St. Thomas and Catholic Charities: Creating opportunity and advancing the common good

University of St. Thomas President Julie Sullivan was the keynote speaker Catholic Charities’ annual St. Nicholas Dinner on Thursday, Dec. 5, at the Marriot City Center in Minneapolis. More than 750 people attended the event, a benefit for the individuals, families and children served by Catholic Charities of St. Paul and Minneapolis. Dr. Sullivan’s speech is published below.

I am delighted to be here this evening for this lovely celebration, and I appreciate the opportunity to share a few thoughts about how two outstanding organizations – Catholic Charities and the University of St. Thomas (both very close to my heart) – are working together as partners in creating a stronger community and a more just society.

In so doing, I would like to share with you two brief, but illustrative, stories about our students’ learning experiences this fall. The first is about a friendship between a St. Thomas student and a regular visitor to the Higher Ground shelter in Minneapolis – a friendship that gives me great hope in this Advent season that even the simplest efforts can produce life-changing results.

St. Thomas has a program called Business 200, in which all undergraduate business majors complete a 40-hour community service project. The program has existed for two decades. Over one-third of our students major in business, and thus several hundred students participate each semester.

Some of these students serve at Catholic Charities. Mark, a junior, was a greeter at Higher Ground this fall, with the responsibility to welcome people as they arrived for the evening. He did only what he was asked on his early visits, but eventually he connected with one man and they talked regularly. The man introduced Mark to others at the shelter, and Mark increasingly engaged in conversations with several of them.

In relating his story recently to his St. Thomas supervisor, Mark told her: “I now think of them as my friends. Not just guys I talk to regularly, but real friends.” He paused, and she realized his eyes were misty. “My friends,” he said. “And they’re homeless. How do we let that happen to people?”

She didn’t have an answer. But she knew that Mark’s experience had become a powerful learning moment and had changed his life. He completed his 40-hour commitment, but he didn’t stop. He continues to serve at the shelter, and he says he will do so as long as he is in the Twin Cities. When she asked why, he replied: “They’re real people to me now. I have to.”

Mark never would have had the opportunity to make new friends and, more importantly, to have his eyes opened to the harsh realities that some of our neighbors face if he had not chosen to fulfill his requirement at Higher Ground. But he did, and he is the wiser and more empathetic for it.

It is exactly this kind of experience that can make a difference – to our students and to those served by Catholic Charities – and I look forward to creating many more such experiences in the years ahead. They are a natural fit for three reasons:

1. Catholic Charities’ mission statement says we are a leader “at solving poverty, creating opportunity, and advocating for justice in the community.” St. Thomas’ mission statement says we educate students “to be morally responsible leaders who think critically, act wisely, and work skillfully to advance the common good.”
2. Catholic Charities’ core values are collaboration, compassion, dignity, diversity, empowerment, integrity, and justice.” What we call our St. Thomas “convictions” are pursuit of truth, academic excellence, faith and reason, dignity, diversity, personal attention, and gratitude.


The words are different, but they reflect the same vision and aspirations, and we are natural allies as we live out our missions. We create opportunity for everyone and we advance the common good.

St. Thomas’ faculty, staff and students enthusiastically embrace this mission. In responding to a planning survey that I distributed last spring, they emphasized the importance of integrating Catholic social teaching throughout the university. They want it reflected in our curriculum and in how we treat every person within the context of the Gospel values, and they have a passionate commitment to social justice. They also understand that we cannot create change for others but must heed Pope Francis’ call to work with others to change our world.

And that means you and me.

That leads me to my second story. This semester, 24 freshmen are enrolled in two linked courses: The Christian Theological Tradition and Introduction to Sociology.

As part of these “paired” courses, the students made three evening trips this fall to the Dorothy Day Center. The students spent three hours on each occasion – serving meals, doing laundry, rolling out bed mats and distributing toiletries – and later wrote about and discussed their experiences with Catholic Charities staff who visited their sociology class.

Laura was scared on her first visit and questioned if she could trust the homeless, “but that quickly changed,” she wrote. “It was a great experience and I am so honored to have had this opportunity. I will definitely volunteer additional time on my own at Dorothy Day.”

Kelly came to realize she wasn’t that different from those at Dorothy Day – that she could have been in their place “had I been born into different circumstances or experienced a financially traumatic event.” She had a new sense of gratitude for the gifts in her life.

And Meghan summed it up well by saying. “We served God when we served the homeless community.”

What an inspiration! The struggle to break the cycle of poverty and to find jobs, shelter, clothing and food can be frustrating and certainly requires perseverance. But when I hear of our students’ experiences and when I look out at this audience, I see hope because of your commitment, and I take solace in the heroic efforts of Catholic Charities’ staff and its many volunteers.

Catholic Charities has been around for 144 years. The University of St. Thomas is in its 129th year. We have rich histories, and we have served this community with honor and distinction.

But we can and will serve it even better. I am passionately committed to St. Thomas working extensively with Catholic Charities in the months and years ahead to help us better carry out our respective missions – to create opportunity for everyone and to advance the common good.

Thank you and best wishes for a joyful and blessed Christmas season.