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### RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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#### “Catholic Cultural Awareness”

We live in an era of ever heightened racial and social tension. If you turn on the nightly news you will hear about Black Lives Matter, Islamophobia, heated immigration debates, protests, police shootings, and terrorism both foreign and domestic in the name of religion. These realities point out that there are still deep racial and ethnic tension in our US culture, and as priests we need to be able to bring some sense and healing to the current state of affairs. We would be naïve to believe that our own vision isn't tinted by the realities we see in the 24-hour news cycle, so tonight let's look more deeply at what it means to be catholic and learn to be more aware of others and value each other's cultural differences. Being healers in the midst of division is nothing new and goes all the way back to the earliest of church experiences. In Acts 6:1, the Hellenists complained against those of Jewish descent that their widows were being neglected – do not despair, the challenges of our time are no less unsurmountable than they were in the year 33 or in 1965 – God gives the grace to each of us to minister in our present age.

One of the most memorable images from World Youth Day Krakow was when welcoming the Holy Father to the Vigil, we looked out and saw the waving flags representing the nationalities of the 2.8 million young people in attendance. In particular, there was a grouping of countries that would normally never be seen together: Israel, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq. To see these young people of warring nations in the same sector and joined in communion was awe-inspiring and hopeful for the future of their peoples. It is their belief that something much larger unites them; it is not their nationality, it is their belief in God and in our common humanity. In a word, it is because they are Catholic! Isn't this what unites us?

What does it mean to be Catholic?

Does it mean more than celebrating the liturgy correctly or having a picture of the Pope hanging in every classroom? Of course we do these things, and of course being Catholic is about a whole lot more than just these things. We know that the etymology of the word comes from two Greek words *kata* and *holos* meaning “according to the whole” or more colloquially, “universal.” Being Catholic is about recognizing that we belong to the whole and in some ways, the whole belongs to us. We belong to something so much greater than ourselves, than our parish, than our seminary, than our Church in the United States ... we belong to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. St. Augustine reminded us recently in the Office of Readings that “our Mother, the Catholic Church has given birth to all faithful Christians scattered over the whole world” (Sermon “On Pastors,” 46). This reality should stretch our horizon of national boundaries and regional disputes to realize we belong to the whole, and are called to pray for and care for the whole. We are meant to influence the world through our catholicity.

The multicultural face of our Church in the United States is a tremendous blessing of vitality and enrichment. Today, just over a third of the US Catholic population are Hispanic/Latino and another 8% are African American, Asian, Native American, or Pacific Islander. About 26% of all parishes specifically serve Latino communities – 1 in 4 churches across the US, and the proportion obviously higher in Florida (keep learning Spanish!). The CARA Report ([Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate](#)) is always a good source of trend data and I would encourage you to be familiar with their work.

But we don't have to look too far to realize this extraordinary reality. We don't have to go to World Youth Day or be at a Wednesday audience in St. Peter's Square, we just have to open our eyes in the present moment. Look around at each other: our students, faculty, and staff at SVDP which represent over 25 countries of origin – that is amazing. We have a truly "catholic" treasure in our midst. Every year there is a question on your end of the year evaluation related to "global awareness" – become more conscious of this lived reality in our midst.

SVDP is a bilingual and multicultural institution. Have we integrated this into a lived reality? Have we really appreciated what a gift it is to be able to learn from and share in such a diversity of cultures? Have we recognized the opportunity to value the incredible beauty of different cultures? Can we see the myriad ways people have come to live and be in this world, reflecting the image and likeness of God? We all have perspectives we bring from our past and from societal views, and here we are presented with this amazing opportunity to learn and love and expand our horizons. It is not enough then to just tolerate each other, but to truly strive to value and appreciate each other. I ask these questions today because I think sometimes we allow the baggage of our past, or our biases to skew our present perception of reality. How can we grow in sensitivity and awareness of the other who is our brother or sister, not just for the sake of the running of our house, but most importantly so that we can be priests who minister to the needs of all with a cultural awareness and sensitivity that is truly catholic?

Pope Francis recently reminded priests: "With the oil of hope and consolation, he becomes neighbor to each person, careful to share in their abandonment and suffering. Having given up self-determination, he has no agenda to protect, but each morning consigns his time to meet the Lord so as to be free to meet and be approached by people" ("Neighbor to all and Friend of Jesus," Conference to Italian Bishops, 16 May 2016). Approached by all people! If we are to be effective priests we must pray to have vision that sees the value and dignity of each race, culture, and country of origin, otherwise biases that may have been engrained in us from our youth may cloud our vision. This is more than just being "color blind" but having the eyes of Christ who sees the dignity and value in each brother or a sister. We are citizens of heaven and citizens of the Church first and foremost (cf. Phil. 3:20). We belong to the whole world and the whole world is our family (for those in canon law, I am not speaking of juridical territory). Living in this *seminarium* or seedbed of St. Vincent de Paul is our moment to be healed of prejudices and biases and open ourselves up to the beautiful and multicultural church and world in which we live.

So first of all, what are our prejudices? Prejudice is defined in the dictionary as a "preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience." In other words, to say that "I do not like that person because they are different than me" – is not reasonable. Or to say, "I do not like them because they are a different color, or speak a different language, or come from a different country" is simply irrational. Growing up in south Louisiana I witnessed at times prejudice

against people of color, living in south Florida now I have seen prejudice among the various Caribbean nations. Can we pretend that these realities do not shape our own minds and hearts? There is also a certain amount of arrogance that flows from particular prejudices: “I am better than you because I was born and raised in a particular location and you were not.” Prejudice narrows our worldview, as we see people in one dimension or category rather than seeing them in their wholeness.

There are even more subtle biases that can creep into our minds based on previous experiences. These biases are not fair, because they do not give the person in front of us the ability to be different than the person that hurt me in the past. They leave no room for freedom and we lump entire populations together. For instance, if I had a bad experience with someone from Namibia, and thus I project on all Namibians this bias and expect the same behavior based on my bad experience. We see this all the time in what is referred to as an “implicit bias.”

Subtle prejudices and biases and even unconscious racism can creep in and slowly erode our priestly ministry and in the present moment, the community in which we live. Thus I invite all of us into an examination of conscience based upon our SVDP Mission Statement and allow it to form us:

*St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary shares in the mission of Jesus Christ “to bring the good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18) in the training of future leaders.*

- Do I care for the poor, marginalized, or those suffering from discrimination?
- Do I embrace the fullness of the “social doctrine” of the Church?

*The seminary’s primary mission is to foster the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral formation of candidates for the Roman Catholic priesthood so that as ordained ministers they share the joy of the Gospel with all.*

- With all! How do I interpret that? The people who are like me and my family? Or my parish or diocese? Catholic – “according to the whole” – Can I or do I love and share the joy of the Gospel with all?

*Acknowledging the cultural makeup of Catholics in the United States, the seminary distinguishes itself in offering a comprehensive bilingual formation program, preparing future priests for ministry in both English and Spanish while cultivating a rich and diverse multicultural community.*

- Comprehensive bilingual program – do I take this seriously or tell myself that this doesn’t really apply to me?
- Do I think that since I live in South Florida my English doesn’t have to be that good, or do I reject Spanish out of hardness of heart and think that it doesn’t matter – is this who we are?
- Are we truly a rich and diverse multicultural community or do we just live in our own silos of language and national groupings never allowing ourselves to really come into communion with each other?

*The secondary mission of St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary is to provide graduate theological education for permanent deacon candidates, clergy, religious, and laity as well as to offer ongoing clergy formation programs so that the evangelizing mission of the Church may continue and broaden its reach.*

- Is everything we do about the evangelizing mission of the Church?
- Do I make the connection with the way I live in community now and my future ministry?

You may have noticed that this newly revised Mission Statement is now in the Kreitner Lounge, in the ----, and in the ----. I invite each of us as faculty, students and staff to strive to integrate the stated mission of SVDP and make it our own.

Multicultural awareness, valuing each other's traditions, and enculturation into the land in which I currently live is a gentle balance for each of us at SVDP and the truly Catholic way to live. Let us strive to integrate as a community in an ever more thorough way, let us ask questions of the person who is "different than me" and strive to understand each other's cultures and backgrounds so we can learn to appreciate the other in the here and now and thus our parishioners in the future. We should have a pastoral curiosity about other cultures with a genuine desire to know the other and find fruitful ways to communicate for the sake of community and the sake of our proclamation of the Gospel.

There is also something to be said for patience with each other when we live in such a diverse house. We all bring our own baggage and biases, not to mention idioms and ways of communication that can be easily misinterpreted. As a rector with a faculty from eight different countries, I am conscious of these differences and strive to remind myself of this when miscommunications or cultural nuances seemingly collide. We are regularly sitting at table with over 25 nationalities, we will step on each other's toes sometimes, heck, that is just called family! [share example of pointing to the A/C in the classroom]. It is good to note that some cultural expressions simply do not cross borders and we must learn to adapt for the sake of communion: e.g. burping after a meal in parts of India, China and in Bahrain or our brothers from Africa averting eye contact out of respect or even hugging and kissing needs to follow the social ques of locality. Know yourself and know your environment.

Becoming a multicultural community and not just be a disparate group of multinationals begins through an examination of our hearts and an honest dialogue with our spiritual directors. It may necessitate a good confession to be reconciled for any prejudices or hurts that have been subtly clinging to us and affecting our outlook. The healthy multicultural community manifests itself at table in the refectory, and on the sports field, and in conversations around the lake. We can certainly see the joy, beauty, and enriching nature of our community on International Night! Certainly this does not negate the beautiful reality that we have close friendships and particular camaraderie with individuals with whom we share common interests like collegiate background, country of birth, shared hobbies, similitude of personality, etc. But in community, and simply as Christians, there should always be an openness to the other; to the one who is not like me, the one who is truly my brother or sister though we share little in common. For if I cannot/will not spend time with someone who is different than me now, how will I ever do it in the parish? The parish priest must always remain open to the "other" in his flock or else he will fail to see the "lost sheep" in the lonely, or the abandoned, or the confused, or else we will simply fail to preach the gospel to all who come to us for Good News.

I consider myself truly blessed to have spent years of formation in South Florida. I would never have been exposed to such a rich cultural diversity anywhere else. I would never have been able to embrace the many Latino cultures, the Haitian and Islander nations, or have the desire to be able to celebrate the sacraments in Spanish. We miss so much if we do not engage the many cultures around us – 25 to be exact! It is hard work, but so worth it. When I arrived at SJV in 1991, I spoke zero Spanish and to be honest, before arriving I considered that it was going to be a waste of time because I was from an all Anglo parish, St. Cecelia's in Clearwater, Florida. But

by God's grace and many new friends made, I immersed myself (as so many of you have) in the new culture and realized the pastoral need of speaking another language and being open to the other. In the summer of 1996, just five years after entering the seminary, I was on summer assignment at my home parish and was able to help launch the outreach to the burgeoning Spanish speaking community that had grown in Clearwater. By God's grace, the prejudice that I was bringing with me to the seminary was conquered by the pastoral thirst and curiosity to be the best I could be for the people of God of every background. My best friends at SJV were Cuban, Mexican and Nicaraguan – and to this day remain in close fraternal communion with them and because of that I love the big Mass in Miami for La Virgen de La Caridad, Las Mañanitas for Our Lady of Guadalupe, and eating Bandeja Paisa! Over the years there is so much I have learned that has enriched me from the various Latino cultures, and friends from Haiti, the Philippines, the Bahamas, Jamaica, Vietnam, Poland, India, Malta, Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, etc. Let's also not fail to mention our need to minister to and embrace the 3 million [Catholic African Americans](#), who generally in the south, find themselves underrepresented in our church. That is why I love meeting black families in the parish and asking about the roots of their catholic faith. How deficient I would be both personally and pastorally without these friends and their cultures, or worse, how many people would I be depriving of pastoral care if I were closed to cultures outside of my own?

It would never be acceptable here to marginalize others. I want to raise our awareness because often times our prejudices are outside of our consciousness, and we need to be reminded to keep asking ourselves about our motivations and to observe our behaviors and words so that we grow closer to the ideal of the Christian community where all are valued. We are having this conference tonight not because I believe we are a divided community, but because I know the diabolical can subtly divide (*diabolein* – to scatter/divide) our hearts and fraternity through the experiences of our families and cultures of origin. Let us never give the evil one the upper hand, let us stand together as one truly Catholic family and stand together as those whose citizenship is in heaven: “from every nation, race, people, and tongue” (Rev. 7:9). May we strive to live in the communion that Christ desired for his apostles and still desires for us. For your further reflection, I want to highlight [canon 275](#) (Fr. Remek's favorite) on the fraternal communion of priests, as well as two scriptures: John 17:20-21: “I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.” And John 13:34-35: “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Let us pray for healing and an end to prejudice and division in our country and in our world as we sing a song that has its origins in the African American community: “In Christ there is no East or West” on page 824.