

Remarks at the Mass of the Holy Spirit, 2012  
Charles Flynn

Welcome to the Mass of the Holy Spirit and Matriculation Ceremony for first-year students of the College of Mount Saint Vincent.

For those of Catholic faith, the Mass of the Holy Spirit is a religious exercise. For both those of Catholic faith and those who are not, this Mass and Matriculation Ceremony are a ritual reaffirmation of our shared purposes at this College. The Motto of the College of Mount Saint Vincent summarizes it all: Teach Me Goodness Discipline and Knowledge.

Colleges and universities are named after all sorts of people. There are colleges named after many presidents of the United States: Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Truman. . . . There is even a college named after Franklin Pierce, a guy otherwise remembered only for drinking himself to death.

There are colleges named after rich donors: Harvard, Rockefeller, Yale, Stanford, Duke. . . . Some of them stole the donations with which they created those schools, but that's another story.

Our college is named after a Saint, and a good one at that.

Vincent lived in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century France. France was then a vibrant, culturally alive, rich, complicated and dynamic nation—an engine of scientific, cultural, and political achievement that helped to create what we now call modernity.

We can romanticize that France. There was much to admire. We have plenty of novels and movies about noble musketeers swashbuckling their way to justice. But France, like almost all of Europe, had a deeply unjust, deeply racist culture.

When you cut through all the complexity, all the inconsistency, France was a nation dominated and controlled by a relatively few people who thought they were from a separate conquering superior race: the Franks. They were called nobles. And they thought their race was intellectually, physically, and above all morally (literally morally) superior.

Most people—the descendants of the conquered people—the Gauls-- were called common, meaning ordinary, meaning inferior—intellectually, physically, politically, and above all morally.

Nobles could wear clothes that commoners weren't supposed to wear. Only nobles could be called Sir or Madame. Nobles could hold government positions that commoners weren't supposed to get. For public occasions, nobles wore lace and tights; commoners were supposed to wear basic black. Nobles could sit. Commoners were supposed to stand.

It was that France into which Vincent DePaul was born the common son of pig farmers. He was a remarkable man. He was brilliant and charismatic and, because he became a priest, he advanced and came to move among the prominent and powerful along the corridors of the King's palace.

Brilliance isn't unusual. Talent, ambition, and careful work brought opportunity and advancement. That's always possible. But that's not why our Sisters of Charity named our College after him.

Vincent DePaul was remarkable because, moving along those corridors of power and privilege, becoming loved for his goodness, he successfully promoted a radical, subversive, even revolutionary agenda founded in truth and faith.

Vincent taught the most basic insights of early Christianity. He not only taught that we all have obligations to each other—that charity is a universal obligation. He also taught why we have that obligation. He taught that we must see the face of God in everyone we meet. In that, he taught that every human being is equal and of worth. He taught that dignity and compassion are every person's due. He taught that, because everyone is created in the image and likeness of God, we have obligations to ourselves and to each other. He thus taught that France had lost its way. That there were no people born more noble than others. That there were no people born morally inferior. He taught that there was no superior race; there was no inferior race. He taught the obligations of charity, of love, NOT as acts of condescension toward those who are unfortunate, but rather that true charity is an act between equals. Perhaps what is most remarkably, Vincent not only spread this message among the privileged and powerful, but he also made them like it.

This College is named after Vincent DePaul because his commitments are ours.

The College is committed to foster an understanding of

- our common humanity (in other words, our equality)
- of human dignity (that everyone is of worth)
- of our obligations to each other (the obligations of service and servant leadership).

One of the reasons we are proud to have you here, one of the reasons that you should be proud of your College, is that we truly strive to live these commitments fully.

Like Vincent after whom it is named, this College is a remarkable place. It has the integrity of authentic academic excellence. It has the integrity to expect all of us to fulfill our obligations to ourselves and to use our God-given talents to do good. It has the integrity to expect all of us to be generous and kind to everyone with whom we make our way in life.

Catholic and non-Catholic alike, those with faith and those without it, these commitments unite us and define the life of this college. This is what we mean by Teach Me Goodness, Discipline, and Knowledge.

Your work here, our work here, is about a way of living life—opening possibilities to thrive, intellectually, spiritually, and professionally. The rewards are beyond measure. It is work in which we all can find immense pleasure and immense pride.