

"Teaching, Learning and What Really Matters"

Sheedy Award Address

November 16, 2001

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I am grateful to receive this award named for Fr. Charlie Sheedy – a distinguished predecessor as a priest-teacher in the Congregation of Holy Cross at Notre Dame. I feel honored to join the company of the wonderful teachers who previously received this award--women and men who so obviously have seen teaching not as a job or career but as a vocation and calling. And I feel particularly honored to share the award this year with Steve Fallon. The best of teaching is of course done not by what we say or what we write but by how we live and Steve has taught us much in that regard in these past years. I feel especially glad to be here with Steve because his presence guaranteed that you would hear at least one thoughtful reflection on teaching! I have a special connection to Steve because I had the privilege to baptize his son Daniel. Daniel is now approaching his eleventh birthday--just about at the age when he should receive some vocation literature from me.

Permit me to extend some words of thanks:

I give thanks to God for my membership in Holy Cross and my calling in it as a priest. I wouldn't be teaching at Notre Dame were I not a member of this order and I am grateful that in it I have had the chance to serve here in the company of other devoted Holy Cross religious. We think of ourselves in the words of our Constitutions as "educators in the faith" and this is what--when I reflect upon it--I have tried to be.

I want to thank two people in particular -- both my former teachers -- not only for their kindness to me over the quarter century since I came here at a graduate student in 1976 but also for their witness as committed teachers.

Firstly I want to thank my treasured mentor and friend, Vincent De Santis, for his unfailing encouragement and for his example as a person who simply loves to teach. Long may he continue to do so! And I must thank my dear elder brother in Holy Cross, Fr Thomas Blantz C.S.C.--himself a Sheedy Award winner--for his great support and his witness of dedication and of concern for students. I was his teaching assistant here twenty-five years ago and he has been a guide and model for me ever since. I would be a better priest, teacher and man if I had followed his example a bit more closely!

Needless to say I want to thank all my faculty and staff colleagues and friends, especially those in my own department where good teaching is appreciated. And, last but not least, I want to thank my dear students both past and present for their graciousness to me. One of my past students, Laura Holland Hoey, is here as a member of the Arts and Letters Advisory Board along with her husband Doug. I had the privilege of presiding at their

Marriage this past summer. If any of my present students are here and perplexed as to how I ever won a "teaching award"--in light of what I have subjected you to this semester--let me say that I'm going to request funds from the Advisory Council to get a rebate for you!

Mark's generous invitation to Steve and myself to say some words asked us to address "some aspect of teaching." On first thought I considered trying to say something about good teaching--to pass along some lessons learned during my time as a teacher here; even--dare one be so immodest to say it--to share the notable--even signature--features of my teaching in hopes that they might benefit other teachers here. But sad to say I had some difficulty clarifying what my signature features are.

--I don't have the wonderful gift of storytelling like my colleague Jim Smyth.

--I'm not fast enough on my feet to engage my students brilliantly in focused discussion as does my colleague Doris Bergen.

--I lack the endless patience and powerful analytic skill to work so ably with multiple students on their research and writing projects like my colleague Laura Crago.

--I know well that it is not my well-honed facility with new teaching techniques and computer technology, for I occasionally still need help to work a VCR and the mere thought of my having to give one of the now ubiquitous "power point presentations" is enough to have me calling for a stiff whiskey.

Of course some folk have offered suggestions for my supposed success as a teacher. When the Sheedy Award was announced last Spring my insightful colleague Bob Schmuhl kindly noted that it came at a time when I wasn't teaching and asked if there was a connection there!

--Some have suggested that my accent helps--that students are not too concerned with what I say but they enjoy listening to how I say it!

--Others have suggested that my distinctive gestures and slightly manic physical presence in the classroom, which led an early student of mine named Paul Wasinger to compare me rather favorably to the John Cleese character in "Fawlty Towers," have something to do it with it!

--Still others have suggested that the endless digressions on matters large and small but seemingly unrelated to the topic at hand have contributed.

--No-one has suggested that my debonair appearance, my animal magnetism or my gentle, retiring manner might be the explanation and, frankly, I'm a bit surprised by that!

Needless to say I hope that certain other factors contributed to whatever accomplishments I attained in teaching. At my best, I sought to engage my students, to get to know them, to convey some sense of my passion for my subject and its importance such that "students" were transformed into "fellow-learners" and, indeed, into friends.

This process of engagement was and is time-consuming but it is most beneficial in terms both of good pedagogy and also my own joy in teaching. I asked my students to work hard as I did myself and they responded. I have always treasured a note which a former student, Carol Dominguez, sent me passing along a brief quotation from *Great Expectations* in which, I believe, Pip writes of his tutor Mr. Pocket: "If he had shown indifference as a master, I have no doubt I should have returned the compliment as a pupil; he gave me no such excuse, and each of us did the other justice." I like to think that many of my students might join me in saying of our courses together:--"each of us did the other justice."

In the end, however, it is pretty obvious what my signature feature is and I have already referred to it. I am a priest in the Holy Cross order and teaching for me is an apostolic work, a ministry. Please indulge me as I reflect in a rather personal way on that reality. I know this matter might seem a bit divorced from the experience of many of you here but it really isn't. Those of you who appreciate Fr. John Cavanaugh's observation that "good teaching is really a sort of sacramental action, a communication of spirit," will understand.

From the outset I began my teaching here with a strong sense that I was engaged upon a spiritual undertaking; that teaching was an important part of my priestly ministry. [I might add that I have spoken and written about this on and off over the years including in some of that vocation literature that I must remember to pass on to Daniel Fallon.] I knew that I was not only about improving minds but shaping souls; that I was called to nurture not only the intellectual lives of my students but also their religious and moral lives and, to aid them in integrating the two. The founder of my order, Fr. Basil Moreau, had outlined in his reflections on Christian pedagogy that "the mind" could not "be cultivated at the expense of the heart," and the tradition of my religious community as educators in the faith and the best teacher-exemplars certainly had conveyed that to me. Nicholas Ayo, Steve Fallon's colleague in PLS and my confrere in Holy Cross, once referred to teachers as "living books." In a similar way Mark Schwehn, the Dean of Christ College at Valparaiso University, speaks of "teachers in the classroom as texts." They allude, of course, to the fact that teachers convey as much by what they do and who they are as by what they say. My good teachers have modeled for me integrity, honesty, perseverance, intellectual and moral courage, and a profound commitment to the truth. I can only hope and pray that in some ways I have modeled such virtues for my students. More explicitly

I hope I also have managed to convey that I seek to follow in the path of Jesus and so to serve them and to awaken and deepen each person's sense of his or her own capacities and giftedness and to challenge them to use their gifts well and in the service of others. I wish I had done and could do this better.

I also have tried in ways obvious and not-so-obvious to help my students get somewhat clear what really matters in life. As a teacher of history I have tried to clarify some of those great lessons of history that are often painfully learned--that things don't always turn out right; nor the way we expect; and certainly not the way we want. I have tried to convey by word and deed the need to respect the dignity of each human person and life, and have tried to emphasize our need to take responsibility for each other and for the common good. I sought to explain that in the end a truly good life is about faith and family and friendship and that, especially in our privileged circumstances, we must lean into life from a disposition of gratitude rather than of resentment. I fear many of my students might have missed some of these aspects of my teaching endeavors being overly concerned with getting the question on the Marshall Plan or the Cuban Missile Crisis or whatever correct on the final exam--which of course I also wanted them to do. Perhaps in the future I might be able to do this better.

In July of 1999 I had the opportunity to make a retreat in Assisi, the home of my favorite saint-- holy Francis--who has always helped clarify for me what are the most important aspects of life and how I must allow God to dwell more fully within me. One hot day I hiked up the slopes of Mount Subasio to the Carceri Hermitage, a place where Francis and his companions often came to meditate and pray. I took with me the Constitutions of my Order and read them there and experienced the presence and call of the Lord in a powerful way. I sensed the Lord's call to me as a priest in Holy Cross to come with renewed commitment and energy to my teaching and scholarship, and to interact more charitably with others without surrendering my honest convictions and beliefs. This is what I returned to do and enjoyed a good year in which I actually taught new classes, including one on the history of my own country--that place which has such a hold on my heart and gut and, incidentally, a place which, regrettably, has not shown the better angels of its collective nature in recent months given its harsh treatment of refugees.

It was during the course of that year, however, that my provincial conveyed to me that he had not experienced the Lord's call for me in quite the same way I had. He asked me instead to serve as Rector and Superior of Moreau Seminary. Being a moderately headstrong person and having the additional backing of a mountainside spiritual 'experience' no less, I was a bit surprised that he did not see my future exactly as I saw it.

But, after some brief prayer and reflection my head and my heart told me that God was calling me to accept this appointment and to give my best to it. Contributing to the good training of Holy Cross seminarians struck me as simply the most important and challenging ministry I could undertake. I now play some part in educating a new generation of Holy Cross "educators in the faith" so that they might follow in the footsteps of forebears like Charlie Sheedy by preaching the Good News and by extending the reign of Jesus Christ in the hearts of men and women. I truly know it is by far the most important teaching assignment given to me, although it is a different form of "teaching" than most of what I have done previously. I have the privilege of working with men who know that their best selves will be discovered only when they pass beyond self-centeredness and selfishness and truly follow Christ in giving of themselves to others. I always have learned from my students--from their insights and goodness--but in this case I am very much a learner from and with my younger brothers in Holy Cross. We are wayfarers and pilgrims on the same journey and we guide each other by living the life as best we can aided by God's abundant grace. My own specific journey has taken me quite a distance from my own country and given me the graced opportunity to serve here. I am fortunate to have had good companions with me at each stage along the way--my Moreau community, my dear students, my faith-filled collaborators in the higher education apostolate of Holy Cross, and so many able and committed teachers and learners whom I have been able to work beside. I give thanks to God for them all and ask his continued blessing as we pursue the 'work' of teaching, learning, and keeping clear what really matters.

Thank you.