Ex corde Ecclesiae and the Culture of Catholic Higher Education in America Today

Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales
October 15, 1999

[Beginning on 1 January 2001, Allentown College became DeSales University.]


It is my distinct pleasure to welcome all of you this evening to the inauguration festival for the Rev. Bernard F. O'Connor, OSFS, the third president of Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales. With special gratitude we acknowledge the presence among us of Their Excellencies, Bishop Edward Cullen and Bishop Thomas Welsh, of the diocese of Allentown, as well as the Most Rev. Lewis Fiorelli, OSFS, the Superior General of the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales, the Very Rev. Joseph Morrissey, OSFS, the Provincial Superior of the Oblates, and, of course, our honored guest speaker.

Actually, the inauguration festival began earlier today with a video presentation on the life and times of Saints Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal. Even if there are no special effects on stage here, this evening’s event is integrally connected to that television production, because the dissemination of Salesian spirituality bequeathed to us by these two great saints is what we are all about. This is why, as a tribute to our former presidents (Fr. J. Stuart Dooling, OSFS and Fr. Daniel G. Gambet, OSFS) and under the visionary leadership of our new president, the College is establishing the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture. This center will be an interdisciplinary research institute whose mission is to enrich and transform our contemporary culture through the authentic integration of social concerns and gospel values, an integration which has been embodied in the lives of St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal and is expressed today in the tradition of Christian Humanism.

One of the more salient features of Salesian Christian Humanism is its focus on friendship -- with God and with one another. That human beings find their fulfillment in good, true, and loving relationships is a fundamental conviction about life that is beautifully portrayed for us in the bond of perfection that united Francis and Jane. This evening we will embrace another facet of that relationality, as we celebrate our growth and development as an institution of Catholic higher education. Essential to the existence of a Catholic college is its relation to the Church, "from the heart" of which flows our educational mission and purpose.

And that relationship is embodied for us this evening in the person of our guest speaker. Among his many works, he is the chair of the sub-committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops that is charged with drafting the particular norms by which Catholic colleges and universities in the United
States will implement the teaching of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the 1990 apostolic constitution of Pope John Paul II on Catholic higher education.

His (printed) biography offers several other clues as to why he would be the best choice to commence our inaugural celebration: metropolitan archbishop, learned jurist in canon and civil law (with admission to the U.S. Supreme Court), one of only eight "princes of the Church" here in the United States, etc. But we welcome him tonight, on his first visit to Center Valley, primarily because he is a **speaker of truth** on matters of higher education. Himself a successor to the Apostles, he exhorts Catholic colleges and universities to take up the public challenge of the apostle, Paul. "Rather than being complacently "conformed" to the Zeitgeist," he writes, "[Catholic colleges] must be bravely ready to provide their students with the trans-political standards of sound reason and the Church's faith, by which they can evaluate the laws and customs of society, uninfluenced by the reigning opinions of the day, thereby discovering 'what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect' (Romans 12:2)."\(^{(1)}\) All the while, he also encourages us to dig deeper, in order to realize the essentially personal goal of education which, "in essence," he says, "is to discover who [we] are in order to discover who others are, including God, in order that [we] might love and serve him and them."\(^{(2)}\)

Long ago, Saints Francis de Sales and Jane de Chantal made that discovery in their own lives. Today, under the leadership of our new president, Fr. O'Connor, all of us at Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales -- faculty, administration, staff, and students -- seek anew this truth about human relationships which is at the core of the evangelization of our culture and which alone will bring us lasting happiness. Along this educational journey, we are honored and delighted to have as a preeminent guide the Cardinal Archbishop of Philadelphia.

Please join me in welcoming His Eminence, **ANTHONY CARDINAL BEVILACQUA**.


I thank the faculty and administration of Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales for the invitation graciously conveyed to me by Father Thomas Dailey to participate in this two-day celebration of our Catholic heritage in higher education by addressing tonight the topic of *Ex corde Ecclesiae* and the culture of Catholic higher education in America today.

The Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities, *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, and the proposed Application for the United States have provided all our Catholic Colleges and universities with an extraordinary opportunity to rediscover and reaffirm their distinctive role within the wider ecclesial communion of the Catholic Church. Father Bernard O'Connor assumes the leadership of Allentown College at a particularly auspicious moment.

Thus, along with my sincere and hearty congratulations to Father O'Connor on his inauguration, I also extend to Bishop Cullen, and to the students, faculty, administration, board, alumni, and friends of Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales the promise of my prayers as you renew your institutional commitment to the virtues and values proclaimed in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*.

In particular, I pray that the Christian humanism of your patron saint, Francis de Sales, will continue to shape the Catholic and Salesian identity of this College community. Indeed, it is to some words of this great saint that I turn as I begin these reflections. In one of his famous meditations, Saint Francis de Sales asked: “What was I thinking about, my God, when not of you? What was I remembering when I was forgetful of you? Where was my heart when not set on you? Truth should have been my food, and yet I feasted on vanity. ... My God and my Savior, from now on I will think only of you ....” (quoted in *The Manual of Prayer*, Pontifical North American College, 3rd edition, 1998, p. 214).

Later in this address, I will ponder with you briefly the significance of the content of this beautiful meditation for our theme tonight. But first I want to explain why I have introduced these lines of Saint Francis de Sales at the beginning of a talk on *Ex corde Ecclesiae* and the culture of Catholic higher education in America today.
I do so simply to alert us to the fact that we have to speak not just of the *culture* but of the *cultures* of Catholic higher education in the United States. The universal ideals of Catholic higher education are embodied in the diversity of distinctive *cultures* represented by the religious communities who sponsor most of our Catholic colleges and universities. Particular religious charisms have contributed decisively to the development of the distinctive cultures we find in Catholic colleges and universities.

Thus, in the case of Allentown College, we speak of its Catholic *and* its Salesian identity. When we do so, we mean to say, not that being a Salesian college is something in addition to being a Catholic college, but that being a Salesian college is a *way* of being a Catholic college. If we approach our topic from this perspective, we will come very close to the core of the message of *Ex corde Ecclesiae*. We will also have a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities *Ex corde Ecclesiae* and the *Application* pose for the cultures of Catholic higher education today.

The 1994 joint statement of the Pontifical Congregation for Education and the Pontifical Councils for the Laity and for Culture entitled, "*The Presence of the Church in the University and in University Culture,*" makes my point this way: "Religious orders and congregations bring a specific presence to the universities. By the wealth and diversity of their charism especially their educational charism they contribute to the formation of Christian teachers and students" (Part II, section 1). What does this brief statement imply?

Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and with the blessing of the Church, the founders of these religious orders and congregations sought to give institutional expression to their special charisms in distinctive, yet all-embracing, modalities of ecclesial communion. The cultivation of these charisms within many of these communities of consecrated persons gave rise, in turn, to their commitment to the educational apostolate of the Church. The inherent attractiveness of their religious charisms, combined with their competence, dedication and zeal, quickly drew to them lay collaborators who either joined them as teachers and co-workers in these apostolic endeavors, or contributed material support for the Catholic colleges and universities which they established.

In this way, the intense experience of ecclesial communion shared by the members of these religious families flowed out to embrace teachers and other co-workers, students and their parents, and indeed their local churches and surrounding communities in effect, drawing them, in varying degrees, into a deeper experience of their faith through the medium of the distinctive, yet fully Catholic, religious cultures of these institutions of higher learning. It would be possible to demonstrate the truth of this observation in cities and towns across the United States. I am sure that many of you have had this experience both here at Allentown College and at other schools across the country.

In short, one could say that this experience demonstrates that authentic ecclesial communion, while it clearly involves inculturation in the diverse national and ethnic settings where the Church is planted, is nonetheless itself both culture-*forming* and culture-*transforming*.

The cultures of Catholic colleges and universities are thus both the product of ecclesial communion and the leaven of transformation in the world. Precisely because ecclesial communion both forms *and* transforms cultures, we need our Catholic colleges and universities to cherish and preserve their distinctive Catholic cultures in order to ensure their capacity to influence the wider society. It is the strong conviction of Pope John Paul II that only in this way can Catholic universities and colleges champion the understanding of truth and freedom that is at the heart of Christian humanism and that is endangered by the crisis of ideas that characterizes late modernity. This is the profound insight to which our Holy Father gives expression in *Ex corde Ecclesiae*. 
Ex corde Ecclesiae frequently expresses the relationship between Catholic higher education and the Church as an expression of ecclesial communion. Ex corde Ecclesiae explicitly states: "Every Catholic University is to maintain communion with the universal Church and the Holy See; it is to be in close communion with the local Church and in particular with the diocesan bishops of the region or the nation in which it is located." (ECE, II, Art. 5, §1) What is more, in order to ensure the culture-forming and culture-transforming power of ecclesial communion throughout the world, Ex corde Ecclesiae calls for the strengthening and, where necessary, the creation of structured relationships between the Church and her colleges and universities in order to express the reality of ecclesial communion. Recognizing that the diversity and particularity of the cultures of Catholic higher education can lead to different structured expressions of ecclesial communion, Ex corde Ecclesiae requires the formulation of local norms for its implementation.

By requiring local norms to articulate with greater specificity the ecclesial communion that links Catholic colleges and universities with the Church, Ex corde Ecclesiae does not infringe on the rightful autonomy of these institutions and the integrity of their founding charisms. Indeed, ecclesial communion presupposes these distinctive and diverse cultures within the ambit of the Catholic Church. Ex corde Ecclesiae does not require that institutional autonomy be sacrificed in the name of ecclesial communion, nor that the distinctive Salesian, Franciscan, Jesuit, or Dominican cultures of our colleges and universities be homogenized in the name of an abstract catholicity. On the contrary, by assuming that ecclesial communion is expressible in concrete forms and structured relationships, Ex corde Ecclesiae embraces, celebrates, and seeks to preserve the autonomy and diversity of the cultures of American Catholic colleges and universities, and to strengthen their role in American society.

Having highlighted a key message of Ex corde Ecclesiae namely, that ecclesial communion both forms and transforms culture I want to consider these two aspects in the context of the distinctive Catholic and Salesian culture of your own institution, Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales.

Not long after his appointment as founding bishop of the Diocese of Allentown, Bishop Joseph McShea invited the Oblates of St. Francis de Sales to assume responsibility for establishing a liberal arts college in the new diocese. The diocese and the college have grown significantly since classes began to meet in the fall semester of 1965. That growth has led the college in many directions.

Students can pursue not only Bachelor's degrees, but also Master's degrees in education, nursing and business. The Shakespeare festival enjoys a national reputation for the quality of its productions. The Department of Theology offers a unique Bachelor of Arts degree in Marriage and the Family Studies. In contrast to many other such programs, the Allentown program is geared to formation for marriage in effect, to preparing students to be spouses. This program offers a perfect illustration of the way that the distinctive charism of a religious community shapes the culture of an educational institution.

When Father Louis Brisson founded the Oblates of Saint Francis de Sales in 1871, he sought to give institutional and communal expression to the spiritual doctrine of St. Francis, and thus to bring to life in the Church a distinctively Salesian realization of ecclesial communion. Central to this doctrine was a fully developed conception of "the possibility of devotion for those in the world." With the Second Vatican Council, we would speak today of the "universal call to holiness" which invites all Christians, not just consecrated religious, to the life of perfection. In the language of the Salesian tradition, it is the way of "practical holiness."
Seen in this light, Allentown's Marriage and Family program is a natural expression of the distinctive Salesian genius to foster Christian humanism in its students to lead them, in the language of your Mission statement, "to become fully human in a Christian way."

In this connection, I want to note with approval your annual essay contest in which students are asked to write on the relationship between the Christian humanism of Saint Francis de Sales and the experience of living within the campus community.

More broadly, we can see how the Salesian tradition that flourishes here at Allentown College lends a characteristic flavor to essential elements of Catholic educational culture.

Let us consider again the words of Saint Francis de Sales: "What was I thinking about, my God, when not of you? What was I remembering when I was forgetful of you? Where was my heart when not set on you? Truth should have been my food, and yet I feasted on vanity" In context, of course, these words are meant to focus the mind and heart on what really matters in life. Thus, the prayer continues: "My God and my Savior, from now on I will think only of you." But the words of Saint Francis can also be placed in a larger context. They can be taken as the inspiration of an educational culture that would seek to train the hearts and minds of students to recognize that the full truth and final goodness of personal and social existence can only be found in God.

Anything less than this is vanity. Nothing less than this is at the heart of the Christian humanism of Saint Francis de Sales. What is more, nothing less than this is at the heart of the Catholic vision of human personal and social existence -- in the words of Ex corde Ecclesiae -- "a kind of universal humanism completely dedicated to the research of aspects of truth in their essential connection with the supreme Truth, who is God" (#4).

The culture transforming power of the Salesian tradition draws its strength precisely from this all-encompassing Christian humanism. In this connection, allow me to quote a passage from Father Thomas Dailey's reflections on Salesian spirituality as found in his book, Praying with Francis de Sales.

Father Dailey writes that St. Francis de Sales came "to realize that the world is essentially good, that all things participate in the beauty and goodness of the Creator, and that human life itself was ordered to this beauty and goodness of God as its ultimate end." Father Dailey continues: "In our world today, scientific discoveries and technological breakthroughs reflect the potential of creation. Yet, at the same time, these powerful advances run the risk of fragmenting our lives. The holistic and humanistic education that Francis received, and which he would later promote, serves to remind us of the overarching plan of salvation that God has in store for our world as it waits to be re-born" (Praying with Francis de Sales, pp.15-16). Here, Father Dailey gives a characteristic Salesian expression to an important and perennial truth. In the midst of late modernity's crisis of ideas, Catholic colleges and universities must continue to explore and reaffirm this truth about the created order and the exalted place of human persons within it.

As Pope John Paul II has argued in a series of recent encyclicals, false ideas about creation and the human person, when they go unchallenged, threaten the very foundations of personal and social existence. In the encyclical, Veritatis Splendor, the Holy Father affirmed the importance of an objective moral order for the realization of authentic human freedom. In the encyclical, Evangelium Vitae, the Pope showed how the eclipse of faith in God in modern thought has placed human life itself in peril. In his most recent encyclical, Fides et Ratio, he defended the power of human reason to come to a knowledge of truth against the skepticism and relativism of modern popular and philosophical culture.
Viewed in the light of these great encyclicals, *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, in effect, summons Catholic colleges and universities to recognize the power of ideas and to rededicate themselves to the transforming power of "the whole truth about nature, man and God." According to *Ex corde Ecclesiae*: "The present age is in urgent need of this disinterested service, namely of proclaiming the meaning of truth, that fundamental value without which freedom, justice and human dignity are extinguished ... that wisdom without which the future of the world would be in danger" (#4).

The more clearly and confidently Catholic colleges and universities foster their distinctive Catholic cultures, the more powerful will be their capacity to transform the surrounding culture. By calling for the explicit expression of the place of the universities at the heart of the Church, *Ex corde Ecclesiae* and the *Application* for the United States seek to ensure the viability and vitality of the particular Catholic cultures of higher education so that these Catholic colleges and universities can fulfill the service to truth and freedom which Pope John Paul II sees as so urgently needed in the present age.

In the culture of Allentown College, formed by the spirit of Saint Francis de Sales, the challenge to transform the wider culture by proclaiming the full truth about human personal and social existence might well move us tonight to make his striking prayer our own: "What was I thinking about, my God, when not of you? What was I remembering when I was forgetful of you? Where was my heart when not set on you? Truth should have been my food, and yet I feasted on vanity. ... My God and my Savior, from now on I will think only of you."