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The Public Purpose of the University of San Diego

November 16, 2003

Chairman Mr. McGee and members of the Board of Trustees, Bishop Brom, distinguished members of the platform party, honored guests, delegates, members of this University community, friends, and my dear family, thank you for honoring me with your presence today.

I am especially grateful to Mr. Banegas, Fr. Jurisich, S.Morris, Msgr. Dillabough, Dr. Hughes and Dr. Hayes for their presence and their personal witness to the continuities of mission and values that create and sustain the University of San Diego.

In my brief time with you this afternoon, I hope to retrieve and reclaim the legacy that inspired our founders, Mother Hill and Bishop Buddy, and suggest its relevance going forward. In a word, I want to persuade you that our heritage points to a mission of this Catholic University that is public in its purpose.

Many of you know that I am a rhetorician by training; meaning that I have a particular interest in how discourse—written texts, art, music, architecture, film, images— affects audiences, be that an audience of one or many. Rhetoricians usually want to know how a reader, a viewer, or listener responds; what did the author, artist, musician intend for his or her audience. I mention this because it explains why I spent so much time in the early weeks of my presidency getting to know this place and its people, reading its history, burrowing in the library archives, examining closely the architecture and design of the buildings, and—most importantly—getting to know as many members of this community as possible. In other words, I have been an audience of one for the many “texts” of this community. That effort, as minimal as it was, both enlightened and energized me.

Let me begin by sharing with you one of these “texts,” a very simple image. At the west end of the campus, situated in front of the Copley Library, is a statue of San Diego de Alcalá, the Franciscan lay brother after whom this city and this University take its name. This representation of San Diego, seen holding a basket of bread and fruit always catches my attention. I find it pleasantly ironic that the library—the symbolic center of a University’s intellectual life—is graced by the image of a simple friar, known for his piety, love of nature, and care for the sick, but also known to be illiterate and uneducated. It is probably more a matter of coincidence than providence that this poor and saintly Franciscan from Alcalá de Henares is forever associated with a university. But so it is. In 1948, Mother Hill took the suggestion of Mother Aimee Rossi and named the campus of the San Diego College for Women “Alcalá Park,” and, later, adopted the architectural style of that period. Mother Hill, of course, would have been attracted to the personalism and love of nature associated with San Diego de Alcalá. Like all of the members of the Society of the Sacred Heart, she found ways to emphasize the reality of God’s presence in all creation. She wrote: “...we are striving to add beauty to our schools and colleges. We must, however, remember that material beauty begins with an appeal to the senses, but ends with an appeal to the spirit, or else be untrue to its mission to lead the soul to God, the All-Beautiful.” [1]

Thus, it was neither an accident nor merely a matter of “taste” that Mother Hill selected this University’s design, its architecture, gardens, fountains and art. She and the earliest founders intended us to be the audience for these “texts” that recall the era and the place where and when 45 years after San Diego’s death, another Franciscan, the scholar and reformer Cardinal Ximénez de Cisneros founded one of the greatest centers of Christian humanism in the sixteenth century, University of Alcalá de Henares. And it is from this university that we have inherited far more than its design.

Cisneros was a reformer who gathered around him scholars and artists formed by the great humanists of Europe, especially Erasmus. The University at Alcalá stood as an oasis on the landscape of social, political, and religious corruption and conflict. During an era when other universities suppressed religious dissent with a rigorous apologetics and the imposition of a singular theological perspective, Cisneros championed the compatibility of sacred and secular learning, encouraged the study of languages (including Hebrew), promoted a return to the sources of classical and early Christian literature, and brought scholars to the University who taught from the variety of Catholic theological traditions.[2]

Everywhere I turn on this campus I meet this legacy of Christian humanism. The consistent and harmonious design of the University intends to draw students and visitors alike into the deep structures of its discourse, demonstrating its inclusiveness, its ecumenism, its blend of sacred and secular. You see this inheritance from Cisneros's university throughout the campus: Christian symbols embedded in the plateresque designs of buildings; the Star of David carved in the choir stalls of Founders Chapel; the motifs of Islam notably apparent in the foyer of the new Shiley Center for Science and Technology. The lessons to be read from the architectural text of this campus are made more manifest in a curriculum steeped in the humanities, in direct service to the greater community by students, faculty, and staff, in prayer and worship, in programming that encourages personal, social and physical development. This is indeed a vital and generous learning community shaped by the same ideals that inspired Cisneros, those of the Catholic faith and Christian humanism, all directed to a public purpose.

The University of Alcalá de Henares offered an alternative. This University became a stabilizing influence, accommodating many schools of thought, many cultures, a vibrant spirituality and ecclesiology that gave back to the Church leaders like Ignatius of Loyola and Theresa of Avila. In other words, the University—precisely because of its humanist orientation—served a public purpose by holding in tandem and in tension intellectual, cultural, and religious forces that—without the mediating influence of the University—created deep fissures that threatened to fracture the larger community

I am not the first, nor will I be the last, to observe that over the course of history, institutions like the University of Alcalá are rare. Perhaps our own human nature can not sustain for long periods great bursts of creativity, energy, boundless enthusiasm for change, or the institutions that are catalysts for change. It seems as if these currents always meet much stronger cross-currents, containing that energy, harnessing the unbridled enthusiasm, imposing boundaries. The Jesuit scholar Franz Josef van Beeck described this phenomenon as it occurred in sixteenth century Europe: "...the outburst of creative energy associated with the new humanism, the spurt toward reform of the Church, the rise of the merchant class and the modern sovereign state, the mobility toward the big cities on the part of the new entrepreneurial trading-and-banking class all over Europe, the opportunities for international trade as well as colonial expansion occasioned by the discovery of the earth's actual rotundity...and perhaps more than anything else, the development of the printing press—all these excitements appear to have struck the movers and the shakers with the prospect of chaos. Control became the watchword; order had to be." [3]

Van Beeck and others observe that these great periods of creativity, social experimentation, political liberalism, and religious tolerance are mostly short-lived because they undermine prevailing social, political, and religious structures. These periods challenge the status quo; erase many boundaries. The discomfort, lack of control, insecurity that are the by-products of such periods generate eventually a reaction and, subsequently, usher in another era of conservation, often marked by a "back to basics" fundamentalism, a reinforcement of restrictive moral codes, religious practices, political and social reaction. In an effort to "keep the lid on," some institutions and their leaders work feverishly to leave no question unanswered, no dilemmas unresolved. Authority is resurrected. If, in sixteenth century Spain, the University of Alcalá was the "ying;" the University of Salamanca was the "yang."

Where is the University in all of this history, if not at the very center of each maelstrom creating, provoking, and reacting? On the one hand, the University has been the source of great creative genius, the incubator of ideas and imagination: The University of Paris is disrupted by Peter Abelard; Oxford, by John Henry Newman. On the other hand, the University has been the great conservator of established Truth and mores. Shortly after Cisneros's death, the momentum of the Catholic reform accelerated into the Protestant reformation which, predictably, generated both a Catholic and Protestant reaction. In the nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson was alienated from Harvard because he denied the efficacy of miracles. Some of us actually remember the great befuddlement of University and political leaders of the 60's and early 70's who were similarly ill-equipped for the chaos generated by anti-war and civil rights activism. Our televisions chronicled the aggressive response to protests at the 1968 Democratic National Convention and the National Guard assault on students at Kent State. We remember the brief period of Vatican II and Camelot and the Civil Rights movement, giving way to a much longer period of political, cultural, and religious fundamentalism. In every instance, we witness that recurring condition of human history: the polarizing effects of too much freedom or too much control, resulting in the fracturing of communities.

There are indeed many fractures within our human family—think of Israel and Palestine; India and Pakistan; Russia and Chechnya; think of nearly any place on the globe. Yet, paradoxically, the human family has become so much closer because of exponential advances in technology, telecommunications, and international commerce. We know now more than ever before that what happens in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and South America matters not only to them; it matters deeply to all of us. The events on September 11th 2001 are, perhaps, the most gruesome example of a clash of cultures gone mad: the extremes of religious conservatism attacking the symbols of secular liberalism.

And, the one institution common to all cultures, all societies, and all governments is the University. At both ends of this vast continuum are universities; some acting as incubators of religious fundamentalism; others promoting secular liberalism; unwitting partners in fostering terrorism or abetting corporate greed. But it is the University that, with few exceptions, remains a significant social institution among developed and developing nations. If the University has survived as such a central institution within and among all cultures, what is its responsibility? Can the University emerge now—as it did under the leadership of Cisneros—as an influence for the common good?

No one disputes that our primary mission, our *raison d'être*, is to teach, create, conduct research and serve the greater community. These activities give life to the University, to all Universities. But the university is more than the sum of its parts. It is also a formidable social institution. Great cities and regions develop around them. And, as our economies depend more and more on advances in science and technology, entire industries situate themselves within and around the University. It is true of San Diego; it is true for so many other regions. Given these realities and a corresponding erosion of institutional “ties that bind” our diverse communities, the University has both a challenge and a responsibility to assume a greater role in offering that common ground upon which all people can gather to collaborate in building our human family. Because it is a significant social institution that welcomes diversity of people and ideas, the University should be the community's “Public Square,” its “collective living room,” mediating the dialogue and debate as we seek solutions, create, and innovate on behalf of the human condition.

I am not suggesting that the University assume a lofty position in some mythic ivory tower merely observing, forecasting, commenting, and criticizing. Far from it. The University that I describe—this University—can never be its authentic self and, at the same time, absent itself from the living, breathing hardships of its local community; from the moral dilemmas with which the human family struggles; from the social tensions inherent in any free society. While the University of Alcalá rested on the principles of Christian humanism, so does its progeny, the University of San Diego. And over the course of the last century, those principles have been more explicitly articulated in a collection of documents that comprise the social teachings of the Church. These have become the authentic touchstone for judging the authenticity of this Catholic University's public purpose; that is, its work on behalf of God's creation.

Universities have long been exhorted “to become an ever more effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals as well as for society.” [4] It is a mission, I might add, we share with all colleges and universities. But, in keeping with our character as a Catholic University, we read and interpret the “signs of the times” through the lens of Catholic social thought, an ever-expanding expression of basic gospel principles that address major themes: the dignity of the human person; the dignity of work; the person in community; rights and responsibilities; option for the poor; solidarity; and the care for creation. [5] These provide a common ground of principles, values and aspirations out of which the University can teach, conduct its research, and provide leadership and mediation.

This University is blessed by administrators, faculty, staff, and students, alumni, friends, and benefactors of great talent and, as impressively, great generosity who give concrete expression to these principles, providing thousands of hours of service through an extensive network of partnerships within our region, including schools, social service agencies, health care providers, and churches. In addition to all of the ways through which we try to fulfill our primary mission, we can, we will, we must do more.

The University—this University—can be a mediating influence on behalf of many of its own neighbors who are poor, sick, or culturally and linguistically isolated.

The University—this University—can be a mediating influence between unbridled experimentation, unfettered liberalism and rigid fundamentalism and reactionary moralism. It can be a crucible for encouraging reflection, dialogue, and debate; for unmasking ideological extremism and facile rationalism with a clear and compelling case for collaboration and compromise.

The University—this University—can be a mediating influence on the economic, social, spiritual, and political challenges affecting relations with our neighbors to the South and to the East, positioned as it is at the geopolitical crossroads.

The University—this University—can be a mediating influence among warring people by resolving conflicts, educating for peace and working for justice.

The University—this University—can be a mediating influence on behalf of economic justice by promoting political and economic policies that respect the rights of both workers and employers.

In these and so many other ways can the University—this University—collaborate with all men and women, especially with our colleagues in education, to reconcile differences and create a community like that described by Pope John Paul II in his 1987 encyclical letter “The Social Concerns of the Church”: “The goal of peace, so desired by everyone, will certainly be achieved through the putting into effect of social and international justice, but also through the practice of the virtues which favor togetherness, and which teach us to live in unity, so as to build in unity, by giving and receiving, a new society and a better world.” [6]

Which brings me back to that statue in front of the library, friar San Diego de Alcalá, giving bread to the world and writing a profound text for this University—his University; our University. This juxtaposition of the simple friar placed before the symbols of our intellectual life is not so ironic after all. For, it was Francis of Assisi himself who paired wisdom with simplicity by praying, “Hail, Queen Wisdom, may the Lord protect you with your sister, holy pure Simplicity.” [7] From this point on, as I walk past the image of our patron, I will pray that this University, my community, will be both wise and simple in our work together.

Thank you. Mary E. Lyons, PhD

President

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[1] Mother Hill, "Fourth Biennial Conference of the Associated Alumnae of the Sacred Heart," convened at Barat College, Lake Forest, IL, 16 May 1939, mss. page 2, Archives of the University of San Diego, San Diego, California.

[2] A summary of the program and activities at The University of Alcalá may be found in Erika Rummel, *Jiménez de Cisneros: On the Threshold of Spain's Golden Age* (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 1999), 53-65; Jose Garcia Oro, O.F.M., *Cisneros y La Reforma del Clero Español en Tiempo de los Reyes Catolicos* (Madrid, 1971), 343-347.

[3] Frans Jozef Van Beeck, "Teaching as Vocation: Faith and Literacy," in Anthony J. Cernera, Oliver J. Morgan, eds., *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, Volume 2, Issues and Perspectives* (Fairfield, CT: Sacred heart University Press, 2002), 151-178, with quotation from page 159.

[4] John Paul II, *On Catholic Universities, Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (Washington D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, fourth printing 1999), # 32.

[5] A fine summary of Catholic social teaching may be found in Edward P. DeBerri, James E. Hug, with Peter J. Henriot, Michael J. Schultheis, *Catholic Social Teaching, Our Best Kept Secret* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, Fourth Revised and Expanded Edition, 2003).

[6] John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei socialis*, 39.

[7] "The Salutation of the Virtues," in Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M.Cap., Ignatius C. Brady, O.F.M., *Francis and Clare, The Complete Works* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 151.