

Appendix 3

WELCOME ADDRESS

Let me begin by offering my warmest welcome. It is an honor for the Church of San José to host your annual convention.

The Communion of Saints is the topic for your meeting this year, so I will focus my brief words of welcome on this theme.

Karl Barth thought that John the Baptist was the ideal and model saint. Barth observed that the Baptist always pointed away from himself to the Christ. In Barth's view, that is what every saint, what every Christian ought to do.

Our diocese is blessed with two patronal saints. Our see city of St. Joseph is situated in the valley of St. Claire. Time prevents a reflection on both our patrons (are you lucky!). But I would like to propose St. Joseph as an alternative to Karl Barth's choice as the model and ideal saint.

When I was young, we frequently heard about St. Joseph "the Silent." He was called silent because we know so little about him. While we certainly do not know much about Joseph's life, we can tell some very important things about him from Jesus, since Joseph played an essential role in our Savior's human formation.

This simple observation brings us to the heart of the truth you will be reflecting on at this year's convention. Human possibilities, i.e., who we are and what we can become, depend on other people and the community within which we live. Even our knowledge of and our relationship with God depends on others.

To put this another way, God can enter the world and touch our lives only through human cooperation, only through people like ourselves, through saintly lives.

As every human being, Jesus was profoundly influenced by his family and especially by his parents. Like all of us, the adult Jesus reflected the family in which he grew up.

For example, consider that as a child Jesus would have first used the word "Abba" to name Joseph. And it was from Joseph that he learned of our Eternal Abba, our gentle and merciful God.

Here is an example of the truth expressed in the ancient doctrine of the Communion of Saints—God touches us with human hands. We encounter and come to know our God through other human beings. Who we become is formed by our community with others. As Jesus' parent, Joseph gave Jesus to our troubled world and silently receded in the giving.

In this way, I offer the co-patron of our diocese to your reflection as the ideal and model saint. It is our task, like Joseph, to give Jesus to the world and recede in the giving.

Joseph is first among the legions of silent saints, the millions across two millennia, whose fidelity and faith have made it possible for us to encounter the gentle face of God in Jesus. This is the multitude of unknown saints who, like Joseph the silent, recede into history. But the fruit of their forgotten lives, the gift of Christ, lives on in those of us who have been formed by their living faith.

These saints, like us, are fragile, struggling, and sinful people. Yet it is on the likes of these that the Spirit of the Risen Christ depends in order to live in our world. In addition, it is these silent multitudes who made it possible for us to encounter the Lord.

In her book *Truly Our Sister*, Elizabeth Johnson reminds us that the living community of saints is the only real reliquary of Jesus, the way the Spirit's power enables the risen Christ to live in history (*Truly Our Sister*, 103).

In each succeeding generation, believers have enabled the Risen Christ to live in ever-changing circumstances. Under the guidance of the Spirit, on every continent, among every nationality and race, the faithful have found ever-changing ways to live in communion with the Risen Lord.

This evening, we fragile saints gather to place our humble gifts at the Spirit's service. You, members of the Catholic intellectual community, offer your unique talents and work to the Lord. Your efforts to probe and enlighten our faith are important, indeed essential to the life of the Church and the work of the Spirit.

In your reflections on this doctrine, I do not want you to neglect your own participation in the communion of saints precisely as theologians. The theological vocation is essential to Christ's presence in the world. For how can people of varied times and places encounter the Risen Christ if his life and mystery are not translated into and enriched by history's ever-changing circumstances?

The story of theology is familiar to us all. During the Patristic period, the great theologians in the Church were the bishops. The theological achievements of saints such as Ambrose and Augustine were their pastoral work, the way they made the Risen Christ live for the congregations entrusted to their care. It was necessary to express the Gospel in ways their contemporaries could grasp. Moreover, new questions, unknown to earlier Christians, had to be addressed if the Risen Christ was to live on.

Across the centuries, the locus of theological reflection has changed—to monasteries, universities, and seminaries.

I think that our contemporary circumstance is a uniquely rich moment in the history of theology. One need only look around this room to realize that this essential vocation is now shared by lay and cleric, women and men, religious and secular of every race and nationality. In this, you reflect the diversity of our

truly catholic community. What a dazzlingly rich treasure you are to our church.

As a member of that Church and as a bishop I want to thank you for your work and express how much I appreciate your efforts.

Your vocation is an ancient and time-honored task. Following the examples of Irenaeus, Rahner, and so many others, you bring our faith to the contemporary intellectual and cultural conversation. This frequently requires that you ask hard questions as we face new challenges. In doing so you enable the Christ to live and be encountered in our time and situation.

We know from our church's history that it is a difficult and sometime unpopular vocation. Saints are not always popular people. New and varied perspectives are not always welcome. However, your efforts are essential if the Risen Christ is to live in our time. Theology is a saintly work.

I would also like to commend and encourage you for the way in which you carry out your vocation.

I think this a vitally important point. Today in our society and culture, everything seems so fractured. Public discourse has become so acrimonious, even within our church.

My prayer this evening is that you might continue the long tradition of Catholic theology, carrying on your deliberations in the Spirit of Christ, in a spirit of unity, mutual respect, trust, and fellowship.

If you can maintain this kind of conversation, that fact alone will rank you among the saints we sorely need. For how is it possible for people in our society to believe in the promise of Christ to establish an eternal community of love and peace, a divine Kingdom, if all we see around us are harsh judgments, acrimony and vilification?

The practice of theology by members of the Catholic Theological Society of America at this meeting and throughout the year remains an authentically counter-cultural sign. Here you share, criticize, and enrich one another's efforts in the spirit of unity, mutual respect, trust, and fellowship—that is, in the Spirit of the Risen Christ.

In this Spirit, your conversation will culminate Saturday afternoon when you gather at our Cathedral in Eucharist. Here the mystery of the Communion of Saints reaches its fullest expression in the celebration of the Lord's Body—head and members.

All the saints—the famous and the forgotten, the living and the dead—are really present with Christ in our Eucharistic communion. Here is the living fact and promise of our eternal community in Christ.

Recall St. Augustine's reflections on the celebration of the Lord's Body. He asked his congregation, what do you take from the altar, what do you receive? His answer: You take yourself from the altar; you receive your own mystery for you are the Body of Christ.

Your work as a theological community is an essential part of our participation in this mystery. I refer not only to the content of your conversation but also to the Spirit in which you conduct that conversation.

Therefore, again, I thank you for your contributions as theologians to the life of our Church.

In the name of the Church, I thank you for embracing the theological vocation. I pray you will have both a fruitful and enjoyable convention. It is truly an honor to have you with us.

BISHOP PATRICK J. MCGRATH

*Bishop of San José
San José, California*