

Inaugural Address/Preaching For Dr. Nancy Blattner, Ph.D.

Fontbonne University | St. Louis | September 19, 2021

By Fr. Charles Bouchard, OP,

Senior Director, Theology and Sponsorship, The Catholic Health Association

It is a great pleasure for me to be able to offer a reflection on this day. Dr. Blattner and I have known each other for many years. First when she was Academic Dean Fontbonne, then as she assumed the presidency of Caldwell University. I was a little torn at that moment, because I was not happy to see her leave St. Louis, but I was glad it was to serve an institution run by my Dominican sisters. Now it is an even greater pleasure to welcome her back to St. Louis.

It is not always apparent to outside observers, but universities tend to be conservative places. Anyone who has tried to move a curricular change through a faculty, let alone change the parking system, knows the truth of that.

Maybe it is because of that inherent conservatism that we have survived the economic, curricular and financial changes that have taken place over the last 60 years, starting just about exactly in 1968. Maybe it is our commitment to the values over our doors – fides, scientia, virtus, and veritas – truth – which seems almost quaint today, that has saved us.

As we continue to adapt there are two trends that I think we must be mindful of. The first **cynicism about institutions**. This is nothing new, but it seems to be accelerating. It sees institutions as self-serving, corrupt, hypocritical authoritarian, or worse, superfluous. This cynicism used to attach primarily to

government, especially at the federal level, but now it has spread to churches, voluntary agencies, health care institutions, the media, public health officials, the county council and even our local school districts.

This places university presidents in a tough spot. They not only represent big institutions, but they also traffic in the intellectual life, and you know how a lot of Americans feel about intellectuals, and in many cases faith and religion – which makes them even more suspect

The individualism that fuels this cynicism is also the basis of what political philosopher Michael Sandel has described as the meritocracy, the notion that I achieve what I need through my hard work.

We Americans like to think of our country as “equal opportunity”, a place where there is a level playing field for everyone. Those who achieve success did so by their own individual striving. Their success was their own doing. Those who didn’t make it have no one to blame but themselves.

In a recent book entitled “The Tyranny of Merit” Sandel says that the self-sufficiency and merit we pride ourselves on has deepened the social and class divisions in our country. It has led to hubris among the winners and humiliation to those who lose out. It also ignores the sometimes invisible benefits that got the meritocrats where they are.

Sandel says the meritocracy has two negative effects. First of all, it gives more inherent dignity (and reward) to some work, especially the work of the mind, and denigrates other kinds of work. I don't think we'll ever see this in the same way after COVID, which gave us all pause to think about who is "valuable" and "essential" and who is not.

Second, Sandel says, the meritocracy is corrosive of the common good. In a comment on Sandel's work, David Wineberg says, "the more we think of ourselves as self-made and self-sufficient, the harder it is to learn gratitude and humility. And without these sentiments it is hard to care for the common good."

In other words, if we think "it's mine because I bought it through my hard work," it's going to be pretty hard to create cooperative relations with those who do work we think is less dignified.

Why should we care? Our business is higher education, after all, and we can't take care of everyone. True. We need high quality education at a level that is not desirable or necessary for everyone. But because most of the people we hang around with are "the credentialed," those with a four year degree, Sandel says we can lose sight of the rest of Americans, 2/3 of whom do not have a diploma.

We should care because universities have served as important arbiters of opportunity. They are also important guardians of the common good. We need to rethink the way we do that, Sandel says and find to help society extend opportunity, and to appreciate and reward the work done by those without

university educations. Universities must tend not only to the good and the success of their own students, but draw others into the circle of opportunity so that as many people as possible are able to contribute to our life together.

He believes that the polarization and we are seeing in our country now is rooted in resentment of the meritocracy and that if we don't address it, the division and class divisions we are seeing now will get much worse.

The Catholic tradition does not see human persons as independent agents who "earn what they get." Our tradition sees persons as essentially communal, and it will not let us separate human dignity – which everyone is in favor of – from the common good, which we're not so sure about. Indeed human dignity is to the individual as the common good is to the group. You can't have one without the other.

Pope Benedict in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, acknowledges the importance of the economy of the market, individual striving and necessary business structures.

But human life cannot be reduced to market exchanges. Behind it all is the "economy of gift" – the act that in the end, or IN THE BEGINNING, none of us earned anything. It is all a gift. I don't "deserve" anything from God. So whatever we think we have "earned" by our hard work, we should grasp lightly and share willingly.

Sociologist Hugh Heclo presents one version of this theory called “Thinking Institutionally .” Heclo thinks individualism and meritocracy are not just an American cultural quirk, but is a major problem in our society. [For reasons I mentioned earlier, Heclo says institutional thinkers are not going to earn immediate respect].

“As a basic orientation to life, institutional thinking understands itself to be in a position primarily of receiving rather than inventing or creating. The emphasis is not on thinking up things for yourself, but on thoughtfully taking delivery of and using what has been handed down to you.”
(Hugh Heclo, “On Thinking Institutionally”).

All of our founders were acutely aware of “what had been handed down to them.” And Whatever else you can say about Catholicism, it is highly institutionalized. Every founder of a Catholic college or university or hospital or clinic had a Gospel inspiration to be of service. They all set about building institutions, not for their own glory but to make sure this form of “preaching the Gospel” had a permanent and enduring home. They understood that that if the Gospel – and the human values behind it -- was to be preached, it had to be preached concretely, here and now, a kind of tangible “show us the money,” let’s see if this Gospel if yours has any teeth.

Part of this was just the founder’s instinct for incarnational spirituality. God and grace came into the world in a real, particular, historical way.

There is a little more to it than that. These institutions are also rooted in another essential Catholic characteristic. If you ask anyone someone who doesn't know much about religion "What is the most distinctive thing about Catholics?" They are probably going to say something about mass or devotions, or rosaries or saints. These things are all sacraments, or at least sacramentals: Real things that mediate the presence of God.

Our institutions are sacraments, too. They are real tangible things that are not just a means to an end. They are things good in themselves that are ALSO signs of God's presence in the world...

Our Catholic universities may not always be the biggest, the most prestigious or the most well-endowed. But that doesn't mean they are not needed. Two articles recently made me aware of their value. One by Francis X Rocca, "Can Catholic Social Teaching Unite a Divided America" (his answer is that it has the potential to do so). The Second, "America Needs Catholicism" by Matthew Walther said that our Catholic institutions historically led social change in this country and they can do so again. Just think of the marches in Selma, or the fact that Cardinal Ritter integrated the Catholic schools of St. Louis in 1949 – far before the rest of the country did.

Against the backdrop of all this sociology and economics, The reading from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians today very good advice. He told the Ephesians they should be "tolerant", they should "preserve unity," and "remember there is one

body and one spirit” ---in our fragmented society this may be one of the most important tasks for every university....building up one body and one spirit, not just ecclesially, but socially and politically.

But he also says that each one of us has received a special gift – a grace, a charism – suited to the time.

I believe grace is custom-made. It comes to each of us just as we need it allowing us to grow in virtue. Not the end of the story. Graces are given for the good of all, for the common good. Nancy, you have your many gifts, gifts I have seen and which have been recognized again and again by others.

You have the benefit of the charism of the Sisters of St. Joseph which has led them to the service of education and health care and in many different ways. Let us thank God for the persistence of that charism and for the kind of conservatism that has kept it alive until today. But let us also be open to the new opportunities, the extraordinary need for unity and common purpose. Let us trust that God has new graces that will help us meet today’s challenges.

