

**Address of James Cardinal Hickey
First Bishop Joseph Francis S.V.D. Scholarship Fund Dinner
Xavier University of New Orleans
New Orleans, Louisiana**

**Bishop Olivier, Dr. Francis, Bishop Steib, Bishop Foley, Bishop Carmon,
Bishop Guillory, all dear friends in Christ:**

**I am delighted to join you this evening in remembering and honoring
Bishop Joseph Francis, S.V.D., a dear friend, a loving bishop, a passionate
defender of human rights and human dignity.**

**To the best of my knowledge, I did not have the joy and privilege of
knowing Bishop Francis until he was named a bishop in 1976. At the time, I
was serving as Bishop of Cleveland, - so I had many opportunities to work
with Bishop Francis in the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. I soon
came to recognize his warmth, his insight, his capacity to lead and his
capacity to challenge his brother bishops. I soon came to cherish his
friendship and to rely on his wise advice and assistance, both in my service
to the church in Cleveland, and later, in Washington. I've come this evening
to express my gratitude and my admiration for Bishop Francis as friend and
colleague. I've come this evening to share with you some of the gifts I
received from Bishop Francis in our long association.**

**Those gifts do not come in elaborate wrapping paper. They are not the
kind of gifts you put on a shelf. Bishop Francis didn't give gifts like
that. Instead, his gifts came in the form of challenges-challenges that
touch the soul. The gifts I shall cite tonight are three in number:**

- 1) The challenge to work for racial justice;**
- 2) The challenge to work for better education for our young people;**
- 3) The challenge to help our young people respond to their God-given
vocations.**

**Three gifts, three challenges which Bishop Francis gave us by word and
example.**

Let me say something about each of them.

1. The Challenge of Promoting Racial Justice

One of my first and clearest memories of Bishop Francis was his work in promoting racial justice. He had scarcely been named a bishop when he was appointed Chairman of a Bishops' Committee that composed a very important pastoral letter on racism entitled, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*. This was no ordinary pastoral letter. It was not the product of staffers and speech writers. It was not a document full of jargon. Rather, it was a thoughtful, prayerful and challenging pastoral letter that flowed from Bishop Francis' soul. It was the fruit of his experience, his study and his prayer. It reflected his own remarkable ability to communicate clearly and his enduring commitment to racial justice that began when he gave his first talk on the subject, in the seminary, at the age of 14. Prophetically he taught us that "racism is a sin" and equally that "racism is a fact" - a sad and tragic fact that afflicts and divides our nation and world to this very day. Bishop Francis backed up his assertions with sociological and economic data. But he did not stop there. He showed how racism is utterly contrary to the key teaching of the Church on the dignity and worth of each person. "This Church," he wrote, "has a duty to proclaim the truth about the human being disclosed in the truth about Jesus Christ." He went on to say, "It is important to realize that in the case of racism we are dealing with a distortion at the heart of human nature. The ultimate remedy against such evils such as this will not come solely from human effort. What is needed is the re-creation of the human being according to the image revealed in Jesus Christ. For He reveals in Himself what each person can and must become."

With that rock-solid, doctrinal platform, Bishop Francis went on to challenge the Church to speak out against racism in all its forms, and to challenge her members to expunge racism from their own lives. Bishop Francis challenged brother bishops and fellow Catholics to be credible witnesses, capable of combating racism in the large society, the culture of which we are all a part.

I recall so well the bishops' meeting where his pastoral letter was discussed. It was clear that he had struck a deep chord in the minds, the hearts and consciences of his brother bishops. I recall rising to speak in strong support of that important pastoral letter - a text that came at a time

when I had joined forces with other religious and civic leaders to work for the peaceful introduction of bussing in the Cleveland area. Following upon that experience, I said, "We need to make crystal clear the intrinsic evil and sinful nature of racism. I applaud the document for doing that."

The document passed unanimously. Its contents were reiterated by the bishops time and time again. Yet as Bishop Francis neared the end of his life, he spoke of his justifiable frustration that the evil of racism still persists - in both its overt forms of ugly words and of hate crimes; and its more subtle forms that masquerade as tolerant civility. Whether politically popular or not, Bishop Francis spoke the truth as he saw it. He never let our consciences rest easy. Nor would he allow the victims of racism to rest easy. In his own words, "Let us who are the children of pain be now a bridge of reconciliation. Let us who are the offspring of violence become the channels of reconciliation. Let us, the sons and daughters of bondage, be the bringers of peace."

O, how Bishop Francis challenges all of us on this evening of remembrance!

2. The Challenge of Education

You didn't have to be around Bishop Francis very long before you learned what was the apple of his eye. The joy of his life was a school in the Watts section of Los Angeles - Verbum Dei High School where the future Bishop Francis served as both founder and principal. If you examine Bishop Francis' coat of arms, you will find a heraldic reference to the Watts Towers - a reference that Bishop Francis deliberately put there as a reminder of one of the most productive periods of his life. In his pivotal role as principal of a school in a section once torn by interracial violence, Bishop Francis touched minds and hearts with God's redeeming love. He witnessed to human dignity and gave young people the chance of a life-time. And he did this at a time when many people wrongly forecast the demise of our Catholic schools. Bishop Francis knew better. He knew that our Catholic schools have both the duty and the capacity to educate not merely the elite, not merely the middle class - but each child, of whatever background, that is entrusted to our Catholic educators. Again, I quote from *Brothers and Sister to Us*: "...We urgently recommend the continuation and expansion of Catholic schools in the inner cities and other disadvantaged areas. No other form of Christian ministry has been more widely acclaimed or desperately sought by leaders of

various racial communities. For more than a century and a half, the Church in the United States has been distinguished by its efforts to educate the poor and disadvantaged, many of whom are not of the Catholic faith. That tradition continues today in - among other places - Catholic schools where so many blacks, Hispanics, native Americans and Asians receive a form of education and formation which constitutes a key to greater freedom and dignity."

Those words, written in 1979, remain utterly true in 1999-as society in general comes to recognize the capacity of our Catholic schools to give young people a chance in life, to give them faith, values, knowledge and skill. Our schools are places of safety, opportunity and hope - for young people whose forebears have long been denied the chance of a better life. You and I are here this evening because we are drawn by Bishop Francis' vision and values. You and I are here to provide and expand the educational opportunity of a lifetime for so many minority students.

Several years ago, I was told by many that I should close or consolidate a number of elementary schools in Washington. Influenced by the example of Bishop Francis, I took another path. I decided to strengthen those schools, not only to keep them open but to make them more attractive; and I'm happy to report, it's working! Thank you, Bishop Francis! My prayer is that you will find it possible to support generously those minority students who seek a sound Catholic education. My prayer is that you will support our Catholic Schools - which have proven their worth over and over and over again!

3. Vocation

A third challenge Bishop Francis sets before us this evening is in the area of vocation - the God-given calling addressed to each and every person. Bishop Francis' vocation came early in life. Joseph Francis was only seven years old when he told a neighbor, "I'm going to be a priest." "You can't," he was told, "you're colored!"

We should thank God every day that the neighbor was proven wrong! The future Bishop Francis not only responded to his God-given priestly vocation - he pursued it! He was welcomed and formed by the Society of the Divine Word represented this evening by Fr. Clifton Labbe' - Provincial Superior. Within the ranks of the Society of the Divine Word are many African-American

priests. From those ranks have come distinguished African-American Bishops. Along with Bishop Harold Perry, Bishop Francis led the way! Soon, he was followed by Bishop Terry Steib, the Bishop of Memphis, Bishop Curtis Guillory, Auxiliary Bishop of Galveston-Houston, Bishop Dominic Carmon, Auxiliary Bishop of New Orleans, and, of course, Bishop Leonard Olivier, who continues with joy and dedication to serve as Auxiliary Bishop of Washington - my own close co-worker and friend.

Bishop Francis was not only a life-long educator - he was also a role model-a living invitation to many to follow the path of priesthood and consecrated life. The pastoral letter Brothers and Sisters To Us, reflects Bishop Francis' constant efforts to promote vocations, when it says: "Particular care should be taken to foster vocations among minority groups. Training for the priesthood, the permanent diaconate and religious life should not entail an abandonment of culture and traditions or a loss of racial identity but should seek ways in which such culture and tradition might contribute to that training."

In the same way, the Bishop constantly invited lay men and women to serve in a wide variety of Church ministries. He called for the establishment of leadership training programs - lay ministry formation, as we say today. He urged Catholic universities, social service agencies, health care institutions to welcome minorities and to open for them the doors of opportunity.

Dear Friends:

I thank you for your kind attention. I thank you for the opportunity to offer my loving appreciation of Bishop Francis - friend, co-worker, and now, we hope and pray, our advocate in heaven.

His life remains both gift and challenge as we stand at the edge of a new century and a new millennium. May we respond with courage, insight, love and generosity and so to serve the Lord, the Church and needs of human society. Thank you and God bless you!