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The Challenge of Diversity

Cover Page Footnote

This essay was presented at the First Presidential Lecture Series at Sacred Heart University on October 8, 1988.

JOSEPH P. FITZPATRICK, S.J.

*The Challenge of Diversity**

I cannot tell you how honored I am to be asked to give the first of the Presidential Lectures at Sacred Heart University. I am going to begin with some references to Scripture. That gives me some anxiety. On the occasion of the first miracle of Jesus at the marriage feast at Cana, we are informed that "the best wine was the wine that was served last." I do not know where that leaves the wine that is served first! However, if we accept the spirit of the Scripture, it means that you have much greater things to come. I think that can serve as a symbol of my own remarks. With the new administration at Sacred Heart University, greater things are to come. As we congratulate Doctor Cernera, we do so with a confidence and enthusiasm that he will seize the impressive achievements of the first twenty-five years of Sacred Heart, and move the University toward the twenty-first century with even greater achievements. Indeed, the best wine is still to come.

My message tonight is focused on a few simple propositions and questions. First, the role which a University in the Catholic tradition must play in the midst of the inner city: briefly, what is the responsibility of Sacred Heart University in the environment of Bridgeport? That role is to fulfill, in its academic pursuits, the prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper, his last will and testament so to speak: "I pray, Father, that they may be one, as you are in me and I am in you, . . . may they be so completely one that the world will realize it was you who sent me."¹ However, the great innovation of Jesus was made clear later. When the first uncircumcised gentile asked for Baptism, the Apostles did not know what to do. Must all gentiles become circumcised and follow the Hebrew religious tradition in order to be Christian? God gave the great revelation to Peter about the Church of the gentiles. They were not required to become circumcised and follow Jewish ways; they were to remain Roman, and Greek, and Syrian and Egyptian, while they fulfilled, in the framework of their own culture, the word and life of Jesus. "God has

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been showing me," said Peter in his great homily to the Romans in the house of Cornelius, "that He has no favorites; but that anyone of any nationality [or culture] who fears God and does what piety demands is acceptable to Him."² The impact of the Gospels was not to homogenize the world. It was to be a mysterious but marvelous unity: the followers of Jesus would be one, but they would be one by remaining themselves, a miracle of unity in diversity; One Church, Many Cultures.

What does this mean for a University like Sacred Heart in a civic community like Bridgeport, a community of remarkable diversity of ethnic groups, races, religions and social classes? How does the University contribute to the effort of the human family to enable its members to achieve the unity of the human family? Something like the ninety-six instruments of an orchestra, each giving forth a different sound, all of which are swept into the harmonious unity of a symphony, or like a thousand forms and colors in a painting issuing in the one creative theme of the artist. The miracle of unity in diversity. Let me begin with the role of the University in continuing this achievement today.

The Role of the University in the Modern City

Put in crude simplicity, the role of the university is to enable you to be yourself, and to enable you to be yourself by becoming more than yourself. In the conventional vocabulary now gone out of fashion, it provides a "liberal education"; in a modern idiom now in style, it is part of the "process of liberation." It achieves what Paulo Freire calls the "awakening of consciousness."³ It secures you in the self-awareness and confidence of being yourself while at the same time it liberates you from what Alfred Zimmern called "the tyranny of lesser loyalties." It enables you to be yourself by enabling you to become something much more than yourself.

This prosaic language identifies the critical problem of the modern city, and the critical role the university must play in the modern city. The powerful assertion of the new racial and ethnic identities and their demand for recognition and respect — Black power, Hispanic power, Asian power — and the reawakening of ethnic consciousness of earlier immigrant groups are at once a sign of

hope and a threat of oppression. They are the constant cry for liberation in the recognition of one's self and one's significance; of one's freedom to play a major role in the modern city. But they carry the threat of confinement to lesser loyalties which can be a tyranny of their own. In this critical and abiding risk of human existence, the role of the university is clear: to awaken and expand and secure the consciousness of one's self, of who you are and where you come from and what you mean; to enable you to become a human person in the rich security of ethnic or racial background, to enjoy the freedom to express that background in contemporary affairs, but at the same time to liberate you from the tyranny of lesser loyalties by linking you to a world of ideas, of knowledge and skills which transcend the limited, albeit consoling, satisfaction of the world from which you come. To repeat, it enables you to be yourself by enabling you to be something much more than yourself.

Is this not the fulfillment of the prayer of Jesus? "I pray Father, that they all may be one." And God's revelation to Peter: Romans and Greeks and Egyptians and Syrians are all to become one, but by remaining themselves. God welcomes anyone of any nation or ethnic group who seeks God and does what piety demands. Some of the followers of the Apostle James wanted to lock the word and life of Jesus up within the Jewish religious traditions; everyone would have to follow Hebrew ways!⁴ What would have happened to the Church without the rich involvement of Greeks, with their philosophy, of Romans, with their gift for organization, of Egyptians, with their art and literature? Centuries later, some of the leaders of the Western Church wanted to restrict the Church to Western European ways, to force the Slovak Christians to use Latin and follow the Roman Rite.⁵ Fortunately the Pope intervened and the Slovaks were able to remain themselves, in language and culture, as they became Christian. And the Church was enriched by the extraordinary devotion of the Slavs, their reverence for Mary, their expression of their Christian life in music and the art of the Icon. In the tragedy of the condemnation of the Chinese Rites in the 18th century, the Roman Church refused to accept the Chinese unless they followed Roman ways. The result was the destruction of the Chinese mission. The decision was reversed in 1938; too late. We can only speculate what differences it would have made for the Church had the richness of Chinese life and culture been absorbed into the Church 250 years ago. Thank God, there is the

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renewed emphasis in our day that, as new peoples enter the Church, they will enrich the Church if they have the right and the opportunity to remain themselves while becoming one with others in Christ.

What was happening here? The great miracle of unity in diversity was taking place. When people of one culture or way of life or style of religious practices were able to open their lives to receive others, to be "liberated" as we now say from the limitations and narrowness of their own way of life by achieving a unity with others, their own lives were enriched and fulfilled in the larger world of cultural variety. Paul, the Jew, became amazed at the generosity of the gentiles in Antioch, keeping the Jews in Jerusalem alive during a famine;⁶ Lydia, the Macedonian woman who ran a business making dyes, was thrilled with the religious richness that Paul, the Jew, had brought to her.⁷ Was it not the legal organization of Rome that protected Paul when his enemies in Jerusalem threatened to kill him?⁸ All this variety, enriched and transformed as they became united with each other in the unity of their faith in Christ.

That was the miracle of the past. What of the miracle of the present? Now it is not the inner city of Antioch or Corinth. It is the inner city of Bridgeport, or Stamford, or New Haven, or the Bronx. There are the Blacks who find rich meaning in their lives of slavery, segregation and suffering in the great religious traditions of the Black churches. There are Hispanics expressing the elemental sense of the sacred in the medals and shrines and processions and lively celebrations; there is their deep sense of personal worth, the inner dignity of the person (*dignidad de la persona*). There is the Asian, with the mystic sensitivities of the Orient that go back centuries before Christ. And in the affluent suburbs, there are many of you, the descendents of poverty-stricken immigrants who enjoy the blessings of the freedoms and opportunities of American life. How can this remarkable variety be transformed into a unity? How can all be liberated from the limitations of their own culture to achieve a greater life in unity with others? How can the modern unity in diversity take place?

This is where the university becomes important. In the first place, it must help us to know ourselves, who we are, where we have come from and why we are important. The university helps us to be more fully ourselves by helping us to know who we are. But it must go farther and help us to know each other so that we may become more

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than ourselves in our unity with others. Indeed there is no substitute for knowing each other.

To Love, It is First Important to Know⁹

We all have a tendency to judge the way of life of others by the standards which prevail in our own culture and to reject what does not conform to our way of thinking and behaving. This can only be corrected by getting to know each other. We think it is inhuman, even immoral for the parents of a young girl to choose a husband for her. The girl in village India does not think so. She thinks it is inhuman, even immoral, to ask young women to compete in the open market for their own husbands. From the time the girl in village India is born, she is brought up to realize that the ones who know the most about married life are her parents. They are the ones who can judge best who would be a suitable husband. An American girl is brought up differently. She cannot bear the thought of living with a husband whom she has not chosen herself. In both cases, the well-being of the young woman is the main concern. Americans see it one way: let the girl choose for herself; Indian villagers see it differently: the parents know best who will be a suitable husband. Rather than reject each other's way of life as immoral or inhuman, the important task is to know, to understand; to see the world from the viewpoint of the other. In this way, knowledge leads to understanding and understanding leads to respect. If both cultures meet as they sometimes do in the United States, understanding and respect becomes the basis of accommodation. Unity is pursued in a spirit of understanding and respect, not by rejection or a demand for conformity.

Chinese people show reverence by making noise; when the Lord comes to the altar, his presence may be greeted with fireworks. Isn't this the appropriate way to greet a distinguished guest? Papuans dance wildly before the Blessed Sacrament as David used to dance wildly before the Ark. The Irish show reverence by silence. Never a sound at the Consecration as the tinkle of the sanctuary bell announces the presence of the Lord. All these people are doing the same thing: showing reverence for the Lord. But they do it in different ways. What is important is not crude condemnation of others as crazy; but an understanding that they are showing the same reverence to God as I am; but doing it differently. Out of knowledge comes

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understanding; understanding leads to respect. If Chinese and Irish come together, accommodation becomes necessary. But if they understand each other, they will work out an appropriate accommodation rather than dismissing each other as fools.

It is the task of the university to advance this knowledge, to search into the way of life of other peoples, to discover what things mean to persons of another race or culture or social class. Out of this knowledge, understanding should emerge. Understanding becomes the basis for respect; respect leads to love and acceptance while the process of accommodation takes place.

*Unity in Diversity: The Experience of the United States*¹⁰

It is encouraging and inspiring to see how this process has unfolded historically in the United States, and the role the university has played in it. The Catholic Church as we know it came to the United States with the massive immigrations from Europe in the last century. There had been a small and very American Catholic Church in Colonial times. This became overwhelmed as the millions of Catholics came largely from Ireland, Germany, and France; later on from Italy, Poland, and Central Europe. They came from many different nationalities and cultures, each one bringing their own cultural style of Catholic life with them. They came to a nation that was unique in history. Never before had a nation existed, committed in its Constitution to freedom for all religions but forbidding the establishment of any one as the national religion. Furthermore it was, sociologically, a new social form. It created an open society which permitted upward mobility, in which a person could come as very poor, take advantage of the opportunities and freedoms of the nation, and rise to middle-class or upper-class status in this new world. The Founding Fathers were determined to break away from the class restrictions of Europe. Everyone, ideally, was to have equal opportunity to advance to that level of society to which ability and effort entitled him or her. We take this miracle so for granted that we often fail to realize what an extraordinary political innovation this was. In actuality, many difficulties and failures and deviations from the ideal developed — the most serious being the slavery and segregation of Black people. But, in the long run, for large numbers it proved true. And probably the majority of you, as with myself, are

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examples of middle-class Americans whose ancestors came as poverty-stricken immigrants during the last century.

For Catholic immigrants this created a situation they had never faced before: a nation where their religious freedom was guaranteed by the Constitution, but where the religious freedom of all other religions was guaranteed as well. Furthermore they enjoyed full rights as citizens to participate in the political life of the nation, a situation which the Irish particularly were to take advantage of to a surprising degree; they took political control of Boston and New York by 1870. This does not mean that everything was sweetness and light. Catholics were persecuted and discriminated against to a large extent. But despite the bias and prejudice and bigotry, Catholics were able to take advantage of the freedoms of the nation to secure their own interests. The symbol of this achievement was the election of President John F. Kennedy in 1960.

One of the great freedoms that Catholics exercised was the freedom to establish their own schools. And at every level, from kindergarten to graduate school, Catholics established what we know as the extensive educational system of parochial schools, high schools, and universities. Many a scholar has described the Catholic Church in the United States as a vast educational system interspersed with some churches. I have sketched this history of the Church mainly as a background for some things I wish to say about the university. Before I do that, I wish to look at one other aspect of the Catholic experience; the existence, side-by-side of large numbers of Catholics of different nationality and cultural backgrounds in the same diocese as in the same nation. For the first time in the history of the Church, millions of Catholics from different nationalities and cultures come together in a single nation.

There was always the fear that this would result in a break-up of the Church, and many Americans, including Catholics and Bishops, pressured the immigrants to suppress their language and cultural differences and to become American overnight. The Church responded differently. It established what are known as the national parishes: German parishes for the Germans, Polish parishes for the Polish, and so forth. By the end of the century, the Church was a mosaic of parishes of different nationalities. But the unity of the Church was never threatened. It was indeed a unity in diversity which was something of an historical miracle: One Church, Many Cultures.

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Even though all were Catholic, neither was this all sweetness and light. Inter-ethnic conflicts were frequent. But as the years unfolded, *the unity of the Church prevailed in the presence of great diversity.*

Let us look at the role of the university in this miracle. It is remarkable what the poor immigrants did. Germans had come when there were no jobs available in Germany, Irish came as exiles from the great famine — on some of the plague-stricken boats, half of them died in passage; Polish and Italians came when their little farms disappeared and no chances were left to own land. They expressed their faith in their traditional ways. They expressed it in the churches they built and the fervent practice of their faith. But they expressed it also in their institutions of higher learning, in the colleges and universities they built with coins they took from threadbare pockets because they knew that, if that tradition were not preserved on the level of higher learning, they did not stand a chance of preserving it on the streets of the west side, or in the churches where they prayed, or in the mills and factories where they worked. They had little idea, those *poor folk from the farms of Europe*, what their sons were talking about when they spoke of Plato and Saint Thomas, Shakespeare and Augustine. But they knew that somehow that world had a meaning. It was expressing in a world of knowledge and science who they were, what they were and where they came from. The Catholic colleges and universities did not have to awaken the consciousness of the immigrants; they were the living expression of that consciousness of the level of higher learning. The function of the university was fulfilled: to enable the immigrants to be themselves, more fully, to link them to the Catholic tradition of faith and learning. Knowing who they were, they lived their lives more fully.

The more difficult task was to enable the immigrants to be more fully themselves by becoming more than themselves; to release them from the tyranny of the lesser loyalties; to link them to the wider world of wisdom and knowledge and a closer association with people of other ways of life. This was repeatedly hampered by a climate of defense, the need of the Catholic communities to struggle against the prejudice and discrimination which they suffered. But, first of all, it was the colleges and universities which communicated to British and German and Polish and Italian and all other people a consciousness of a common past and a tradition of faith and learning that they shared, the unity in which they transcended the limits of their own

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cultural background and were conscious of the unity in which they were more than themselves. This was the role of the university in days past; it must continue to be the role of the university in days to come.

The Catholics in the affluent suburbs are the outcome of that history. Many of them have not only been trained in Catholic colleges and universities for their professions and business careers as part of mainstream, middle-class America; but grandsons of Irish or German or Italian or Slovak or many others, are neighbors in the suburbs who, probably a century ago, spent their evenings criticizing each other and commenting on the strange way in which those other people lived. Now, sharing a common tradition, and conscious of a unity that transcends their culture, they are more fully themselves because they have succeeded in becoming more than themselves.

But the danger of the followers of the Apostle James is still with us, the tendency of the affluent suburbs to shut themselves in around their own achievements, to create another "lesser loyalty" which may make it difficult for them to achieve a higher unity with newcomers in the inner city. The role of the university must continue to be fulfilled, to affirm and reaffirm that Catholic tradition of faith and learning which enables both the affluent in the suburbs and the newcomers in the inner city to know who they are, what they are and where they come from. Without this, neither one will have the full consciousness of themselves and be fully themselves.

But in order to transcend the lesser loyalties of their own ways of life, they must also come to know each other. This is the second part of the role of the Catholic university: to reveal to the affluent what life means to the Black or Hispanic or Asian in the inner city; and to reveal to the newcomers of the inner city what life means to the affluent in the suburbs. The full resources of the university must be guided by this determination, a relentless effort to enable our people to know each other, to perceive the deeper meaning of their lives, to become sensitive to the deep values which are stirring in each other's minds and hearts. If they come to know each other this way, understanding should follow, and from understanding should flow respect and acceptance.

I am not suggesting that this is easy. It is not. It is enormously difficult for the people in the suburbs and for the people of the inner city. The important thing is the determination to do it. And a determination to do it does not mean that you are going to settle the

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problems of homelessness and drug abuse, school drop-outs and unemployment and integrated schools and housing by next week or next month or next year. But if we lock ourselves into our own world, whether we are affluent or poor, the achievement of the higher unity will be lost; and the sad consequence is the loss of the consciousness of the greatness of myself because I have refused to become greater than myself in a unity with others. I hope the following Presidential Lectures will address themselves to the specifics of the ideal I have sketched. In that way, the best wine will indeed have been saved 'till the last.

When Saint Paul came to Corinth for the first time, Corinth was a backwash of the Roman Empire, a dissolute port city that had fallen from better and more elegant days. It was a strange and frightening gathering of the poor from many lands, the oppressed, the unemployed, the racketeers, thieves and prostitutes. Paul, even the great Paul, became afraid and was tempted to leave. But the Lord spoke to him saying: "Paul, don't be afraid . . . I have a great following in that City. I am with you."¹ Paul stayed; and out of a people that sophisticated Romans called a hopeless and unpromising crowd, Paul developed one of the great churches of early Christianity. I am not suggesting that Bridgeport is like the Corinth of Paul's day. But as we who are Sacred Heart University face the challenge of the modern city, if ever we feel the spirit waver or our nerve grow weak, I hope we will listen to the Lord saying to us what he said to Paul: "Don't be afraid . . . I have a great following in that City, Paul. Go back; I am with you."

Notes

¹John 17:21-23. (Scriptural references are from *The Jerusalem Bible*.)

²Acts 10:34-35.

³Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. by Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Herder & Herder, 1970).

⁴See Galatians 2:11-14.

⁵See Joseph Fitzpatrick, *One Church, Many Cultures: The Challenge of Diversity* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1987), ch. 3.

⁶Acts 11:27-30.

⁷Acts 16:11-15.

⁸Acts 21.

⁹For a detailed discussion of intercultural understanding, see Fitzpatrick, *One Church, Many Cultures*, ch. 2.

¹⁰For the history of the Catholic Church in the United States, see Jay Dolan, *The American Catholic Experience: A History From The Colonial Times Up To The Present*, (New York: Doubleday, 1985); or James Hennesey, S.J., *American Catholics: A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States*, (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1981).

¹¹Acts 18:9-10.