

Good evening. Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this panel, tonight, and for the opportunity to reflect on the Commencement address given here by Bishop Farrell last May. As I was thinking about how I wanted to respond tonight, I found myself remembering a warm September morning in 1996. I was standing at the corner of Bardstown Road and Grinstead Ave. in Louisville KY, feeling rather foolish and very corny. Along with about a dozen others, I had come to see a runner carrying the Olympic torch through the city, on its way to the Olympic Games.

I have found in my life that sometimes very small moments have lasting import for me. This event was one such. I was taken by the ancient ritual of carrying the torch, the care with which each runner handled their brief moment in its movement, tying the old with the new – the coming games that had yet to take their place in that ancient line of games. It was important to me to witness the fidelity of the runners to this task.

I believe that a Catholic university is a torch-bearer as it holds the light of faith and reason. There, it is the task of professors and students - our runners - to study our tradition, understand it, and make it accessible to today's world, holding that light high, faithful to the past, but moving towards the future to which we are called. I hold much respect for those of you who have spent your professional lives in the academy, and feel somewhat as I did that September day – a witness. Most of my professional life has been spent working with the products of your efforts – the graduates of our universities, both lay and ordained. I have walked with them and witnessed their journey as they have encountered the joys and challenges of ministry.

For the past five years, I had the privilege of directing the Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project, a multi-tiered, national research project conducted by six national ministerial associations, funded by a major grant from the Lilly Endowment. The project was designed to study excellence in parishes and pastoral leadership. From 2003 to 2008 we met with lay and ordained leaders from 80% of US dioceses, sent by their dioceses so that we could benefit from their experience. We witnessed the emerging micro-trends of the local Church. The religious and pastoral life of our parishes is changing in ways that we would not have dreamed of even 20 years ago.

For example:

- We experienced the movement from planning for parishes to the development of mega and regional communities of parishes. Parishes, particularly in metroplexes like Dallas/Fort Worth are becoming quite large with 15, 20, 25 thousand parishioners.
- In small towns, rural and even suburban areas, we are seeing the development of regional entities spanning multiple small parishes with a single pastor or pastoral team.

- Nearly a quarter of the diocesan priests in this country are pastoring more than one parish or mission. Half will be retired before this new decade is over.
- The number of permanent deacons is rapidly increasing as bishops are turning to their sacramental presence in parishes.
- Most of the day-today work of the parish is in the hands of the laity, either professionally trained lay ecclesial ministers or parishioners trying to be faithful to their call to discipleship.

Pope John Paul II believed that “the future of the Catholic university depends on the competent and dedicated services of lay Catholics.”ⁱ So too, it appears, does the future of the parish.

In witnessing their work I learned that the best way to convey the urgency and depth of the change in our ministerial lives is to use theological language; that we can best understand the concerns and challenges of pastoral leaders when we appreciate that their language, in turn, is theologically laden.

Last May, Msgr. Kevin Irwin, Dean of the School of Theology and Religious Studies at the Catholic University of America, in his baccalaureate address reflected on the need for theologians to address current realities. He told the graduates:

We should learn from and appreciate what [Thomas] Aquinas said and did in the *Summa*. But the *summa* should spawn other *summas*, new ones for our day and age. In fact we do a disservice to Aquinas when we do not reach beyond him and cultivate a new way of doing what he did, for a new day and age.ⁱⁱ

The United States bishops, in their document *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*, made the same plea when they called us to imagine a future that is “faithful to the Church’s theological and doctrinal tradition and responsive to ‘contemporary pastoral needs and situations.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

We need a theological discourse for our time. Bishop Farrell, in his address, suggested that adhering to the tradition means being open to “new questions, new cultures, new circumstances, and being willing to learn from them... as well as to reformulate teachings in them.”^{iv} This is not just an academic exercise. I cannot express strongly enough the longing of those who are laboring in the vineyard for just this dialogue. They long to know that their labor is witnessed. They need language – solid theological language - to understand and to pass along their experience of the church in today’s world

It seems to me, then, that the task of the theologian, and thus of the Catholic university, is two-fold. It is just as important that we witness and interpret the experience of the faithful in the light of our faith, giving it theological language, as it is to interpret the teachings of the church for the faithful. In our day and age this is of critical importance. It challenges today’s theologians and academics to also become adaptive, finding new ways and new language to theologically prepare their students for the world they will face as they leave these hallowed halls.

The future of our parishes is going to depend on their ability to care for one another in ways that are true to their faith. It is our task to teach them to think theologically in all of their studies, not just to know some theology; to give them the ability to bring their faith and reason to action in the difficult life moments they are going to have to confront.

For our graduates who do go into ministry, we need to know that they have developed a broad enough theological base and clear theological language that can hold the faith of those with whom they minister, whether or not it is identical to theirs, while meeting needs in ways that are pastoral. Those precious moments in life when one needs to know the church stands with them - births, deaths, faith crises - those are the moments when we need to know that we have done our job well as a Catholic university.... that we have been faithful as runners, holding the light high, so that our graduates, in turn, can hold that light for others. Thank you.

ⁱ *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. #25.

ⁱⁱ Msgr. Kevin Irwin, Ph.D. Commencement Address, May 15, 2009, Catholic University of America

ⁱⁱⁱ *Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord*. USCCB, 2005.

^{iv} Farrell Commencement Address, May 15, 2009, University of Dallas.