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Inauguration Remarks of John J. Petillo, Ph.D.

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September 21, 2011

A Time for New Beginnings
INAUGURATION OF JOHN J. PETILLO, PH.D.

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John J. Petillo, Ph.D.

September 21, 2011

Chapel of the Holy Spirit
Sacred Heart University | Fairfield, Connecticut

It is fitting and just that we gather for this inauguration in this holy place. It is, for us, a moment to celebrate, reflect and recommit ourselves to who we are. We often speak or refer to our mission as what drives and guides us. But I would suggest that our mission is driven by our identity. Who are we?

This is neither a trick nor complicated question. It is not even in need of a philosophical discourse. We are a Catholic community of learning rooted in our Christian traditions. These are not simply dogmatic beliefs. It is all-inclusive of the richness of the Catholic heritage within the humanities. It is that identity that must be part of our very fabric as a learning and inquiring community.

Knowing who we are enables us and guides us in our mission and our quest. Certainly, as a community we are a people in search of. For some, those uncertainties are uncomfortable and unsettling. For others, they are the excitement of being part of a vibrant learning community.

In the late 19th century, Archbishop John Ireland of St Paul, in an address at Catholic University, said: "Catholics must excel in religious knowledge; they must be ready to give reasons for the faith that is in them, meeting objections from whatever source, abreast of the times in their method of argument. They must be in the foreground of intellectual movements of all kinds. The age will not take kindly to religious knowledge separated from secular knowledge."

I would like to suggest that the words of vibrancy, learning and reflecting are only relevant for members of this community that consider this University much more than a place of employ. Which takes me to what I would hope, with your participation, can be the hallmarks for us of my tenure; namely, servant leadership, stewardship and presence.

All three of these must be understood and lived within the context of our students. On several occasions, I have clearly expressed my belief that we are here for our students. They are who we are. Their presence actually provides the boundaries for all that we can, want and should do.

In the '70s, Robert Greenleaf developed this stewardship leadership concept. It was a concept of serving the needs of a leader's employees. He came from an IBM culture. What I am suggesting is not a maternal or paternal approach to this leadership. I am suggesting a leadership that does by example and advocacy in service to and for our students. It speaks to our obligation, our mission of formation.

It is a formation that emphasizes mastery of facts, skills and discipline. It is comfortable giving priority to the ethical questions as they surface in the discourse of the human journey. It is a formation that recognizes that an individual's personal history is necessary for maturity. We owe our energies to our students to assist them on this journey.

During his recent trip, Benedict XVI spoke at the Monastery of El Escorial saying, "Teaching is not just about communicating content. It is about forming young people." This should be our response to servant leadership.

These young women and men are here because they found this university to be welcoming, supportive and offering study in their interested fields. Those traits must extend far beyond the Open House Days and Orientations. Our credibility as members of this community must be measured by the quality of our service to our students and one another. This notion of service should be understood in the context of giving of our time and talents. For our students, we cannot hold back. Jesus commended the widow not for giving away so much, but for keeping so little. Our students expect no less.

Such service and stewardship goes well beyond the confines of the classroom or laboratories. It needs to be evident in the dining rooms, the athletic fields, the theater and the lounges. Our service to our students needs to be affirming, challenging and listening. We need to be comfortable mentoring as well as confronting. This learning, this journey cannot be relegated to only the classrooms.

None of these can occur if we, as faculty, staff or administrators, use the status of our office as power. Unless students see us as approachable, we will not be approached. We will not have the opportunity to be of service. To be believable in our identity, we must be unbelievable in our mission. This should be our understanding of accountable stewardship.

Clearly, whatever our role within the University, there are protocols, expectations and obligations. Yet I am strongly suggesting and expecting that we do not hide behind those roles. This administration will not be oligarchical. I am sure there will be faults, but that shall not be one of them.

At the same time, I would expect that whatever our office, first and foremost will be our responsiveness to students and one another. We can only be of service and good stewards if we are there with and before them, in their learning and in their leisure, in their celebrations and in their confusions. By our presence, we indeed become part of their unchartered journey.

This University was founded almost 50 years ago in the shadow of Vatican II. From our founding, we were called forth to develop and nurture an institution of Catholic Higher Education. While our mission may have been modified, our identity has remained grounded. As a community, our energies are called forth to be transformative. These energies are so in consort with the documents of *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*.

Cardinal Avery Dulles in commenting on these documents wrote, "The special function of the laity, according to the Council documents, is to sanctify the world from within, in the manner of leaven." As we approach the 50th anniversary of both the Council and this University, this community can be rightfully proud of its faithfulness to its founding and to the Church.

Probably portions of these concepts of servant leadership, stewardship and, even presence, may be too demanding or imposing for a secular institution. However, as part of Church, and in particular this local Church, we need to be the salt and the light. We need to provide the moral compass. Without that, our reason for existence should be questioned.

We can only flourish as a university if we do this together, collegially. Clearly, our faculties are critical in this process -- faculties that through dialogue have an affirming understanding of our identity and mission.

Albert Camus captures this collegiality best. "Don't walk behind me; I may not lead. Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend."

As friends, we can and will disagree; but we still can be friends and co-workers. So I ask you to stand with me and walk together in service, stewardship and presence. Thank you.



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