#). As you may know, Nicaragua in 2004 surpassed Haiti as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. When we returned to campus, I wrote a letter about this experience to the University community. I told the story of a young woman who had dropped out of school for over a year because she simply could not pay the \$600 tuition that would allow her to take the final law school course that would allow her to begin to practice law in her desperately poor, rural community. More than a handful of you offered to cover that young woman’s tuition. That’s remarkable! That’s a wonderful tribute to this community. That would not happen at every university.

It is self-evident that one cannot give what one does not have. We cannot hope to

educate fully human beings if we ourselves are not working to realize the fullness of our own humanity in the world as it really is. We cannot hope to educate leaders who will fashion a more humane and just world if we ourselves are not somehow, each in his or her own way, engaged in that struggle. The good news is that we — faculty and staff — do have what we hope to pass on to our students. This year as we take some time to dream and plan for the future, we do so secure in the knowledge that while USF lacks many of the resources needed to realize its ambitious goals, it is well endowed with the human resources to do so. We have the minds and hearts to change the worlds of our students. I cannot imagine a better group of people to dream and plan the future of this University. USF is in good hands because it is your hands. I am confident that we will continue to move the University forward in the midst of a world that desperately needs the kind of people that we aim to educate.

I conclude where I began, by suggesting that I think now is a kairotic moment for USF; now is the time for us — the permanent, stable University community — to rekindle our enthusiasm and fire our commitment to educating leaders for a more humane and just world — and figuring out what it will take over the next two decades to do just that.