The Challenges for Vincentian Higher Education at the Dawn of the Third Millennium

Centennial Laureate Lecture by
Robert P. Maloney, C.M.

The Very Reverend Robert P. Maloney, C.M. presently serves in Rome as the superior general of the Congregation of the Mission (The Vincentians). He is the 22nd successor of St. Vincent de Paul, the University's patron. A native of Brooklyn, New York, Fr. Maloney was ordained in 1966. He holds a doctorate in Moral Theology from the Catholic University of America, and is the author of numerous articles and books on Vincentian Spirituality. Fr. Maloney spoke as the final Centennial Laureate of the university's 1998-1999 Centennial Celebration. May 10, 1999

There is something fascinating about the dawn of a new millennium. We stand at the threshold of a new era in history.

For Christians the beginning of the first millennium was marked by vibrant faith and hostile persecution; the advent of the second, by bitter theological controversy and by gradually increasing division: in 1053 the division between Rome and Constantinople, and then, almost 500 years later, the separation of many protesting churches.

What is it that marks the dawn of the third millennium for Christians? Today I suggest that this new millennium will be characterized not so much by persecution (though persecution still exists in places like China, from which I have just arrived), not by theological controversy and division (though these too exist in abundance). The great problem confronting the Church today is indifference, "the massive absence of God from so much of the contemporary world with all the final emptiness, religious cynicism, or meaninglessness of that experience." Religious practice has declined dramatically in most of the countries of the western world. I experience it even more strikingly in Europe than here in the United States. In Rome, where I live, it is almost fashionable for a young person to say: "I'm not a believer." Practice has fallen beneath 10% in Italy. In France, some estimate it at 1%. God is very distant, very absent in the lives of so many of the young.

The dawn of the third millennium is also marked by the terrible suffering of humanity. No era in the entire history of the world has ever known so many refugees as our own. Tens of millions flee wars and violence in Eastern Europe, especially Kosovo, in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America. Here in the United States more than for million homeless people dwell on the streets of our major cities. And of course as you have heard so often, the number of poor people in the world is greater now than ever before, just as the number of rich people is greater than ever. Somehow we seem utterly incapable of bridging the gap.

Forgive me for sounding pessimistic as I begin this discourse. But really I am not. I love life. I love the religious heritage that our parents and teachers have communicated to us faithfully, focusing on the person of Jesus. I love the Vincentian tradition which DePaul University has handed on so well for the last hundred years. I am confident that Catholic higher education can do something to counteract the indifference and the great human misery that are so present at the dawn of the third millennium.

A millennium is too big a chunk of time to envision. If this talk had been given a thousand years ago, none of us would have even envisioned the United States, or Chicago, where we are gathered today. So, to put this evening's topic more modestly: what are the challenges that face DePaul University as a new decade, a new century begins? I offer you several:

1. The decade ahead will be one of networking.

I encourage you to network. Make your mission here at DePaul a truly collaborative effort. Let it mobilize the energies of all of you: the members of the Congregation of the Mission, the lay administrators, faculty members and staff, the students who are part of this great university. Let everyone feel a part of DePaul's mission. Let this university be a true educational community, filled with the spirit of Vincent de Paul. If there was anything Vincent de Paul knew how to do, it was to draw everyone into his captivating vision of life. He was a great networker. At his one side was Anne, the Queen of France, a woman of broad culture and also of political intrigue; at his other side was Marguerite Naseau, a peasant girl who taught herself how to read or write. He energized rich and poor, women and men of every rank in society, by sharing his vision with them. Can everyone here at DePaul be made to feel a part of the Vincentian mission from the youngest student to the
most experienced administrator, from a trustee who is CEO of a large corporation to a beginning faculty member just out of graduate school?

2. **The 21st century will be the century of the laity, as Pope John Paul II has often pointed out.**

In recent years we have become very conscious that our Vincentian Family has well over two million lay members living in more than 135 countries. The Society of St. Vincent de Paul alone has more than 930,000 members who volunteer to work among the poor. The Ladies of Charity have more than 260,000 members. Our youth groups, which are rapidly growing in more than 40 countries, have 200,000 members. The Miraculous medal Association has, literally, countless members! The educational institutions of our Vincentian Family throughout the world have more than half a million students. We Vincentians with just 4000 priests and brothers, and even the Daughters of Charity with 25,000 sisters, are tiny when compared with our lay groups. The 21st century will be the century of the laity. Vincent de Paul, almost four centuries ago, knew that the full involvement of lay men and women in the mission of the Church was utterly necessary. He knew that every lay person is a missionary. He knew how to encourage lay men and women to channel their energies toward the goal that burned in his heart: relieving the needs of the poor. Can DePaul instill in all its members a deep sense of the lay person's missionary vocation in the Church?

3. **At the dawn of the 21st century we live in an information society.**

Computer science is flourishing here at DePaul as in so many other universities. We live in an information society where those who have the right information will be best prepared to make the right decisions. But the quantity of information is so huge that we must focus, we must set priorities. That is one of the great challenges of the Catholic university today. What are life's priorities? What is the information that will enrich? Will our students leave DePaul with a taste for great literature rather than for the trash so often sold on newsstands? Will they appreciate good drama and music rather than the sparse fare that television so often offers? Will they have deep religious values, a profound love for God and a deep love for the human person that leaps beyond using others for one's own personal advantage? Will they see science as an instrument for human advancement and the promotion of life rather than for its destruction or manipulation? Will they see sports as a healthy means for physical and psychological growth, rather than the self-centered, profit-centered industry that it has become? What can DePaul do to help us prioritize in an information society?

4. **The challenge of the poor and of deep human misery stands before the global community.**

What can DePaul do to help meet this challenge? Let me suggest two things. First, let DePaul be a place where the poor always feel welcome. You already have a wonderful tradition in this regard. From DePaul's beginnings, the sons and daughters of immigrants found a home here. Keep that tradition alive. Let students, no matter how poor, find a place here as long as they are willing to work hard to learn. Let the skins of DePaul's students be of all colors and shades. Let their languages of birth be very varied. Let the poorest student on campus feel as equal a member of DePaul as the richest. Let students' dignity and gifts as human persons, rather than their economic status, be what distinguishes them. Secondly, be sure that every student who comes to DePaul leaves here with a deep social consciousness that has been nourished by the university's Catholic and Vincentian heritage. If a student, Catholic or non-Catholic, should graduate from DePaul thinking that his or her main goal in life is to "make big bucks fast," we have utterly failed him or her. But if our students, through their classes, through vital contact with their teachers, through campus liturgy leave here with Christ as the center, with a deep conviction about the fundamental dignity of all human persons, then DePaul has served those students well.

5. **Finally, let me ask your help in putting into practice something that Pope John Paul II addressed to the Vincentians gathered together in Rome more than a decade ago. He stated: "Priests and Brothers of the Mission, search out more than ever, with boldness, humility, and skill, the causes of poverty and encourage short- and long-term solutions adaptable and effective concrete solutions. By doing so, you will work for the credibility of the gospel and of the Church."**

Where can this aspect of the Vincentian mission be better carried out than at a place like DePaul, where the knowledge, the skills, and the resources for investigating the causes of poverty exist in great force? How can the University help Chicago grapple with the causes of its urban problems?
How can the University help our country provide better education for all its young? How can the University help the global community find peace and true human liberty? I encourage you to continue to provide your students and professors with the opportunity to come into firsthand contact with the poor. This contact can change their lives. It can enable them to see a world where the suffering Christ lives on and it can liberate them to ask the question: What contribution can I make, even in my own small way, to the future of suffering humanity?

Pope Paul VI once wrote: "Lack of education is as serious as lack of food; the illiterate person is a starved spirit." I thank all of you here today at DePaul who are so committed to feeding the human spirit. Spirit means life, soul. We want DePaul's graduates to go forth with soul in abundance. We want them to be filled with life and vision and hope and enthusiasm and we want them to be able to communicate that to others. The dawn of the third millennium is a new horizon. We hope that DePaul will form students who can look over that horizon, who can see beyond it with far-reaching vision, a vision that creates unity among disparate men and women, a vision that breaks down the barriers of division, a vision that eradicates the crippling causes of poverty, a vision that loves fullness of life and that knows how to promote it.

That is the great challenge for DePaul University at the dawn of the third millennium. I encourage you to meet it and I am confident that you can do so.
