



Bulletin today

Dease encourages 'focus anew on our mission'

By: University of St. Thomas News Service

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Editor's note: Father Dennis Dease, president of St. Thomas, spoke to faculty and administrators at the annual academic convocation Tuesday afternoon, Sept. 5, in St. Mary's Chapel. In case you missed the convocation, Dease's remarks follow. (Or watch video [here](#).)

Challenge yourself, change our world: A tagline or a trust?

Introduction

This summer I visited Taiwan for an alumni event in Taipei and to sign an exchange agreement with Tamkang University. One afternoon I was standing in my 18th-floor hotel room when I suddenly fell against the wall. I thought I had stumbled on the suitcase at my feet, but then I fell again. Before you start thinking too much "rice wine," I must add that the doors on my floor began to slam and the heavy wooden clothes-hangers in my closet began to bang loudly against the wall. To keep from falling, I quickly made my way to the bed and sat down. The building was flexing back and forth as though it were made of rubber. I was experiencing my first major earthquake – one that registered 6.1 on the Richter scale. Naturally I was concerned, but I comforted myself with the thought: "Dennis, you survived last semester's travel policy; you will get through this."

The mission of a Catholic university

A few weeks ago I attended the triennial meeting of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU) at Assumption University in Bang Na, Thailand. Presidents and scholars were there from Catholic universities all over the world. Several of them asked about our own Dr. Michael Naughton and his work with the John A. Ryan Institute for Catholic Social Thought. They also had kudos for the University of St. Thomas' co-sponsorship of several international conferences in recent years, especially last year's Rome symposium commemorating the anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, known by its Latin title, *Gaudium et Spes*, which means "joy and hope." The opening lines of that capstone document of the Second Vatican Council were:

The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the [people] of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts That is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history.¹

The Council's work marked a major turning point in the life of the Church. Pope John XXIII initiated this when he indicated that he wanted to open a window in the Church. One of the earlier major documents of the Council, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, or *Lumen Gentium*² as it is titled in Latin, dealt extensively with internal workings – the Church *ad intra*, as Latinist theologians described it. In the spirit of John who had called the council and presided over the first two of its four autumn sessions, *Gaudium et Spes*, coming at the end of the Council, and a direct result of its collegial deliberations, examined the mission of the Church *ad extra*. Providing a healthy balance for Catholicism, this document was seen by many as the embodiment of John XXIII's legacy – his interest in serving the larger world. Theologians began to write about how the Holy Spirit

of God works in the world, as well as in the church, and that the Catholic faithful should attend to the voice of prophesy that originates outside the institutional church, such as in the Civil Rights Movement.

Gaudium et Spes sounded a positive, outward-looking note for the Roman Catholic Church in its attitude toward the world and its movements. Forty-one years later, as scholars and presidents gathered at the IFCU conference, its opening lines encouraged us to continue to seek inspiration from this landmark document. Hearing once again those wonderfully outward-looking words of altruism prompted me to ask myself whether they might serve as wise and timely counsel for the University of St. Thomas.

Last spring, in particular, we found ourselves investing much energy in St. Thomas *ad intra*. It was, of course, energy well spent for the most part because it dealt with matters of justice and human dignity for members of our community. Careful maintenance of the life and morale of an organization are important.

This academic year we need to focus anew on our mission, and its implications for the university's work *ad extra* – that is, the mission for which we were founded and for which we continue to exist. The institutional church realized four decades ago that it needed to become more engaged with the world culturally, ecumenically, and socio-critically. Today we, too, must keep always foremost in mind our larger mission. We need to search for new and more effective ways to assist our students in growing more aware of the larger world around them – its “joy and hope, grief and anguish.”

This is not to say that the maintenance of our community life as a university is not vitally important. We will focus attention on critical maintenance issues such as the climate of our university community. But in the end, we should not lose sight that such efforts must remain ultimately in service of our mission as a Catholic university. A healthy balance between the investment of our energies *ad intra* and *ad extra* is what we must strive to achieve.

In the course of last year's discussions, several key issues were raised: One concerned the nature of our Catholic mission; another, diversity initiatives that should be pursued; and a third, the civility that should mark the debates and disputes of this community.

The Catholic mission

First, I would like to say a word about the Catholic mission of St. Thomas. At the May meeting of our Board of Trustees, one respected trustee commented that she had gone through Catholic schools from first grade through college. She said she had found herself concerned that our recent travel policy controversy might reinforce in the minds of our publics and our students the mistaken notion that Catholic moral values are mainly about sexual matters. She said she had learned that Catholic moral beliefs are ever so much broader than sexual ethics and apply to a wide array of human and societal issues. She also spoke of the rich body of Catholic social thought to which she had been introduced in her Catholic education.

What she said struck a chord with me. Catholic moral values are often portrayed, especially in the media, as sexual dos and don'ts.

I realize, nonetheless, that the travel policy raised an important social justice issue for us: namely, how members of this university treat and regard students, faculty and staff who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender. I realize, too, that members of these groups wondered whether the university might be sending a signal that they were no longer welcomed or deemed valued members of this community. Nothing, of course, could be farther from the truth. I want to say again what I have oft repeated over the years, namely, that we value the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students, faculty and staff of the University of St. Thomas. To any who somehow felt marginalized by the travel policy discussions, I want to say that I regret that. I know I speak for this community when I pledge to work harder to express our genuine regard for those colleagues. We enjoy professional ties and bonds of friendship with GLBT members and we appreciate the gifts they bring to our common effort. We will continue to recruit students, faculty and staff from among these communities and we absolutely will not tolerate any expressions of homophobia or prejudice that would infringe on their human rights or mar their human dignity.

At the same time I trust that all members of this community shall continue to respect the Catholic values of this Catholic university and support its faith-based mission.

Diversity

With regard to our campus diversity I am encouraged to report that we have identified several strong initiatives.

One of my goals is to work with the vice president for student affairs, Jane Canney, to hold more conversations and dialogues about diversity among students in order to create a more inclusive community. A second goal is to work with senior administrators on a plan to increase the recruitment and retention of a more diverse workforce. A third goal is to complete, by May, an institution-wide campus climate study.

Last month, a group of African-American faculty members and administrators submitted a series of recommendations on how St. Thomas can recruit, select and retain a more diverse work force and create a more welcoming environment for all. I was impressed with the group's suggestions as well as its initiative in developing them. The suggestions include the climate study, a series of "presidential dialogues" and more effective faculty and staff recruitment efforts – all of which already were in my own goals – as well as the following:

1. Appoint an ad hoc committee to advise me on issues directly impacting the climate for racial minorities, especially African Americans.
2. Strengthen support services and resources for cultural programs for students of color, and provide more mentoring and leadership development opportunities for students of color to work with faculty and staff of color.
3. Review the Dease Scholars Program, which provides scholarships to underrepresented populations, and examine whether there should be higher ACT and GPA requirements to qualify for and retain these scholarships.
4. Use the classroom to help change the campus climate for students of color by working with faculty to develop a stronger multicultural curriculum, discussing climate at faculty meetings and workshops, and providing training for faculty on cultural sensitivity issues.

These steps, and others, will go a long way toward improving the climate on campus and making this a stronger community. And I thank each of you for your support for such an important priority this year.

Why our mission makes us different

What does it mean that we are a faith-based university? What should be different and unique about the way each of us approaches our work because we are a part of the University of St. Thomas rather than the University of Minnesota or the University of Wisconsin?

Many of us may have not given a great deal of thought to how serving in a Catholic university makes us unique – how it should influence the way we carry out our work, especially at the level of our department, our school or our college. Is the service we render genuinely and qualitatively different from what it would be were it carried out within the context of a secular university, such as the University of Minnesota or the University of Wisconsin?

How does the Catholic mission of the university make a difference for us? Do we actually understand at the classroom, department, school and college levels what it means that we are a Catholic university? Do we find that our faith-based mission does indeed enrich our work?

I have heard two questions raised even after extensive community-wide discussions that resulted in the revision of our mission statement and the creation of a vision statement and a statement of our convictions: What does our mission mean? What kind of university are we becoming? One can only conclude that either those asking these questions are simply not paying attention, or, and in my mind more likely, the questions indicate a lack of serious reflection at the department, school or college level about what the mission of the university means for how that department, school or college conducts its business. Therefore, I want to raise formally two questions:

- Have our departments actually had serious ongoing dialogue in this regard?

- Has the common understanding of the mission of each unit been integrated with the larger mission of the university?

These are important fiduciary questions that in the spirit of professionalism and good stewardship it is incumbent upon us to explore.

I want to commend Dean Barbara Shank and the faculty and staff of the School of Social Work for their pioneering work in exploring how the mission of their school fits with the Catholic mission of the university. Their innovative project, which they have titled "Social Work for Social Justice: Strengthening Social Work Practice through the Integration of Catholic Social Teaching," should serve as a model for other schools and departments. Their quest is to determine what it means that they teach social work at the University of St. Thomas and the College of St. Catherine and not at the University of Minnesota or the University of Wisconsin.

Catholic social thought is an exceptionally rich, progressive and multifaceted body of reflection beginning with the dignity of the human person. In this tradition there are two basic moral principles. The first is that individual persons have the greatest value, not their cultures or systems. And the second is that all persons are equal. Catholic social thought, consequently, has consistently dealt extensively with such issues as poverty, a living wage, racism, a society's correctional system, capital punishment, environmental justice, rights of migrants, warfare and peace.

In Catholic higher education today it is often painfully obvious that what it means to be a Catholic university needs continual reflection and clarification. Those of us entrusted with the stewardship of this university and its mission find that answers are not always easily arrived at because the questions are complex.

Our work to renew our Catholic identity today is made even more complicated because the Catholic Church in the United States is fraught with polarization. A Catholic university must resist those on one side who would secularize its mission and those on the other who would reshape it according to an ecclesiology that is too narrow and an understanding of "Catholic" that is undersized. Both forces, unfortunately, contribute to a climate of fear. Both challenges will be successfully met only when all of us have put in the effort required to achieve a clearer understanding of what the Catholic mission means – and what it does not mean.

ss="style1"> **The world of our students will change**

As representatives from the world's Catholic universities reflected this past summer on "international justice," we heard speakers ask how we might awaken our students, who are children of privilege, to the reality of injustice. Our lives, in the words of John Paul II, are marked by "the dazzle of opulence" in the eyes of those who live at a much different level. As Jaime Oraa, the Jesuit president of a Spanish university, put it: Our students need to be "slapped with the reality of the world."³

And what constitutes that reality?

- The 1.5 billion persons, or one quarter of our world's population, who subsist below the "absolute poverty" line as drawn by the World Bank: one U.S. dollar a day – or less. "Absolute poverty" is defined as the condition of such destitution as to place a person's life beyond any reasonable definition of human dignity.
- The 40 percent of people in developing countries who go hungry every day.
- The 18 million deaths that occur each year as the result of poverty.
- The fact that although conditions are improving in Asia, in other parts of the world, especially in Africa, they are steadily deteriorating.
- The 50 million persons who are living their lives as refugees.

Despite these haunting statistics, the IFCU gathering was for me a profoundly hopeful experience. Why? Because of the clear consensus of the participants that action on behalf of international justice constitutes an

essential and fundamental element of the Catholic mission of our universities; and because of their strong conviction that Catholic higher education can indeed make a substantial difference.

Higher education in the United States needs to do a better job of awakening students to issues of world economy and politics. We live a dreadfully insular life in this country. Our blinkered news media focus too much attention on issues that are superficial, sensational and, worst of all, provincial. As Professor Oraa put it: "We cannot live in a bubble." He added that Catholic social thought provides "a way of seeing and interpreting the world – as though people matter." We need to continue to encourage our students to go into the field and gain direct experience working with the international community. Only direct experience engages the heart, and spurs one on. It is the catalyst for moral reflection and committed, intelligent action.⁴

An international perspective

The University of St. Thomas' tagline is: "Challenge yourself, change our world" – a good synopsis of our mission. To help our students do just that we need to ensure that they be exposed to a world perspective. That happens through their interaction with faculty and staff, through study abroad and international service-learning programs and through the substantial presence on campus of international students.

Our study-abroad program ranks among the finest in the United States. The 2005 Open Doors survey sponsored by the Institute for International Education ranked St. Thomas No. 1 in the doctoral/research university category, finding that 61 percent of undergraduate students will study abroad by the time they graduate. Our numbers continue to go up, too. Some 825 students studied abroad in 2005-2006, including 756 undergraduate students and 69 graduate students. This should make us immensely proud.

Last year St. Thomas enrolled 281 international students from 66 countries, making up roughly 2.5 percent of our student body. That is not enough. Our current goal is to achieve 5 percent. Were we ever to reach 10 percent we would rank among the best in the nation.

Our campus is fortunate to be home to an English Language Services program (ELS). Currently its enrollment consists of 145 international students, including 28 from Saudi Arabia, 24 from Korea, 18 from Taiwan, 14 from Bosnia & Herzegovina and 11 from Japan. Some of these students will enroll at St. Thomas.

This summer I had the opportunity to sign a new exchange agreement with Tamkang University in Taiwan. I want to thank Dr. Sarah Stevenson and Dr. Michael Sullivan for facilitating this exciting exchange. We have 11 new students from Tamkang who will spend their junior year with us this year and this number is expected to grow to 20 in the next few years.

I ask faculty and staff to encourage your contacts in other parts of the world to send us students. This brings the world into our classrooms, and will help our students someday change that world.

Civility in discourse

Another issue raised in last year's discussions was that of civility.

Life is not always neat and simple. Understanding the mission of a Catholic university can sometimes prove to be a daunting task. Balancing "Catholic" with "university" is never going to be easy, and we must learn to live with the tension inherent in our identity. That is simply reality, and it is healthy. Such diversity does, however, require that each member of this university community strive always to extend consideration and respect to those whose views differ. Civility requires that we assume that those who hold positions at variance with our own do so sincerely and in good faith.

I remember a column that James Shannon, president of St. Thomas from 1956 to 1966, wrote in the Aquin. He told his all-male student readers in the language of that day that even in the heat of debate there is one thing a gentleman never does: to question either his opponents' motives or his intelligence.

This is counsel that would serve well today's polarized U.S. Catholic community. I appreciate the work of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who founded the Catholic Common Ground Movement. I applaud our own

Sister Katarina Schuth, holder of the Endowed Chair in the Social Scientific Study of Religion, for her personal investment of time and energy in that movement as one of its founding board members.

Catholic common ground espouses seven “principles of dialogue”:

1. We should recognize that no single group or viewpoint in the church has a complete monopoly on the truth.
2. We should not envision ourselves or any one part of the church a saving remnant. No group within the church should judge itself alone to be possessed of enlightenment or spurn the mass of Catholics, their leaders, or their institutions as unfaithful.
3. We should test all proposals for their pastoral realism and potential impact on living individuals as well as for their theological truth. Pastoral effectiveness is a responsibility of leadership.
4. We should presume that those with whom we differ are acting in good faith. They deserve civility, charity, and a good-faith effort to understand their concerns. We should not substitute labels, abstractions, or blanketing terms – “radical feminism,” “the hierarchy,” “the Vatican,” [“the administration”] – for living, complicated realities.
5. We should put the best possible construction on differing positions, addressing their strongest points rather than seizing upon the most vulnerable aspects in order to discredit them. We should detect the valid insights and legitimate worries that may underlie even questionable arguments. [This is an especially crucial (and perhaps difficult) principle in an academic community where “destroying an opponent’s argument” is often seen as a badge of honor. We need to learn to soften this approach and replace it with genuinely constructive criticism.]
6. We should be cautious in ascribing motives We should not rush to interpret disagreements as conflicts of starkly opposing principles rather than as differences in degree or in prudential pastoral judgments about the relevant facts.
7. We should bring the church to engage the realities of contemporary culture, not by simple defiance or by naive acquiescence, but acknowledging, in the fashion of *Gaudium et Spes*, both our culture’s valid achievements and [its] real dangers.⁵

Campus dialogues

In the days ahead I would like to call the entire university community to engage in a discussion of the university’s mission and what about it makes our work here unique. In the past two years we have revised our mission statement, crafted a vision statement, and outlined a statement of seven convictions. These represent the best effort of this community to answer concisely four questions:

- Who are we?
- Where are we going?
- How will we get there?
- And, most importantly, what do we stand for?

Who are we? Our revised mission statement reads: “Inspired by Catholic intellectual tradition the University of St. Thomas educates students to be morally responsible leaders who think critically, act wisely and work skillfully to advance the common good.” We are a “teaching university.” We recognize and reward a broad range of intellectual endeavors as constituting scholarly engagement and we place a special emphasis on work that actively involves students in the scholarly process.

Where are we going? Our new vision statement affirms: “We seek to be a recognized leader in Catholic higher education that excels in effective teaching, active learning, scholarly research and responsible engagement with the local community as well as with the national and global communities in which we live.”

How will we get there? We will announce at the end of this academic year a major capital fundraising effort that will, if we are successful, bring in much needed resources to substantially strengthen the university. The three priorities of the campaign are Catholic identity, access and excellence. Without the support of faculty and staff we will not be successful in this effort. With that support, however, we will strengthen that which makes us unique: our Catholic character. We will open much wider than they are today our doors to countless deserving

students. We will create for them here strong and excellent programs that will prepare them “to think critically, active wisely and work skillfully to advance the common good.”

Finally, what precisely do we stand for? Our Convictions Statement declares:

As a community we are committed to:

Pursuit of Truth

We value intellectual inquiry as a life-long habit, the unfettered and impartial pursuit of truth in all its forms, the integration of knowledge across disciplines, and the imaginative and creative exploration of new ideas.

Academic Excellence

We create a culture among faculty, students and staff that recognizes the power of ideas and rewards rigorous thinking.

Faith and Reason

We actively engage Catholic intellectual tradition, which values the fundamental compatibility of faith and reason and fosters meaningful dialogue directed toward the flourishing of human culture.

Dignity

We respect the dignity of each person and value the unique contributions that each brings to the greater mosaic of the university community.

Diversity

We strive to create a vibrant diverse community in which, together, we work for a more just and inclusive society.

Personal Attention

We foster a caring culture that supports the well-being of each member.

Gratitude

We celebrate the achievements of all members of our community in goals attained and obstacles overcome, and in all things give praise to God.

Our convictions: A basis for dialogue

What happens when members of this community, in good faith, disagree in their understandings of the basic values of community? Dr. Brenda Powell suggested to me last spring that we might want to consider using the university's Convictions Statement as a basis for dialogue. I couldn't agree more.

Conclusion

After all is said and done, what does our mission boil down to? It comes down to our students – their challenges and their future. The American Council on Education's tagline is: “America's colleges and universities: We teach the people who solve the problems and change the world.” And here at St. Thomas we say to students: “Challenge yourself, change our world.” Our mission, in a word, is to educate students in such a way that they may indeed contribute to the fashioning of a fairer, better world.

End notes

¹*Gaudium et Spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, The Second Vatican Council (December 7, 1965), paragraph 1.

² *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, The Second Vatican Council (November 21, 1964).

³ Jaime Oraa, S.J., "Catholic Universities and International Justice: Commitments and Projects," International Federation of Catholic Universities, Bang Na, Thailand. Professor Oraa is rector of the Universidad deusto, Spain.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ "Principles of Dialogue," Catholic Common Ground Initiative, National Pastoral Life Center.

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