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Addresses

## **Breakfast Comments: Catholic Higher Education**

University of St. Thomas, Houston, Texas, March 2, 2010

I've been asked to offer a few thoughts about the Catholic identity of Catholic higher education. As I was gathering my thoughts for this morning, I remembered two articles. Neither is recent. But each is even more important today, than when it appeared.

The first was published on the web in 2002. The author Francis Fukuyama spoke at the Carnegie Council, and then he took questions from an audience. His theme was "Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution." The council then posted the transcription to the internet. The second article appeared in 2004. Bill Joy, a scientist and mathematician, wrote it for Wired magazine. The title speaks for itself: "Why the future doesn't need us."<sup>1</sup>

Each of these men has an outstanding mind. Neither, to my knowledge, is religious. Both are deeply pro-science and pro-technology. But both describe possible futures that should sober us all - futures where the technology we create undermines important things we *think* we know about human nature, human rights and human dignity. And the most unsettling thing about both men is that they have the insight to see and understand the problems we face. They also have the good will to worry about them. But they don't have the moral framework to offer any convincing solutions.

In his Carnegie remarks, Fukuyama made an observation that's worth dwelling on. He said: "When [Thomas Jefferson] was on his deathbed in 1824, [Jefferson] wrote: 'one of the reasons we can be optimistic about the future of the United States and of progress, is that Nature has not conspired to create certain people that were born with saddles on their backs, and others born booted and spurred to ride them.'"

Having quoted Jefferson, Fukuyama then added this comment: The technologies we will have within the next two decades "will give us the capability, in effect, to create people that are either born with saddles on their backs, or born booted and spurred." This is not fantasy or science-fiction. It's fact, or very soon will be.

If we want to know why a truly *Catholic* education is so urgent, and why a place like the University of St. Thomas is so important, the answer is right there in Fukuyama's words. As a nation, we've created a culture that behaves like the Sorcerer's Apprentice. Neil Postman once called us the world's first emerging "technopoly" - a society where the real organizing principle is technological progress in its narrowest sense, and every other social value is subordinated to it.

We have the knowledge to unlock the power of creation, but we lack the wisdom and the humility to use it for real human progress. Our definition of "progress" is limited and confused. It ignores the most vital part of what it means to be really "human": our spirit. We don't fully understand the power that we unlock, or its implications. In fact, many of us no longer really believe that a unique and permanent "human nature" exists.

The genius of a Catholic education is to anchor the yearnings, the brilliance and the glory of the human mind in the greatness of God. Man has no security outside the guarantees of God's love. If we deny Him, we deny ourselves. If we do not know Him, we cannot know ourselves.

And this is why, when Catholic institutions of higher learning soften or dilute their bonds to the Church, or treat Catholic teaching as somehow separate from serious intellectual life, they're not

becoming more progressive or more relevant. They're choosing to be *irrelevant* because they have nothing new and confident to say to the world around them. They're betraying themselves, their students and the culture that Jesus Christ calls them to sanctify. *Jesus Christ is Lord. The Church is his bride and our mother and teacher.* If these two facts don't burn in the heart of a Catholic university, its leaders and its faculty, and through them, in the lives of its students, then it's just another cup of salt that has lost its flavor -- and its purpose.

The greatness of the University of St. Thomas is not just your academic excellence, which is vital and admirable and does honor to the great Catholic intellectual tradition. Your real greatness is the Christian humanism - given life by the Catholic faith -- that educates and makes new the *whole* person: mind, body and spirit. *That's* what sets you apart. Never lose it. Be Catholic, *really, faithfully, unapologetically* Catholic, and the future will have the kind of articulate and morally mature leaders it needs.

I began with a couple of voices worried about the future. I want to end with a voice from the past who knew the peace of God's presence in world just as confused and anxious as our own. Augustine, as all of you know, lived his ministry as a bishop in an age when everything solid in the old Roman world was unraveling. His people lived with a constant fear and uncertainty. The encouragement their bishop gave to them was this: "Bad times, hard times -- this is what people keep saying; but let us live well, and times shall be good. *We are the times.* Such as we are, such are the times."

You and I, and all of the lives this wonderful university touches: *We are the times.* And we can shape the future with our zeal and faith and Christian love from this moment forward. *So let us live well, and times will be good.* We are the times: Such as we are, such as we *love*, such as we *do* -- such are the times.

## Endnotes

1. Francis Fukuyama is best known for his book *The End of History and the Last Man*. His Carnegie Council appearance was tied to the release of his subsequent book *Our Posthuman Future: Consequences of the Biotechnology Revolution*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. Bill Joy was the main player in the development of the computer operating system BSD UNIX, the basis for most subsequent forms of UNIX, the dominant OS for most of the world's large-scale computer and information networks. He also co-founded and has served as chief scientist for Sun Microsystems.