

## **COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS**

### **Oblate School of Theology**

Very Rev Fr Louis Studer OMI; Chairperson of the Board at OST and other members of the Board of Trustees; Dr Scott Woodward - President of OST; Fr. Jim Myers, PSS, Rector of Assumption Seminary, other formation directors from religious houses in San Antonio; Dr. Richard Gaillardetz of Boston College, fellow Honorary Doctorate recipient; Fr. Robert Wright, OMI - OST Medal of Honor recipient; Faculty; Graduates; ladies and gentlemen:

I am deeply honoured to be with you today and to have been awarded an honorary doctorate by the Oblate School of Theology. I wish to express my gratitude to the OST for considering me for this honour, even though my life and ministry as a priest have not been in the academic field, but rather as a pastor in parishes. A similar award was given by this same school to another South African – and Capetonian – Dr Allan Boesak. Dr Boesak received an honorary doctorate of Theology in 2014 in recognition of his courageous challenge to the apartheid government through Liberation Theology and its critique of the forces that seek to oppress and hold others in servitude. It is truly an honour for me to be the second South African and Capetonian to be acknowledged in this way.

I was raised in apartheid South Africa and grew up in a system that legislated which racial group each and every person belonged to. The group to which you were assigned – based largely on skin colour – determined which privileges and freedoms you would enjoy. Different racial groups lived in parallel worlds with little or no intermingling apart from the formal setting of the workplace. Powerful indoctrination was used to ingrain in one segment of our society that they were the civilized and superior ones while also ingraining in the vast majority of the population that they were inferior, incapable of being educated and that they should simply accept their inferior lot in the world. Fortunately, I was blessed since I came from a compassionate and thinking family, and also because I belonged to a Church with outstanding leaders, among them Archbishop Dennis Hurley OMI. The Catholic Church's stand against apartheid and its courage have never been given sufficient acknowledgement.

Twenty-nine years after our independence, the workplace, schools, universities, sport and social clubs have all been de-racialised in South Africa. Yet socially, South Africans still, by and large, live in parallel worlds. Prejudice and a "group mentality" are powerful forces that are not easily eradicated. It takes more than one generation to overcome indoctrination. Creating a cohesive yet diverse society cannot be accomplished through legislation alone. Speaking as a person who was privileged in the old system because of my skin colour, and as a pastor who throughout my priesthood ministered in Townships to disenfranchised persons, I believe the lessons of apartheid and post-apartheid South

Africa are relevant for much of the globalized world where people are being confronted by difference at a scale probably never seen before in the world. There is a need to move from a group mentality to a mentality of encounter.

Globalization has brought many benefits to the world in terms of technology, health care, science, engineering and transport. The impact on communication, safety, human rights, democracy and greater access to material benefits and prosperity has been enormous. It has also led to the globalization of ideas, social theories, philosophies and mores. It has enhanced the migration of peoples and, throughout the world, people are on the move in a way that seems to be unstoppable. Negatively, globalization has facilitated human trafficking, organised crime, drug smuggling and terrorism. In an age when human rights have been championed, they are at the same time under threat not only because of wars and conflicts, but also because of xenophobia, trafficking of human body parts, fundamentalism and philosophies that erode human dignity and the right to life. The change is rapid and is impacting on culture and traditional beliefs that has left many floundering.

The questions I wish to pose are “how do we respond to diversity?” How do we deal with the tension between inclusivity – a prime Catholic belief – and the preservation of our culture, traditional beliefs and customs, not only in a Catholic sense but also in terms of society itself? How do we respond to a new existential crisis as many young people struggle with the questions of “who am I”, “why am I” and “who should I be”? As a person who has ministered in the pastoral field for forty years and has worked shoulder to shoulder with ordinary people and families, I know that the consequences of globalization in bringing different cultures in contact with each other, as well as different philosophies and mores, into what can be considered “private spaces”, have left our pastoral response and practice wanting. We are struggling to find adequate ways with which to deal with the change that is happening. I believe that, although it is not in itself a silver bullet, education is key to resolving the dilemma we face and that academic institutions have an essential role to play.

The temptation in a time of rapid change is to withdraw into, what we in South Africa, call the “laager”, that is, to pull the ox-wagons into a closed circle and to defend the group against any outside threat. In today’s world, new ideas and challenges to what we hold dear, are often seen as a threat against which we must defend ourselves. To close ranks and defend the group against other groups may be necessary in certain circumstances, but not in our present circumstances. To do so would not only be self-defeating but would also probably be self-destructing. The recent Popes – since the Second Vatican Council – have all called on us, rather than to retreat, to have the courage to enter into dialogue in our response to diversity, to be open to understanding and learning from difference and to accept that, whoever we are, we cannot in ourselves hold the fullness of truth and knowledge since we are finite beings with finite minds. Putting it in a different way, in terms of our Christian faith, to accept

and to delight in the fact that the “the Spirit blows where he wills” (Jn 3:8). Faith is not something we have or don't have – we are continually learning and growing in faith. Responding to diversity through dialogue has the possibility to both enhance mutual understanding and also to deepen our own knowledge of what we believe and why we believe it. It also allows us to discard erroneous beliefs, prejudices and ignorance – which were so typical of apartheid South Africa. Yet dialogue needs education.

Firstly, **dialogue is threatening**. We may fear that the dialogue partner will be more powerful, or that dialogue may result in syncretism and a watering down of our beliefs or even that it may result in annihilation. It is not for the faint-hearted and those who enter into it must be equipped to face its risks. Secondly, **dialogue needs knowledge and understanding**. It is not possible to enter into any real dialogue unless one is well-informed of one's own beliefs and understands the reasons underlying those beliefs. It is not everyone who has the background to give the reason for their hope (cf 1Pe 3:15). Furthermore, it is important to have knowledge and understanding of the essence of one's belief system as opposed to the peripheries and those things which have become customs and practices, which may be nice to have, but are not the core beliefs. For Christians, the centre of our belief is to be found in the life and ministry of Christ, the beatitudes and the golden commandment. Furthermore, for dialogue there needs to be an **ethical basis**. It is quite possible to have brilliant scientists, businessmen or politicians, but if they have no ethics in their profession they will contribute little to society and may do considerable harm. As Carl Rogers noted science without any corresponding moral development will end up being a juggernaut. It is the same with dialogue – honesty, integrity, truth, the pursuit of justice, the desire to build peace, compassion, seeking the common good and a special concern for the poor are all necessary elements which underly honest dialogue. Therefore, the **formation of conscience** is part of equipping those who have the openness for encountering diversity without shrinking from it. Conscience, too, ensures that differences are not swept aside or that there is a pretence that they don't exist or do not matter. Dialogue is not the denial of difference. Finally, dialogue must always respect **the common humanity of all people**. Differences among people do not detract from our common humanity and any person, no matter how different, deserves the respect of his/her dignity as a human being. In a changing world it is easy to demonize and denigrate those who differ from or with us, call them names and dismiss them as being irrelevant. Dialogue can never be successful without respect.

I believe that Institutes of Higher Education, particularly those that are Catholic, have a positive role in equipping young people to encounter difference and diversity in a positive way, appreciating that we are not in a ghetto because we differ from others, or that others are in a ghetto because they differ from us. We face times which are daunting and yet filled with opportunity. Now is not the time to shrink back, but to meet the challenges. It is part of what it means to be a synodal Church, a Church that is

willing to listen, to learn and to discern the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking through others and through the signs of the times.

Pope St John Paul II referred to St Eugene de Mazenod as a “Man of Advent”, one who looked to the future, and was prepared to take the risk to advance into the unknowns of the future. The frontiers may have changed and the boundaries may be different, but the need for a “people of advent” is great because we have – with many others – something to offer the world, to make it a more just and human place and to help those who are searching to find meaning. We should not become so despairing of present day ills and problems that we fail to have hope and to steer change in a direction for the betterment of humanity.

I will end with a quote from the film “The Man of La Mancha” in which Don Quixote speaks of insanity: *“...who knows where madness lies? Perhaps to be too practical is madness. To surrender dreams — this may be madness. To seek treasure where there is only trash. Too much sanity may be madness — and maddest of all: to see life as it is, and not as it should be!”*.

Thank you.

+Stephen Brislin  
Archbishop of Cape Town

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