

CHALLENGES, HOPES, CATHOLIC IDENTITY AND PURSUING THE
TRUTH AT NOTRE DAME

SYCAMORE TRUST BREAKFAST, NOTRE DAME, MAY 31, 2025

Fr. Bill Miscamble, C.S.C.

Dear friends, thanks for your presence here this morning, and thanks especially to those of you who support the Sycamore Trust and the great work that Tim and Bill Dempsey and the Board members are doing on our behalf. Please encourage your friends and fellow Notre Dame folk to continue their support for the Sycamore Trust and to subscribe to the Sycamore Bulletins.

Let me give a greeting to Bill and Mary Dempsey watching us, I hope, on the livestream. Bill, thanks for your tireless commitment to Notre Dame's Catholic mission and identity. Mary, thanks for all the support you give to Bill.

I have titled my talk: [As Above!]

It covers a potpourri of topics – I trust some of it will connect with you.

Much has changed in the world and in higher education and also here at Notre Dame since I spoke at this breakfast last year.

On the macro-level we have a new presidential administration in the United States and a new Pope in Rome – amazingly the latter is a White Sox fan!!

In the immediate term the former is having more impact on higher education than the latter.

--But before I address what implications those changes may have for our university, I want to note some changes much closer to home – namely the deaths of two major figures at Notre Dame – both philosophers – David Solomon and Alasdair MacIntyre.

David was the visionary founder of the deNicola Center for Ethics and Culture and a legendary teacher here at ND who did so much to keep the Catholic intellectual tradition and the prolife cause vibrant and meaningful on our campus. His great spirit lives on in the many students he trained and in the bonds of community and friendship he helped create.

--Let me acknowledge also his wonderful wife Lou, who was his strength and support all through his half century of terrific service at Notre Dame.

--David spoke regularly at this breakfast and gave his full support to Sycamore.

David's great colleague, Alasdair MacIntyre, died just recently. Many of you would be familiar with MacIntyre's work. He was a longtime Senior Distinguished Research fellow at the DeNicola Center for Ethics and Culture and he died on May 21. You may have read MacIntyre's great book *After Virtue*, but I commend to you his *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry ("Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition")*. It provides a strong basis for seeing that the Catholic intellectual tradition is life-giving and must shape in a distinctive way a genuine Catholic university. Alasdair helped generate Catholic intellectual life on this campus and we pray that his influence will long live on here. We extend our sympathy to his wife Lynn and pray for his eternal rest.

I should also mention a couple of academic developments regarding key appointments.

Firstly, the very able Dean of Science, Santiago Schnell, will soon depart Notre Dame to take up the appointment as Provost at Dartmouth. Dean Schnell was deeply committed to our Catholic mission, and he will be greatly missed.

Secondly, it was recently announced that Professor Kenneth Scheve will take up the appointment as Dean of Arts and Letters this summer. He has recently served as a professor of political science and global affairs, and as Dean of Social Science at Yale University. He is a 1990 graduate of Notre Dame in economics, and we must pray that he comes with a clear-headed view of the important role the College of Arts and Letters must play in the Catholic mission of Notre Dame.

Some departments in the College, such as Theology, clearly understand the role they must play in this mission. Others seem rather at sea in this regard. In mentioning the Theology department, I recommend to you Professor John Cavadini's recent piece in *Church Life Journal*, entitled "Notre Dame Theology: Six Easy Rules for Achieving a Top Ranking." By the way, Cavadini's first rule is "Don't talk about rankings." (We should leave that for the football program!) Cavadini's second rule is "Value truth instead. Seek truth, not rankings." These rules **should be applied to the University as a whole.**

--(Perhaps we could get a banner made and have it placed on the Main Building!!)

Last year when I spoke at this breakfast, I noted that the previous year had not been a notably positive one for American higher education. That year, you may recall, had involved the turmoil on American campuses protesting against Israel and the resignations of major Ivy League university presidents who could not clarify that calls for Jewish genocide should not be permitted on their campuses.

The turmoil in higher education continues apace.

Clearly the election of President Donald Trump has led to significant challenges to the higher education “sector,” as some folks describe it. Harvard University has been a particular target and the matter is ongoing with court battles, etc. The administration seems determined to contest the Gramscian March through the Institutions which has led to such progressive dominations on campus. Trump’s willingness to withdraw or cancel funds from Harvard indicates the seriousness of the challenge to the status quo in higher ed which endlessly touts “diversity” while operating within a narrow ideological bandwidth.

Notre Dame so far has stayed largely out of the line of fire, although she has lost significant funding to the Keough School of Global Studies as a result of the dissolution of USAID. The Pulte Institute for Global Development has recently announced a two-thirds reduction in its staffing.

It seems likely that there will be further challenges going forward and, in particular, funding from various agencies like the National Science Foundation, National Endowment for the Humanities, etc. may be reduced. Also, the cap on paying “indirect or overhead costs” for federally funded research and assuring that Notre Dame does not discriminate on the basis of race in its admissions and hiring policies are obvious issues for the future. (Note there has also been some speculation about (1) taxing of endowment income; and (2) restricting full-fee-paying foreign students. Both would have sizable impact.)

Whatever the financial challenges from reduction of government funding, Notre Dame seems well placed to navigate them. The building mania continues and the university has just opened a fancy new office complex in Washington D.C., where Notre Dame hopes to strengthen its impact and serve as a force for good. Of

course, if Notre Dame wanted to seriously engage the present administration perhaps it might be willing to invite some of the senior members of the administration to our campus. Let us hope invitations will be forthcoming for prominent Catholics like Vice-President JD Vance and for Secretary of State. Marco Rubio in the near future. Perhaps Vice-President Vance could be asked to address the new administrations important initiative in the area of religious liberty. By the way let me mention in this regard that our local Bishop, Kevin Rhoades has recently been appointed to the religious advisory board of the Religious Liberty Commission established by President Trump. And the great Professor Gerry Bradley of the Notre Dame Law School has been appointed to the legal advisory board. Let us hope and pray that this Commission can do good work to firm up this most precious liberty.

Now I should mention that there is a hiring freeze on staff appointments at the moment, and all units on campus have been tasked with preparing for a five percent reduction in their annual budgets. There is some evidence of a little tightening of belts in various parts of the campus, but let us hope this does not interfere with the central academic mission of our school.

Of course, some have suggested that the administration of the university could lead the way in the belt-tightening by reducing the sizable number of vice presidents, associate vice presidents, and assistant vice presidents. Perhaps Michael Canady's successor as editor of the *Rover*—Lucy Spence-- will assign a team of investigative reporters to determine just how many of those positions there are. Those of you who follow higher education know how bloated administrations have become in recent decades. Perhaps Notre Dame could lead the way in trimming. We don't need DOGE or the chainsaw approach – just some sensible reductions in

non-academic areas would be a good start. Also, a serious start could be made to disassemble some of the DEI infrastructure that has grown so rapidly on the campus and which is embedded in most of colleges and in student Life.

Now friends, I want mainly to focus, at least briefly, with what remains of my time on the pursuit of truth at Notre Dame, but I must mention two very challenging developments that will have a significant impact on higher education in general.

The first is the so-called demographic cliff that has been reached. There are fewer 18-22 year old traditionally- aged students. This will not impact Notre Dame directly, except there will be fewer faculty positions available for our doctoral students, and the overall state of colleges and universities will be more on the defensive. There may be many small Catholic colleges and universities under challenge, and indeed some may close. Perhaps Notre Dame could be of some help to such places—at least those who still have a strong Catholic identity and mission.

Another major challenge confronting higher ed is the whole area of artificial intelligence. This promises to have major implications for not only higher education but also for society as a whole and the likely employment prospects of our graduates. Interestingly, it is an area that our new Holy Father, Pope Leo XIV, hopes to address. It's possible that Notre Dame could be of help to him in this regard. It is clear, however, that AI is going to have a significant impact on how teaching and learning is undertaken here. Already there are concerns about student work being generated more by AI than by their own brains. A colleague of mine recently shared with me that perhaps the future will involve student papers that are prepared by AI being graded by professors who funnel them through AI without casting an eye upon them. What a prospect! This will be a challenge going forward

for all of higher ed, and not just Notre Dame. Let us hope we can keep the real purpose of a Notre Dame education in mind as we navigate this new terrain. Educating the heart and the mind and the soul cannot be accomplished by AI. [Let me note – this talk was NOT prepared by AI!]

As you would be well aware, the public's regard for higher education has diminished in recent years. There is an increasing recognition that many schools have lost a certain legitimacy and that they have become rather partisan institutions. While there is much talk of "diversity," there is little concern for a diversity of viewpoints on campuses. Faculties at some elite campuses are one-sided, to put it mildly. I think this is recognized by any fair-minded observer. Mitch Daniels, the former governor of Indiana and who served a distinguished decade as president of Purdue University, has written about "decades of undeniable illiberal discrimination and ostracism of even mainstream viewpoints." In these circumstances, serious introspection and a recognition that changes are needed are hard to come by.

Notre Dame's Catholic identity has helped it weather some of the worst of the imposition of woke ideology that is still pervasive on American campuses. (e.g. there have been minimal anti-Israel/pro-Hamas demonstrations and the like here.) But our desire to win the regard of our so-called "preferred peers" has led us to make too many concessions to this ideology in hopes of obtaining the regard of these peers and hence of securing our place in those ubiquitous rankings that seem to preoccupy administrators and trustees.

This certainly seems the case when our provost, John McGreevy – my fellow historian – suggested in a letter to faculty earlier this semester that hiring for diversity purposes was equally important to Notre Dame’s mission as the hiring of committed Catholic faculty. John justified his position by arguing with the usual ‘buzz-words’ that this would help us become “a more diverse and inclusive intellectual community.” But there was little recognition in his communication of the **essential priority of Catholic mission**. Yet, it must be the central and defining principle as indeed it is clearly set forth in the University’s mission statement—which, let us hope, our trustees have read with care.

This is the point that David Solomon regularly made over many years. It is the point that Bill Dempsey and the Sycamore Trust have focused their endeavors on. It is the point that we must all appreciate and understand if Notre Dame is to be the great Catholic university we pray and hope it can be.

Now if Notre Dame is to fulfill its true mission, it should root its endeavors in the pursuit of truth. Here at Notre Dame, we do not need to succumb to the relativist and secularist approaches that characterize most of the so-called elite schools in the US. Poor Harvard has *Veritas* as its motto – it is supposed to be engaged in the search for truth. But as Alasdair MacIntyre’s work so powerfully illustrated, the contemporary American university has betrayed much of its founding purpose. Notre Dame should be a school that shows the way for others in engaging in a unapologetic effort to pursue the truth. In this regard can we act in accord with Catholic teaching and reject the destructive gender ideology which has so permeated our culture? Can we come down on the side of truth—known by faith and reason—and acknowledge that sex is binary. Can we hold to the truth that each of us is irrevocably male or female. Can we firmly reject the transgender mania

that has men claiming to be women participating in and, at times, dominating women's sports?

I can report that there are wonderful scholars and significant parts of Notre Dame engaged in endeavor to pursue the truth. That said, there is still a tendency here to conform ourselves to what is done in our “preferred peer schools.” This, sadly, has been on display in elements of the implementation of Notre Dame's strategic plan – Notre Dame 2033. I have taken a particular interest in the ‘democracy initiative,’ which is one of the featured areas of the plan. Let me mention an episode recently that illustrates how Notre Dame is still engaged in conforming much of our academic endeavors to what we might call “the spirit of the age” rather than the genuine pursuit of the truth.

Recently, Notre Dame sponsored a conference entitled “Defending Democracy” in Washington, DC. The conference organizers selected as the **keynote speaker** for the conference Mr. A.G. Sulzberger, the publisher of the *New York Times*. Sulzberger gave the usual admission that his paper could occasionally make mistakes, but then launched a lengthy assault on the Trump administration. There is surely material to criticize there, but his talk rang hollow because there was no recognition of the major failures of the *New York Times* to pursue the truth. Notre Dame seemed glad to have the publisher of the paper that completely covered up poor President Biden's cognitive decline as well as being responsible for a long list of fabrications and suppressions. I fear that the invitation to Sulzberger was not really about the pursuit of truth or enhancing democratic practice. Rather, it was more of a sad continuation of Notre Dame's pathetic desire to curry favor with and possibly to gain some favorably publicity from the *New York Times*. When can we move beyond such supine behavior?

Let me say again, Notre Dame must overcome its fixations about ratings and its insecurity about how we are viewed by others. Can we be a place, instead, that helps guide Catholic higher education back to its central mission? Can we be a place that does not get caught up in the mania of the moment, such as what happened some years back when we felt obliged to cover over the Columbus Murals in the Main Building? My distinguished history colleague, Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, has pointed out that these murals celebrate both the bringing of the Gospel to the New World and the reciprocal return of the energy and produce of the New World to the Old. Far from being some sort of insult to Native Americans, Felipe describes the murals as the most significant tribute to Native Americans on our campus. Yet these murals remain covered because they could not be viewed and defended honestly. It is a serious embarrassment for a Catholic university.

Dear friends, let me conclude my remarks by paying my own tribute to Michael Canady and the wonderful students who staffed the *Rover* this year. It was hardly an easy task to run a papers whose previous editors have been subject to a disgraceful lawsuit launched by a faculty member. But Michael and his team performed so well and I extend my thanks to them.

Let me finally remind you that the areas of hiring faculty deeply supportive of our Catholic mission and in shaping a curriculum that prepares our students well to engage the world as faith-filled Catholic men and women remains crucially important. Who teaches and what is taught remain fundamental issues that must be addressed **honestly**. In this regard Notre Dame should return to its previous practice of publishing the religious make-up of our faculty—there should be

accurate figures for all ranks and colleges and for both tenured faculty and non-tenured faculty.

In the end, faculty and students here must be committed to the pursuit of truth, whatever the challenges that confront the higher ed “sector” in general. If Notre Dame remains committed to this purpose, Our Lady will look kindly upon us. May God bless each one of you here this morning, and bless all who love Notre Dame.

Thank you.