

STRS Commencement – Dean’s Remarks – May 17, 2008

Certainly in the annals of the history of the Catholic Church in the United States last month’s visit of Pope Benedict XVI to these shores will be counted as nothing less than truly historic. Clearly in the annals of The Catholic University of America the visit of this Holy Father will be counted as nothing less than truly historic and memorable since it was the second time in fewer than three decades that a successor of St. Peter came to this campus to give one of the major addresses of his pastoral visit, one that was planned even at the earliest stages of setting the itinerary for the visit.

As we all know well his itinerary was packed with a variety of stops from baseball stadia, to cathedral churches, to airport tarmacs, to seminaries, to parish churches, to a synagogue, to the White House lawn and to the great hall of the General Assembly of the United Nations, and yes, to Ground Zero where his brief but poignant prayer was worth more than a thousand other words that could have been spoken at that now hallowed spot.

He visited Catholic church clergy, religious, seminarians, church professionals, leaders of other churches and religious traditions, academics, pastoral ministers, the disabled. Countless thousands participated in liturgies he presided over and, thee there were the selected few victims of sexual abuse who met with him in this city where he acted as a holy father should act among the more obviously wounded and injured of our Catholic community.

In the “run up” to the visit media folks kept asking “what will he say?” My response was usually a variation on “I give up!” Or as our esteemed colleague Msgr. John Tracy Elis would say when asked what church history meant for the future of the church “I don’t know. I am an historian, not a fortuneteller!”

Now that we are a month removed from the visit we can reflect on the messages he delivered in all their variety, depth and breadth. My own assessment is that what he left us with is a range of well crafted and theologically astute messages, homilies and speeches. My own sense is that what he said here coincides very well with what he has said and written since becoming Pope Benedict XVI. The expanding corpus of Pope Benedict's writings defy a summary characterization, not to mention that they defy a "sound bite" media culture. They deserve to be read and reflected upon, studied and, yes, prayed over. Allow me to offer four things which he said and did while here that support and challenge our mission at the School of Theology and Religious Studies here at CUA.

1. *Dialogue -- Doctrine and Life.* Starting with a comment he made on the plane trip across the Atlantic Pope Benedict repeatedly noted the importance of the interreligious and ecumenical meetings he was to have, including a visit across the street at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center with interreligious leaders, an ecumenical prayer service at a parish church in New York City and the stop at a synagogue on the east side of Manhattan at the start of Passover. There was no narrowness or ghetto Catholicism in the way Pope Benedict spoke about and visited with a number of people from a variety of religious traditions. He addressed them as fellow believers. He invited all of his hearers "to view dialogue not only as a means of enhancing mutual understanding, but also as a way of serving society at large." He then challenged his hearers to bear "witness to those moral truths which they hold in common with all men and women of good will" in order to "exert a positive influence on the wider culture." His challenge, it seems to me, is to a delicate theological and spiritual balance -- that progress toward ecumenical and interreligious understanding, not to say unity, should

never be divorced from living what we believe before the whole world. Otherwise ecumenism and interreligious dialogue is for the already “churched” or “attached.” These enterprises should also be about evangelization and living what we believe in the public square. At the ecumenical prayer service he reminded his hearers about the importance of doctrines and the historic creeds as they necessarily play into ecumenical dialogue in our day and age. He also coined the phrase (at least I think he coined it!) *diachronic koinonia* which he termed “communion with the Church in every age...just at the time when the world is losing its bearings and needs a persuasive common witness to the saving power of the Gospel.” Again, creed and witness, doctrine and life. No possible divorce for him between “Faith and Order” on the one hand and “Life and Work” on the other. Important challenges, I would say, from a pope who has not lost his theological lens, professorial manner and pastoral heart. Important challenges for us as theologians and experts in religion so that our approach to others in the dialogue process can be as respectful, sensitive and theologically acute as were his words to us.

2. *Human Rights and the Common Good.* The Holy Father noted on several occasions that sixty years have passed since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and that he wanted to contribute to this anniversary by addressing “the human and spiritual foundations on which it is built.” At the United Nations itself he spoke of how the Declaration applied to everyone by virtue of the common origin of the human person. He then referred to the way in which the promotion of human rights remains the most effective strategy for eliminating inequalities between countries and social groups. True to his custom of laying out and reiterating principles and then allowing others to make specific applications from what he has said I cannot help but

think about how this Declaration, and in fact the United Nations itself, ought to have responded to the situation in Myanmar or to the relief efforts in China. Natural disasters are not bound by national boundaries and the treatment and caring for those who endure physical and emotional suffering should not be determined by military rank or junta comradeship.

While here the pope reiterated what has become a familiar theme from before his election to the present – the dangers of materialism and individualism. On this trip he complimented American Catholics for their historical commitment to Catholic Charities and overseas relief services. He also spoke more than once about the need to go beyond oneself to the common good. He said this about a range of things, from practices of personal devotion to the hoped for effects of the Universal Declaration itself. “The common good that human rights help to accomplish cannot, [he said] be attained merely by applying correct procedures, nor even less by achieving a balance between competing rights.” When I reread this section of his speech at the United Nations I recalled his invitation to us two years ago that we as a university reflect on the “natural law” which we did with the recent symposium on “A Common Morality....” The Catholic Church in general and Catholic theology in particular have an important role to play on the world’s stage about human rights and the common good certainly by giving voice to the voiceless victims of grievous oppression and systems of government that are literally inhuman in the way they deal with citizens and constituents.

3 *The Academic Study and Craft of Theology.* Obviously for us who are engaged in the academic study of theology and religion the Holy Father’s address delivered on this campus was a moment of particular pride and, yes, of challenge. Before the talk our doctoral candidate Shannon McAlister had the privilege of being one of the ten members of the CUA

community to meet the pope individually. His address was from academic colleagues to academic colleague. He thanked American Catholics for their commitment to education which he characterized as “integral to the mission of the Church to proclaim the Good News.” He then immediately further explicated how the study of theology is to be seen in a wide context including “personal encounter, knowledge and Christian witness” and that these three are integral to what he termed “the *diakonia* of truth which the Church exercises in the midst of humanity.” My own suspicion is that it will take some time for us individually and collectively to unpack the meaning of that phrase *the diakonia of truth*. The word “truth” occupies center stage in Pope Benedict’s understanding of the challenge believers have to be faithful to the truth of the gospel and to the truth that guides our minds and hearts. But the rich term *diakonia* lays down a major challenge for us to see what we do as truly in service to the truth, a truth that indeed sets us free, but a gospel truth that is also paradoxical and sometimes all too challenging to be embraced. Again I come back to the theme of integration, not only in terms of his description of education but also in his description of Catholic identity. He offered that “Catholic identity is not simply a question of her number of Catholic students” nor can it be equated “with orthodoxy of course content.” Among other things Catholic identity means teaching and learning with conviction, based on a fundamental and deepening conversion -- committing ourselves “intellect and will, mind and heart to God” -- and a commitment that is given “fervent expression liturgically, sacramentally, through acts of prayer, charity and a concern for justice and a respect for God’s creation.” Once again the word “integral” comes to mind as the Holy Father moved us to consider our role as students and professors as vocations to serve the truth with the hard work and rigor of an academic discipline, and also with the hard work and discipline required for believers

always to deepen our personal commitment to and witness of the truth of our faith. We study the high points and low points of the theological enterprise within Catholicism not as interesting museum pieces and things to be lightly touched and kindly observed. No we study the Catholic tradition from the inside with commitment and pride, as well as appropriate critique and analysis that sometimes leads to reformulating and recasting what we have come to know – and be convinced of – for the church in ever new circumstances.

4. *Semper reformanda.* The Holy Father's meeting with the sex abuse victims captured the attention of the media and the imaginations of millions of Americans. It was an appropriate response to a situation that is nothing less than unimaginable and truly unspeakably devastating. But in several of his talks and homilies he referred to this crisis as a challenge for personal and communal conversion. In a sense this crisis for the church in the United States is our worst scandal ever. But it can also become the greatest opportunity for us to move to a deeper level of commitment to the truth of the gospel, especially as we here today, church leaders in theology and education are charged to be its catalysts. In the academic theological enterprise and in our personal commitment to the gospel there can be nothing that bespeaks the mediocre or the half hearted or the tentative. The stakes for what we do in this building are very, very high. What we do is nothing short of being the whole game – the study of the things about God, conversion to the things of God and witnessing in the world to the God we believe in. High stakes indeed. And a very demanding challenge. It requires intellectual humility as well as intellectual honesty, it demands communal self transcendence as well as individual self discipline it requires intellectual charity as well as academic freedom it requires knowing the faith, defending the faith and living the faith. It means being

a part of a two thousand theological and spiritual tradition with pride and also with the humility required to realize that academic study and discipline also requires personal conviction and commitment. These virtues come not from books alone they come from the refiner's fire of prayer and contemplation. Paradoxically they come almost naturally when we realize that all of us are part of the church that is indeed *semper reformanda*.

Today we send forth our graduates, a bumper crop in terms of numbers, and a stellar group in terms of what each of you has accomplished here in the breadth and variety of your specializations and research. Thank you for coming here and being with us on this journey of a truly rigorous academic study of theology and religion. Thank you for challenging us professors to strive to do better and know more about what our individual specializations and fields of research. Please keep in touch and keep us in your prayers as you do what alums are always meant to do – to transcend what you have learned here, to excel in your own future work in the church or the academy and be faithful to what the Holy Father called “the *diakonia* of truth.” The word *Diakonia* is often translated “ministry,” “service” or “vocation.” It should also become a lifestyle for us in this building and for those of you who now go forth from this building. Congratulations each and all.