

# St. John's University Founder's Week Convocation Keynote Address

---

Preliminary remarks:

In his 1990 Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, Pope St. John Paul II wrote: “A Catholic University, as any University, is immersed in human society; as an extension of its service to the Church, and always within its proper competence, it is called on to become an ever more effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals as well as for society. Included among its research activities, therefore, will be a study of *serious contemporary problems* in areas such as the dignity of human life, the promotion of justice for all, the quality of personal and family life, the protection of nature, the search for peace and political stability, a more just sharing in the world's resources, and a new economic and political order that will better serve the human community at a national and international level. University research will seek to discover the roots and causes of the serious problems of our time, paying special attention to their ethical and religious dimensions. If need be, a Catholic University must have the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society.” (32)

Together, as we celebrate Founder's Week, we give thanks to the Vincentian community and St. John's University for living this *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* charge, for “Welcoming the Stranger” from the very beginning of the University's existence and for the prophetic courage “to speak uncomfortable truths” to promote “the authentic good of society.”

I devoted a year of my life to researching, studying and writing about the 17<sup>th</sup> Century French School of Spirituality. St. Vincent de Paul was the fulcrum of that School that united practical mysticism and *esprit apostolique* (apostolic spirit).

A key theme of the French School of Spirituality was the synergy created by apostolic friendships. And so in the French School a communion of saints with

different charisms, missions and personalities united in friendship for the mission of the Church.

St. Vincent de Paul and St. Louise de Marillac, St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal, St. Jean Eudes, Fr. Charles de Condren, Fr. Jean-Jacques Olier (the founder of the Sulpicians and the subject of my doctoral dissertation) and their descendants to this day teach us to be friends in Christ who pursue the mission of Mercy of the Catholic Church together.

My friendship with St. John's University began last February when President Bobby Gempe saw presented me a St. John's basketball jersey at Center Court at Madison Square Garden. The number on that jersey was #5 for the fifth Bishop of the Diocese of Rockville Centre and it symbolized the New Evangelization partnership between St. John's University and the Diocese of Rockville Centre since the Diocese was founded in 1957.

I look forward to many years of apostolic friendship and partnership with St. John's University and the Vincentian community and I express my gratitude for your gracious invitation today.

---

***“The Relationship between Catholic Sacramental Theology  
and Catholic Social Justice Teaching: The Sacrament of  
Penance in Service of ‘Welcoming the Stranger’”***

Most Reverend John O. Barres, STD, JCL

September 21, 2017

At Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina, there is a unique baptismal font in the chapel. Before the Civil War there was a block of stone on what later became the Abbey property. It was called the “Slave Stone” because slaves being sold at auction were made to stand on that stone so that potential buyers could see them.

Imprinted in this stone was the emotional memory of the coarse cruelty of the slave traders and the anguish and trauma of slave families being separated and further

stripped of their human dignity. The Slave Stone carried some of the emotional imprint of the stones of Calvary itself.

Years later in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the Benedictines purchased the land, discovered the history of the Slave Stone, and made an inspired connection between Catholic Sacramental Theology and Catholic Social Justice Teaching.

The Stone was turned and refashioned into a baptismal font. A plaque was placed on this baptismal font that is there to this day. It reads: “UPON THIS ROCK, MEN ONCE WERE SOLD INTO SLAVERY. NOW UPON THIS ROCK, THROUGH THE WATERS OF BAPTISM, MEN BECOME FREE CHILDREN OF GOD.”

The Benedictine Monks of Belmont Abbey, saw clearly both historically and prophetically the connection between Catholic Sacramental Theology and Catholic Social Justice Teaching.

They saw the connection between the Theology of Baptism and the Church’s insistence that all human beings are entitled by their very existence to Dignity and Freedom. They saw clearly that slavery, racism and the commodification of humans in all its forms and in all its moments in World History are grave offenses against God and are rejected by the Sacramental Theology of Baptism as theological heresy.

The purpose of this address is to begin to explore the relationship between Catholic Sacramental Theology and Catholic Social Justice Teaching. It is not a subject that ordinarily receives much attention, but consider the image of that slave rock transformed into a baptismal font. I submit that the connections between Sacramental Theology and Social Justice Teaching are in fact profound and potentially very powerful for New Evangelization *dramatic missionary growth*.

That is often the case with our faith. One part of Christian teaching might on the surface seem to have little to do with another part, but on deeper inspection we find that in fact the first can cast great light on the second. As Pope Francis emphasizes in *The Joy of the Gospel*, “each truth (of our Catholic faith) is better understood when related to the harmonious totality of the Christian message; in this context all the truths are important and illumine one another.” (39)

Very often, a detailed, linear approach to theology helps us to understand the great truths of our faith. But the Lord also works in ways that are not always easily understood by linear reasoning, and if we trap ourselves into such a one dimensional approach to faith we can easily miss the profound truth of Pope Francis' statement—a truth that can revolutionize and elevate our approach to faith.

For example, in *Laudato Si'* 236, Pope Francis discusses the relationship between the Eucharist and an Integral Ecology and Care for the Environment.

He writes: “It is in the Eucharist that all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation. Grace, which tends to manifest itself tangibly, found unsurpassable expression when God himself became man and gave himself as food for his creatures. The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach the intimate depths through a fragment of matter...Indeed the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love; . . . because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world.’ The Eucharist joins heaven and earth; it embraces and penetrates all creation. . . . Thus, the Eucharist is also a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation.”

The Splendor of Catholic Truth is synthetic, holistic and harmonious. *Laudato Si'* shows the connection between Sacramental Eucharistic Theology and Catholic Social Justice Teaching concerning Integral Ecology and Care for the Environment.

In the light of that redeemed rock and Pope Francis's integrated approach, we now examine a third example which is the focus of this Address: the relationship between our Catholic Sacramental Theology of the Sacrament of Penance and our Catholic Social Justice Teaching concerning the themes around “Welcoming the Stranger.”

Throughout the recent Jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis asked us to be missionary disciples of the Sacrament of Penance. That was a special call for the Year of Mercy, but of course it is a constant daily call for every Catholic in every moment of history.

The Holy Spirit calls us to constant conversion. Deep and transforming experiences of the Sacrament of Penance are a critical dimension of those person-transforming and Church-reforming conversions.

So much of a Catholic's capacity to engage in meaningful integral ecology conversions, social justice and social change conversions, racism conversions, Gospel of human life conversions, and conversions from the seven capital sins hinges on consistent, deep and transforming experiences of the Sacrament of Penance.

The transforming conversions experienced in the Sacrament of Penance can also help us as Catholics to be a societal fulcrum -- to be Catholic American leaders in "Welcoming the Stranger."

The question<sup>1</sup> thus becomes this: can the Sacrament of Penance help us to break through what Pope Francis calls "global indifference" – the type of indifference toward the refugee and immigrant family that he put a global spotlight on when, in the first days of his Pontificate, he celebrated Mass at Lampedusa on the remains of a boat that sank off the coast of Italy resulting in the deaths of so many refugees?

It is, of course, also a matter of indifference to the plight of refugees and immigrants before they become refugees and immigrants. No refugee would risk taking a leaky boat across the Mediterranean Sea, or ride underneath a freight car

---

<sup>1</sup> The question I am asking with you today is a question of the relationship between Catholic Sacramental theology concerning the Sacrament of Penance and the beautiful symphony of Catholic social justice teaching running through Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1892); Pope Pius XI's *Quadregesimo Anno* (1931), *Non Abbiamo Bisogno* (1931), *Mit Brennender Sorge* (1931), and *Divini Redemptoris* (1937); Pope Pius XII's *Christmas Radio Messages* (1939-1954); St. Pope John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* (1961) and *Pacem in Terris* (1963), the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* (1966) and the Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae* (1966) so influenced by American Jesuit Fr. John Courtney Murray, SJ; Blessed Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967), his establishment of the Pontifical Commission of Justice and Peace (1967), his establishment, beginning in 1968 of January 1<sup>st</sup> as the *World Day of Peace*; his *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971); St. Pope John Paul II's *Laborem Exercens* (1981), his *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1988), his *Centesimus Annus* (1991) and his commissioning of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004) issued by the *Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace*<sup>1</sup>; Pope Benedict XVI's *Deus Caritas Est* (2005); and Pope Francis' *Laudato Si'* (2015). For an effective summary of the history of Catholic Social Justice teaching from Pope Leo XII to St. Pope John Paul II, see the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace's *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004), #87--#104.

from Central America to the American border, if the risks at home were not worse than those they face on their journeys,

The Sacrament of Penance can be a critical catalyst in helping penitents to break through their own indifference and to embrace at a much deeper level our call to welcome refugee-immigrant families and serve them with the feet-washing spirit of Jesus.

That includes helping them to confront the issues they face from unemployment to housing to education to medical care to a true and authentic appreciation and love for their leadership, charisms and gifts so generously shared in our Catholic parishes. It also includes helping people in their own countries so that they are not forced to leave their families, friends and homes and travel thousands of miles in order to survive.

The Sacrament of Penance is intensely personal and private – so private that we have a Sacramental Seal in our theology and canon law. But we also know that the Sacrament of Penance is intensely communal as well.

Our individual experiences of the Sacrament have invisible ripple effects in our families, our workplaces and the way we approach the Church's mission of Mercy expressed in Catholic Social Justice Teaching. If we cannot acknowledge and address our own sins, we cannot effectively pursue social justice.

In his February 17, 2016 homily at Ciudad Juarez, on the border of Mexico and the United States, Pope Francis said: “The human tragedy that is forced migration is a global phenomenon today. This crisis which can be measured in numbers and statistics, we want instead to measure with names, stories, families. They are the brothers and sisters of those expelled by poverty and violence, by drug trafficking and criminal organizations. Being faced with so many legal vacuums, they get caught up in a web that ensnares and always destroys the poorest. Not only do they suffer poverty but they must also endure all these forms of violence. . . . Let us together ask our God for the gift of conversion, the gift of tears, let us ask him to give us open hearts like the Ninevites, open to his call heard in the suffering faces of countless men and women. No more death! No more exploitation! There is always time to change, always a way out and always an opportunity, there is

always the time to implore the mercy of God.” (Homily at Ciudad Juarez on the Border, February 17, 2016)

Pope Francis diagnoses the spiral of evil and sin that destroys refugees rather than serves them. He calls for “the gift of conversion” from the tragic sins that directly violate human life and dignity and he calls for that same gift of conversion for sins involving “global indifference”, the failure to take the stance of the Good Samaritan and for the failure to acknowledge “what I have done and what I have failed to do.”

In his 1984 post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance*, Pope St. John Paul II stated: “At the heart of every *situation of sin* are always to be found sinful people. So true is this that even when such a situation can be changed in its structural and institutional aspects. . . by the force of law, or – as unfortunately more often happens—by the law of force, the change in fact proves to be incomplete, or of short duration, and ultimately vain and ineffective—not to say counterproductive—if the people directly or indirectly responsible for that situation are not converted.” (16)

And this, I believe, is the key. It is a constellation of individual but connected human sins that leads to refugees and immigrants being forced out of their homes and families driven to travel long and often dangerous roads to foreign countries in which they are strangers.

And it is a constellation of individual but connected human sins that leads others to victimize immigrants and refugees as they make their way to, and try to build new lives in, those strange lands.

It is the Pauline logic of the Body of Christ image in reverse where sin gets the upper hand and creates an evil momentum.

As Catholic Christians, we are called to break that momentum of evil and to live the image of the Body of Christ as St. Paul wanted us to live it. We realize that every grace, every decision to forgive, every conversion impacts, lifts up and energizes the Body of Christ and the People of God in history.

The Sacrament of Penance follows the logic of St. Paul’s Body of Christ imagery. Each individual and heartfelt confession has an immediate ripple effect in the

individual soul and in the Body of Christ. The grace-filled momentum of these Sacrament of Penance driven conversions can help lead to real and lasting social change.

This real and lasting social change has many dimensions. What we are saying here is something that, I believe, has been, to some extent, overlooked -- that the Sacrament of Penance is a critical dimension of Truth-driven social change.

Perhaps this seems to be asking a lot. But, in fact, like all Sacraments, the Sacrament of Penance is powerful—if we allow it to be. The Sacrament of Penance is liberating and consoling. It strengthens us and gives us a new and fresh start. It strengthens us to be peacemakers and forgivers.

When we allow the graces of the Sacrament of Penance to work in us, these Spirit-driven graces help lead us to not only profess and promote the Gospel of Life but to live it practically and holistically in the way we give reverence and respect to every human being we meet and the environment in which they live. Each time each of us avails ourselves of the Sacrament of Penance we further open ourselves to the work we need to do personally to help the refugees and immigrants in our midst.

We make a good examination of conscience and a verbal confession of sins that helps us to take responsibility for those sins maturely. We receive a priest's counsel and a penance for the reparation of sin. A heartfelt act of contrition leads to our hearing the words of peace and absolution that wash over and strengthen us: "I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."

The door of every confessional around the world is a "Door of Mercy", a Door to forgiveness and conversion, a Door to the transformation of our minds, hearts, lives, marriages and families. The door of every confessional is a Door to the purification, reform and transformation of the Church and the World, a Door that breaks through global indifference.

As a fellow penitent who goes to the Sacrament of Penance frequently – I ask the People of God I serve to walk through that Door of Mercy frequently.

Mercy and Mission always go together. We are called to be missionary disciples of Christ's mercy who gently but boldly propose and encourage those around us to celebrate the Sacrament of Penance.

As that slave rock saw transformation into a font of grace, we experience the redeeming, reconciling grace of God as we leave the Door of Mercy of the confessional. We rise to a new and resurrected spirit of forgiveness, humility, charity and mercy that leads to deeper grace-filled patterns and conversions in all of our human relationships.

And the Door of Mercy of the Confessional helps to transform every marriage and family to transform the world and history, and so often to transform the world and history by welcoming, supporting, serving and celebrating the immigrant families, the refugee families in crisis, the families of strangers in our midst.

A few weeks ago the Catholic Church on Long Island hosted Cardinal Gregorio Rosa Chavez, an auxiliary bishop in El Salvador who was recently made a Cardinal by Pope Francis.

Cardinal Rosa Chavez was a close friend of Archbishop Blessed Oscar Romero, who was martyred while celebrating Mass because he told soldiers to refuse to participate in torture and murder.

It was while offering the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass that Blessed Oscar Romero made the holy sacrifice of his life for Christ, the Church's mission and the People of God of that moment and every subsequent moment in Church history.

With Cardinal Rosa Chavez, we, the Church on Long Island, made an appeal for comprehensive immigration reform in this country and globally, grounding that appeal in the principles of the dignity of the human person, the sanctity of all human life and the family, and Catholic Social Justice concerning our belief in a preferential option for the poor.

We made an appeal to gang members on Long Island, and gang members from Los Angeles to New York to leave the Culture of Death and embrace the Culture of Life.

We also commemorated the 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the birth of Archbishop Romero, and prayed for his canonization. Archbishop Romero once said: “The most profound social revolution is the serious, supernatural, interior reform of a Christian.”

And here we return to the Sacrament of Penance. Although Blessed Romero has become embraced as an ecumenical and interreligious figure of inspiration who is known for his courage, his humanity and his solidarity with the poor, what is often forgotten is that he was a deeply humble man and priest who was profoundly committed to the Sacrament of Penance in his personal life and who deeply promoted it among the people served.

Blessed Romero understood both the power of conversion in the Sacrament of Penance and how that conversion could help provide for the social change El Salvador desperately needed.

Like Blessed Romero, when we embrace the personal conversions of the Sacrament of Penance, we see the global challenges of migration through the lens of the Kingdom of God and the prophetic mission of mercy of the Catholic Church on earth rather than through our own limited vision. We begin to better understand our own role in welcoming strangers as we follow Jesus’ call and build a genuine culture of life and civilization of love.<sup>2</sup>

Adelante!

---

<sup>2</sup> In his August 4, 2017 Pastoral Letter entitled *Sorrow and Mourning Flee Away* Bishop Mark Seitz, the Bishop of El Paso, Texas, expresses it well: “Even in hardships, reversals and disappointments, the Spirit has been at work in this long history of migrations, moving hearts to hospitality, rewarding hope with opportunities for work, and building harmony in diversity. Our Chihuahuan Desert has been a powerful place of encounter, where a true culture of *encuentro* has taken root and allowed flowers of life, culture and faith to bloom even in the direst of sands. The Church’s work of evangelization takes place within this great drama, announcing words of blessing, affirming life and pointing to the Kingdom. We are servants on the patient journey towards the civilization of love that the Spirit is preparing for all humanity.”

