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Address at Inauguration of Kevin Mullen, OFM, as Siena College's 10th President

by Kenneth Himes, OFM

Bishop Hubbard; Mr. Cushing and members of the Boards of Trustees and Associate Trustees; Former Presidents of Siena; Distinguished Representatives of Other Educational Institutions; Siena Faculty, Administrators and Staff; Students of the College; Alums and Friends of Siena; Members of the Franciscan family; Family and Friends of Fr. Kevin:

I recall a story about the late Adlai Stevenson, Democratic candidate for president in the 1950s as he spoke one day to an audience. He said, "I am about to begin speaking. You are about to begin listening. I sincerely hope we stop at the same time."

"A Time to Begin Again" is the theme of this inaugural. Since Fr. Kevin Mullen is Siena's tenth president it is obvious that this beginning already has a history. It is not a beginning *de novo*; the Siena community may begin again but it will start from somewhere. It starts from a specific place, knowing that it already has a sense of mission, a sense of history, a direction for the future.

Siena is a Liberal Arts College in the Franciscan and Catholic Traditions. And all those terms are significant for understanding Siena and what we are doing here this morning.

Tradition

Tradition offers us the ability to converse with the past. Those who cherish traditions do so not out of nostalgia, but because they have hope for the future. We study the past because it is different than the present. And to know that the past was different from the present allows us to imagine that the future also can be different.

By tradition we do not refer to a set of constraints on freedom, but rather a rich resource for creative thought. In particular, the tradition of the liberal arts proposes that students who come to Siena will have the great privilege of joining a fascinating conversation that has been going on for centuries. And those who teach at Siena have the wonderful opportunity to introduce young minds to people they might not otherwise meet. It is akin to being invited to a wonderful dinner party with lots of clever people saying lots of clever things.

The faculty of a liberal arts college have the good fortune to have been guests at the party for years. They know the other guests well and now they get to introduce students to the most interesting people. Over there is Plato and there's Euclid standing in the corner. Have you heard Voltaire tell that story about the Jesuits? It is quite funny . . . as long as you're not a Jesuit. And there are Durkheim and Darwin, Shakespeare and Pasteur. Standing over there are Augustine and Bonaventure and they seem to be having a debate with Thucydides and Gibbon. That, and so much more, is the world that faculty get to share with students at a liberal arts college.

To embrace the liberal arts tradition is encounter Mozart and Milton, Elizabeth I and Clare of Assisi, Kepler and Avicenna, Maimonides and Madison, Dickinson and Kant, the authors of the Song of Songs and the Song of Roland. The guest list goes on and on; with some of these people we may only have a passing chat. But others will become lifelong friends who introduce us to their friends who, of course, have other friends.

A broad implication of Siena's liberal arts tradition is that although knowledge is not wisdom it is a vital and necessary step in the direction of wisdom. Many of the claims for wisdom are eventually proven to be folly. So how to avoid the quick fix? The attention-getting ploy? The self-deceiving life? No easy solution exists, but being able to think critically is indispensable. The liberal arts tradition believes the human mind is capable of critical reflection that must avoid fundamentalisms and fanaticisms of all types. Intelligence, informed and questioning, is necessary to discern

In our information society we can readily accumulate data but we do not always know what to do with the data. Information is not automatically sorted into bins labelled significant and silly. For that discernment we need an intellect with a vision that is wise, and character with values that endure. The educational processes practiced by the liberal arts tradition ought to be transformative, setting people on a path that leads to an authentically human life.

In sum, whatever else happens at a college devoted to the liberal arts tradition it is not a stifling of the imagination but the engagement of the mind with other great minds that have entered into the long conversations of history. And as we come to appreciate the past that shaped our present, we understand that we have the project, and the freedom, to transform the present in order to shape our future.

Catholic

Siena is an institution that takes seriously the task of engaging the Catholic intellectual tradition. This underscores that we must not ignore the religious dimension of human experience, either at the personal or social levels. At the personal level, the place of God and the naming of God, become central concerns for this will shape so much of whatever else a person thinks, feels, relates to, and does. To answer the identity question of who we are it is necessary to know to whom we belong, to what are we loyal.

What we name as God is that which effectively motivates us, and thus, is a vital question. Can our God bear the weight of ultimacy for us? Religion is a way of talking about the major questions of our existence and across the curriculum and throughout the non-academic areas of Siena life students must be led to ask religious questions, questions of ultimacy. Wrestling with the Catholic intellectual tradition is a way to insure those questions are addressed.

At the social level, we should provide a means whereby students see how religious concern interacts with other areas of human existence. How has religion affected the arts, the sciences? What are the positive and negative aspects of religion? How has religion shaped our society, our inherited culture? How can the Catholic tradition be enriched by other wisdom traditions? Of

course to engage in conversations beyond one's own tradition is far more enriching if we first know our own tradition; otherwise we are rendered mute in the conversation.

To explore the Catholic intellectual tradition is to take up the exploration of the meaning and significance of the central symbols that constitute that tradition as one way of talking about the meaning and purpose of existence.

Franciscan

Siena's institutional and communal self-understanding is further inflected by the Franciscan tradition. Working as I do at a Jesuit school there is some good-natured back and forth about the difference between Jesuits and Franciscans. I am regularly outvoted, but never shouted down. I once explained the difference between Franciscans and others this way: the Benedictines have a Rule of Life they follow; the Dominicans have a theology they adopt; the Jesuits have a discipline of Spiritual Exercises they practice; while the Franciscans have a person they cherish. To my surprise not a single Jesuit disputed that characterization.

To be Franciscan, in its simplest terms, is to allow oneself to be influenced by the person Francis Bernadone. To place oneself under the tutelage of Francis and allow his reading of the Gospel of Christ to be a touchstone for one's life is to be a Franciscan. The initials OFM after the name, the brown habits, and all the other visible signs are not the heart of the matter. It is the character of the individual shaped and inspired by the life of Francis that marks the true Franciscan. That is why the Franciscan spirit here at Siena is not the domain of the friars alone. All who enter sympathetically into the worldview of Francis of Assisi share the spirit of Franciscans.

Years ago, at another point in my life as a friar my professor in a course on Francis and the medieval world raised a question in class. "Why was Francis so beloved a figure?" Not why was he loved by later generations who have sometimes romanticized him beyond recognition. But why was Francis loved so widely in his own time; even by those who disagreed with him? What was it about Francis, the professor inquired, that others were drawn to him?

Students in the class, including myself, offered our explanations all of which the professor acknowledged but countered by pointing out that Francis was hardly singular in his piety, his concern for the poor, his interest in community and the other suggested answers to the question. Finally, this teacher offered his own answer to the question. It was the fact that no one ever had to fear Francis. Francis never sought to dominate, manipulate, or coerce anyone. No person ever looked into the eyes of Francis and saw a lust for power or control.

What people found was an overwhelming sense that Francis wanted what was good for you; it was your best interests that he had at heart. And so even when people disagreed with Francis and opposed some of his ideas they never did so because they suspected he was seeking his interests over theirs, or would coerce others to embrace his view of what was best.

That story has stayed with me for almost thirty-five years now, because it points up an important quality of the Franciscan tradition. To be a Franciscan is to be a brother or sister to the rest of creation. There is something in Francis's fraternal and sororal vision that is inimical to any

relationship that is controlling, manipulative, exploitative. His is a vision that tutors us in seeing our rightful place in God's good creation.

The fraternity, equality, mutuality and community that ought to mark a Franciscan institution has a foundation in the very reality of Francis's life.

College

Being a voice for liberal education is, indeed, a challenge in an age that is too often illiberal in spirit and uneducated in matters of importance, or even to know what matters are important.

We live in a world that is filled with much risk, suffering and violence. Millions, literally millions of people the same age as our students, live in situations where sleep can be interrupted by people with guns breaking down doors; where the preoccupying task for the day is to find some food and water; where the work day, if work can be found, runs from sunrise to sunset.

In such a world the grace to be physically and emotionally safe, to have food and shelter assured, to have the leisure to study and reflect is a privilege that should not be taken for granted. A risk for a college such as Siena is that those who are here come to think that they are here as a matter of right, that they deserve what is theirs, that somehow they have earned it. The great risk is that we can think that Siena is here for us and we are here for no greater purpose than to advance our already privileged situation.

The great traditions that shape Siena college must constantly remind us that we are here for the sake of those who are not here. We must study and learn and become wise for the benefit of those who will never sit inside a classroom, for those who will never own a book of their own, for those who are not literate. We, the people who are Siena, must look beyond the safe boundaries of Route 9 and Fiddlers Lane.

Our education must be put at the service of those who are not fortunate enough to study here. Private colleges like Siena cannot become preserves of elitism; rather they must be launching pads for service, and laboratories for ideas that will enliven the hopes of those who shall never have the privilege of setting foot on a college campus.

The traditions of the liberal arts, Catholicism, and Franciscanism must conspire to enlarge the scope of our vision and depth of our compassion or they will have failed us, for they will have failed the great project of education – to improve the lot of humankind.

In ancient Rome the word "campus" was first used for the Campus Martius, the field of Mars outside the city walls that was used by the Roman military as a site for drills and physical contests. The term campus came to be used generally to name an open field where competitive games were held. Today a college campus is still an "open field" where the contests are now those of ideas.

A college is a place where the traditions of liberal arts, Catholicism and Franciscanism can mutually enrich and advance one another. This will occur, however, through critical testing of the adequacy of these traditions.

Traditions must all be examined; including those that characterize Siena. The liberal arts tradition, the Catholic tradition, the Franciscan tradition – as valuable as they may be, are all in need of reform. How could it be otherwise? For these traditions have all been shaped by men and women, who though well meaning are also flawed and limited.

So we study these traditions not to mimic them, nor to parrot what has been said before. We examine these traditions in order to find our own voice, our own vision. We must test and reinterpret these traditions for our time. In the words of Paul of Tarsus, “we must test everything and retain what is good.” A college is an ideal place to take up that self-critical testing of our traditions.

Tradition, liberal arts, Catholic, Franciscan, college – all significant words for understanding what we are doing here this morning. There is, however, one more word: Kevin!

Closing

Fr. Kevin and I go way back. When I first met Kevin he wasn't yet sure if he wanted to be a friar, a fireman or a cowboy. Lucky for us he figured it out. Today we formally entrust to him this legacy that is Siena; we place in his hands the leadership of this college.

But it is a college, a collegium, a gathering of colleagues; it is a collaborative enterprise by its very definition. Fr. Kevin cannot lead by fiat, by fear, or false promises. We ask him to lead us into deeper appreciation and love for this institution and the traditions it stands for: the pursuit not only of knowledge, but of wisdom. We ask that he lead this community to a deeper awareness of its roots in the mystery of the God who is wisdom, justice and love. We ask that he lead another generation of young people into the experience of Siena's great traditions.

Kevin, may your Presidency be filled with challenges; and may your mind and heart be filled with the insight and courage to meet those challenges. May your Presidency be a blessing for this school; and years from now may we look back on this day as a new beginning, as a time of growth in the things that matter. May your Presidency be a source of joy to you as the steward of this legacy; and may it be a source of pride for us, that we are your colleagues in the noble work of higher education.

Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M.
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