



## COLLEGE OF MOUNT SAINT VINCENT

Remarks at the Mass of the Holy Spirit, 2019

Charles Flynn

Welcome to our Mass of the Holy Spirit and Matriculation Ceremony.

This ceremony is a tradition.

For some it is a religious ritual; for some it is not.

But for everyone, it is a ceremony recommitting us to the values with which the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul of New York founded the College:

1. An understanding of our common humanity – our equality
2. A commitment to human dignity – our worth
3. A full appreciation of our obligations to each other – our call to live a life of service.

These values inform the work of this College. They undergird democracy. They are universal.

Several weeks ago, it was shocking to learn that the Sisters of Charity in Maryland once owned slaves.

--that was when the Sisters in New York were an outpost of the Sisters in Maryland.

--that was the 1840s

--that was before there was a College

-- that was even before there were Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul of New York

Nonetheless it is shocking. Slavery was and is the most extreme opposite to the values we celebrate and reaffirm today.

Why are we shocked? Does knowing that Sisters once owned slaves make us more responsible for slavery? Does it make us any greater heirs to the iniquity of slavery?

The answer to both questions is decidedly “no.” Slavery was not just a Southern institution. Like the racism and bigotry that continued to thrive in its wake, it was an American one. It was a national injustice. It was protected by the Constitution. It was part of the fabric of this whole country. Communally . . . are all its heirs.

Some of us can say, but my ancestors weren’t even in this country. My ancestors were busy being exploited and abused someplace else— many as slaves-- in Ireland or Puerto Rico or the Niger or Poland or Italy or Brazil or Vietnam or China or wherever.

Immigrants to this country, whether slave or free, truly were the huddled masses. None were stupid enough to believe that streets were paved with gold. Immigrants then as now yearned for a job, yearned to be able to care for their children, yearned not to be abused.

Our shock that Sisters in Maryland once owned slaves means what?

I think the shock is because it brings all of us of every background closer to an injustice for which so many Americans feel no personal responsibility.

After all, if we were to feel personal responsibility, what could we do? It's easier to keep an emotional distance, easier if an apology comes from Georgetown University or Sisters in Maryland or Robert E. Lee's great great great great grandson.

Pope John Paul II tried to teach us about forgiveness and apology.

He apologized for the crusades.

He apologized for the treatment of Galileo

He apologized for the subordination of women.

He apologized for the rape of children by priests.

He apologized for the passivity of many Catholics in the face of the holocaust.

He apologized for the ambiguous role of the Church in the history of slavery.

He even apologized for the sacking of Constantinople in 1205.

I, for one, find it difficult to understand what such apologies mean.

Galileo waited 500 years for his apology. I'm sure he's grateful.

I can happily apologize for the sacking of Constantinople in 1205, but to tell you the truth, I don't believe that would mean much to the people of Istanbul, whose ancestors sacked it themselves in 1453. And it doesn't mean much to me. I don't feel personal responsibility for 1205 ... or for 1453 for that matter, and I don't think John Paul did either.

That's why an apology for slavery is odd and incomplete.

If people and institutions are truly sorry for slavery in North and South America, where is mass movement to win the abolition of slavery today. Our government estimates more than 27 million slaves in the world today, more than a million in the United States alone.

Pope John Paul II may have us more about apologies and forgiveness than he intended.

While apologizing for the abuse and even rape of children by priests, he was joined with other guys—including the man who became his successor—to protect priests who abused children and bishops who protected them.

Saint John Paul taught us an important lesson about hypocrisy.

Hypocrisy is not just self-excusing. It is lazy and easy, but it is not passive. It is the foundation for all injustice.

Today we commit ourselves individually and as a community to the values of this college, to the values of the Sisters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul of New York.

We are committing ourselves to a demanding way of life.

We are committing ourselves to live those values fully as we make our way in life individually and together.

We are promising to live lives of justice and love informed by truth wherever it may be found.

There is no higher calling.

There is nothing more beautiful.

In all of that, in joining this community, you are called to greatness.

We know that you can achieve it.

Welcome to the College of Mount Saint Vincent.