

Friendly Sons of St. Patrick
March 16, 2012

Your eminences, Cardinals Dolan and O'Brien, Mayor Bloomberg, Commissioner Kelly, Mr. Smith, reverend clergy, distinguished guests, past presidents of the Friendly Sons, Friendly Sons and at-large husbands, Irishmen, authentic and honorary, I am honored, and humbled, to stand among this distinguished company tonight.

And thank you, Mr. Codd—president Codd—for your hospitality and introduction tonight. Your mention of my wife's experience as the first first-lady of Manhattan College reminds me of some entertaining moments in my first few months on the job, such as when I would be greeted by an alumnus as "Brother President" just before introducing him to my wife. Cognitive dissonance does create interesting facial expressions!

It also reminds me of an anecdote that I've heard Fr. McShane tell, about a distinguished visiting professor who, upon being introduced to Fr. McShane and told that he was a Jesuit, responded: "how lovely, and were your father and mother Jesuits, too"?

As I look around the room at this august gathering, I must say that I am particularly touched that so many of you came here tonight sporting my school's colors on your ribbons, sashes and lapel pins! I'm especially grateful to the Fordham and St. Johns attendees here for their gracious gesture of support in wearing Manhattan College green! So moved am I, in fact, that I must have recourse to the ancient language of our ancestors in vain attempt to express my inexpressible gratitude: as the Irish say in Riverdale, "I'm verclempt".

Speaking of Manhattan green (which of course, given our history, is Kelly green): I'm especially honored to be sharing the dais tonight with a particularly distinguished Manhattan College graduate, New York's "super cop," and the finest police commissioner in the nation: class of '63 graduate Ray Kelly. (Mr. Kelly, I am proud to say, will soon have a new building on campus named in his honor, when we open the Raymond Kelly Student Commons in Fall 2014—God willing . . . and cash enabling!)

Earlier this evening at the reception, the Commissioner shared with me a curious bit of statistical data gathered from the NYPD's COMSTAT program. It seems that every year, precisely for the duration of this Friendly Sons dinner, felonies plummet citywide by almost 50%.

The mayor has appointed a Task Force. The New York Times, however, has expressed serious concern that men of Irish descent may be profiled during the investigation.

A spokesman for the NYPD called the investigation: "more an 'introspective moment' than an 'investigation'".

But in all seriousness, it is a great honor to be here before you, as we raise our glasses to our beloved country, the safe haven not only of our ancestors, but of wave after wave of immigrants from around the world; the seedbed of democracy; the incubator of genius and talent; the fertile ground of inventiveness and the entrepreneurial spirit, and, still, thank God, and despite powerful forces to the contrary, a land of religious liberty.

Irish Americans and Irish New Yorkers are of course justly proud of their historical role in defense of the core value of religious liberty, from Archbishop John Hughes's stance against the Nativists and Know-Nothings, to Al Smith's strong challenge of the prejudice that said that a Catholic need not apply to the White House, to John Kennedy's even stronger challenge to that bar.

And so we of course must take this opportunity to convey our sincere thanks to and admiration of our courageous and ever hopeful Cardinal Dolan, who, on behalf of the American bishops and of all people of faith, is fighting the good fight, reminding our sometimes amnesiac culture of the core principles on which our republic is founded, working to safeguard freedom of conscience, and refusing to accept an interpretation of the first amendment right of "religious liberty" that amounts to the freedom of people of religious faith to express themselves only and to the extent that they have nothing challenging or controversial to say.

What a wonderful celebration was your elevation to the College of Cardinals last month, Cardinal Dolan and Cardinal O'Brien! And what a coup for New York—with a son of the Bronx and an adopted son of the city elevated on the same day!

How proud you made New Yorkers of their bishop, Cardinal Dolan! How edified we were to read your powerful and hopeful speech to the Holy Father and your fellow Cardinals, in which you spoke so eloquently about New York City as, despite its reputation as the capital of secularism, a deeply spiritual city. (O.k., some of us may have been surprised by that characterization; but we were edified nonetheless!)

How we delighted in seeing you, before you received your red hat, don your NYPD Emerald Society jacket and World Champion New York Giants cap!

. . . . And how fortunate for all involved that you were not elevated while you were in Wisconsin in a year that coincided with a Packers championship! Forgive me, your Eminence, but I'm not sure the Vatican is ready for a Cheesehead Cardinal! And let's not even talk about the Aaron Rodgers championship-belt touchdown dance.

And, finally, how fortuitous it is that Manhattan College will be graced by your presence at our commencement exercises this May, at which you will become an honorary alumnus of the College! I say that this is fortuitous because, as you know, Manhattan has a long and proud history of preparing men for the priesthood, and counts among its many alumni who became bishops two great American Cardinals, Patrick Cardinal Hayes, of the class of 1888, and George Cardinal Mundelein (class of 1889). Both men were elevated to the College of Cardinals in 1924.

The simultaneous elevation of two Americans with degrees from the same institution prompted an editorialist in the Jesuit magazine, *America*, to write glowingly (in what may be the last such gracious gesture of the Jesuits toward the Brothers of the Christian Schools before tonight's wearing of the green): [I quote]:

A special meed of honor must be reserved for the Christian Brothers of New York, for it was at Manhattan College that the young men now raised to the sublime dignity received the Catholic training so earnestly desired by the Church for her children. Is there a college in Christendom [the writer continues] which can boast that two of its children, Metropolitans in great and populous Provinces, were called to the Sacred College on the same day?

The coincidence led many a witty journalist of the day and for years afterward to refer to Manhattan as (what else?) “The College of Cardinals.” So, on May 20, your Eminence, we will rejoice to welcome you, with somewhat less pomp and ceremony than what we saw at the consistory, into the Manhattan College of Cardinals.

Yes, Cardinal Dolan, it will be a great day in our history when you become an honorary Jasper!

Now . . . here let me pause, for I am conscious that I have used a term that may cause confusion for some in my audience.

Surely, it is one of the great mysteries of mind and memory, that there has persisted, generation after generation, among the otherwise so exquisitely educated Sons of St. Ignatius, a single incapacity, which expresses itself so plaintively in a repeated question.

What is that question? You ask? Is it that which has been called the central question of philosophy—“why is there something rather than nothing?” The Sphinx’s riddle? The difference between “one in being” and “consubstantial”?

No. For these men such questions are easy, mere child’s play in comparison to the enduring question, and the one on the lips even now of many in our audience, the question [all together now]:
“What the Hell’s a Jasper?”

Having myself fairly recently made the longest three mile journey in the world—from Rose Hill to Riverdale—I believe that I am in a good position to answer that question.

Jaspers are many things: In addition to Cardinals and Commissioners, they include men, and (since 1973) women who have lead and served this city and our country in countless ways.

Early on, they were predominantly Irish immigrants and their children, ministered to by French Brothers who arrived in New York in 1848 at the invitation of Archbishop Hughes.

In the late 19th century, they derived their nickname from a legendary Irish educator (and unintentional inventor of baseball’s seventh inning stretch), Brother Jasper of Mary. Brother Jasper, born in Kilkenny into a notable and noble clan—his family name was Brennan!—was one of a long and distinguished line of Irish educators recruited by the De La Salle Brothers to serve the needs of the burgeoning Irish community.

The Irish strain stays strong throughout the school’s history, with presidents who bear names such as Murphy, McMahon, Fitzsimmons and Scanlan; with a stellar faculty

dominated early on by the likes of Brother Potamian, born Michael Francis O'Reilly in 1847, holder of a doctorate from the University of London and first dean of the Engineering School; and decades of graduates named McGrath, Moran, McGuirk, and O'Malley; not to mention Houlihan, Boyle and Quinn, Regan and Dooley, Farrell, Hannon, and Horan.

These Irish Jaspers follow the path so familiar to students of the Irish in New York: the sons of manual laborers become the engineers who build our city's bridges, roads, tunnels, and skyscrapers; descendants of service workers take their places as CEOs and senior partners, directors, priests, professors, politicians, bankers, lawyers, writers and judges.

As time passes, the rolls begin to reflect the Brothers' embrace of the next wave of immigrants, as the Tomasettis join the Thorntons, and names like Gargano, Salerno, Tamaro, Esposito, Scala, and Tucci are found liberally sprinkled among the O's and Mc's. A Jasper named Giuliani becomes the second alumnus to serve as mayor of this great city, after Hugh Grant, who served from 1889-1892.

The honor roll of living Jasper alumni includes the famous—like the world's best-selling author James Patterson and (did I mention this?) our great Police Commissioner, Ray Kelly.

It also includes many, many men and women who do yeoman service, day in and day out, as teachers and soldiers, doctors and nurses, lawyers, brokers, and accountants, policemen and firemen. It includes twenty men who lost their lives on the darkest day in the city's history, and scores upon scores of men and women who risked life and limb in the aftermath of 9/11 to help put New York back on its feet.

Whether famous or not, Jaspers are people who have been educated in the tradition of Saint John Baptist de La Salle to be men and women who work hard, who reject elitism and nihilism, and who along with valuing material success are committed to seeking the truth wherever it may lead, to finding meaning in their own lives, and to striving to improve the lives of their fellow human beings.

Today, Jaspers, male and female, come in many hues and from many nations: they are named Cruz and Chavez, Chen and Cho; Rwabukuma, Asfaw, and Chowdhury, as well as O'Neil and Passarella.

Their increasing variety, reflecting the growing diversity of our city and our country, makes being a Jasper a very different experience than it was when Patrick Hayes was a student.

But their ambitions and aspirations, their hopes and dreams, are the same, and embody the continuance of the tradition of the school as an escalator to opportunity for a new generation of immigrants and the children of immigrants.

For all the fun of indulging in sibling rivalry, in the end, of course, Jaspers are finally more comrades than competitors with the alumni of all of the great Catholic Colleges and Universities in the city and beyond.

They are brothers (and sisters) in a common family, dedicated to a common project. Each of us—whether Lasallians or Jesuits, Vincentians, Sisters of Charity, Augustinians,

Franciscans, Dominicans, Ursulines, or Irish Christian Brothers—has contributed in distinctive ways to the rich tapestry of Catholic higher education—and Catholic elementary and secondary education—in New York and throughout the nation.

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine where this city and our country would be today without the great project of Catholic education.

More important, though, is that it is difficult to imagine our future without the continued vibrancy and relevance of this rich heritage. For as glorious as the past has been, we are not a people to get stuck in complacency and nostalgia. For all of our reverence for tradition, we have never been afraid to set out in new directions.

And so, today, in the midst of very different challenges than those that faced Archbishop John Hughes or Mother Elizabeth Seton, we honor the legacy of St. Patrick by reflecting on the question: “to whom is the great Saint, himself a powerful and effective teacher, calling us to minister, today?”

We remember that Patrick’s ministry was not to his own kind, but to a strange people among whom he lived in his youth in slavery and exile, and to whom he nevertheless returned in love to serve.

“Who,” St. Patrick asks continuously through his example, “who are the Irish of today?” Who are those who are most outside the pale, most crippled by want and ignorance, most in need of a shepherd?

What do we need to do, here and now, to assure that their talents will not be buried forever and wasted, but will find a way into the light, where they will make as great a contribution to this city and country as our ancestors have made?

What ought we to be doing to encourage and support those who continue, day in and day out, in the hope and faith and love that motivates immigrant parents to work two and three jobs so that their children can have access to the American Dream?

What are we obliged to do, as people for whom education has meant so much, to continue to assure that quality education will continue to be available to those who struggle to make ends meet?

I think that we can hear many of the answers to such questions all around us, if we listen. We hear them in the continuing and faithful work of our Catholic elementary and secondary schools; in the powerful witness of projects such as the Cristo Rey network and the Nativity and Miguel Schools. We hear them in the scores of amazing success stories, like Brother Brian Carty’s De La Salle Academy, where children from the poorest households emerge from a rigorous academic curriculum and caring environment to go on to the best high schools in the region and the best colleges in the country. And of course we hear them in the work of the colleges and universities, all of which continue to work tirelessly and faithfully to maintain their roles as beacons of hope and gateways to a life of dignity and opportunity.

As Cardinal Dolan said in his address to Pope Benedict, anyone who has doubts about the great spiritual depth of this city need only step inside one of our classrooms, where miracles take place every day!

Thank you, gentlemen, for your kind attention. God bless our teachers and students! God bless the continuing work of Catholic education in the city of New York and in this great country of ours. And God Bless the United States of America! *Sláinte!*