

Respect for Persons as a Way to God¹

Brother George Van Grieken, FSC, Ph.D.²

Thank you for this honor and this privilege of addressing you at this 2026 Academic Convocation during your Lasallian Heritage Week. It is certainly something that I would not have foreseen at any point in my life. If anything, this recognition honors the people who have touched my life and shaped its direction. Each of you in this chapel can name those who, because of their relationships with us, have made us the persons we are today—parents, siblings, friends, neighbors, teachers, even those we may have encountered very briefly but whose impact was quietly transformative deep down, where plants of the soul grow. This year's theme, *A Mosaic of our Shared Humanity*, based on the core principle of *Respect for All Persons*, beautifully highlights how the light that shines through the various, colorful, significant people in our lives illuminates our souls in deep and sacred ways. The theme also invites me to name and recognize a few such moments in my own life as a way of inviting you to do the same in yours.

First, it would have been great to have my parents here today. When I was eleven years old, they decided to emigrate from the Netherlands to California—they were forty-one and forty years old—bringing with them five kids, one a baby, and completely starting over. New country, new language, new culture, new immigrants. As a first-generation immigrant—and the first in my family to go to college I now appreciate how challenging that must have been for my father, who worked as a self-employed custodian (solid, dependable, devout, kind, and strong), and my mother, who had to learn a brand-new language while raising a family of seven (determined, generous, hard-working, curious, and prayerful). Both had survived World War II, with its detention camps, underground activities, and harsh deprivations. They told me later that we moved to the U.S. so that we might have better opportunities for **our** futures. They are the first persons in my personal mosaic, and today I hold great respect for them.

I fondly remember a young Sister of Mercy at St. Apollinaris School in Napa who took a shy 11-year-old kid who didn't know a word of English and placed him in the back of the classroom next to the smartest kid in class, giving me a 1st grade reading and spelling book and relying on both of us to figure out how to proceed. When I didn't know what the word "stone" meant, he ran out to get one. When the class first went over to the parish church next door for weekly confession, she knocked on the confessional door when it was my turn, whispered to the priest, and came back to let me know to just do it in Dutch. (It was also one of the most honest and comprehensive confessions I've ever made.) She returned as my teacher again in 8th grade, and she attended my graduation ceremony here at Saint Mary's. I think she planted the teaching bug in my soul. I have great appreciation and respect for her today, and I'm still in touch with her, now that she's retired in Ireland. (In fact, she wrote to tell me that she would be watching this ceremony online.)

I learned what it means to respect people when I worked at Napa State Hospital right after high school, encountering those with very limited intellectual skills but with clear, simple, quietly

impactful personalities. No posturing, filters, or facades. Like a laser beam, they were simply the people they were. Even today, I can vividly recall each one of them more clearly than anyone else I met that year. It was very easy to respect them as persons, despite their limitations.

As a final personal mosaic piece from here at Saint Mary's, I learned what difference one person, one conversation, can make. Halfway through my freshman year, a Brother I did not know intercepted me on my way to Dante for an evening class, sat me down just outside this chapel, and, as the evening grew dark, persuaded me to join the Integral program. It proved to be the right conversation at the right time with the right person, and it changed my college trajectory. His name was Brother Robert Smith, and I grew to respect him highly throughout those years as an undergraduate student.

I invite you to take time to look at key people in your life and discover how a genuine respect for someone has impacted you. When we come to know a person as a person, the world changes for us and for them. Just look at the New Testament and the way Jesus interacted with his disciples, with strangers, with the sick or disturbed, with children. Not only did he see each person as a person, but he also invited us to live out our relationship with him **through** our relationships with others. From the Gospel of Matthew: "Whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you do for me." (Mt 25:40) Respect for persons is how we touch God. We learn to **be** persons by the respect we exercise toward others **as** persons.

When we talk about having respect for all persons in the mosaic of our shared humanity, it can only make sense if it's applied to real people in our lives, folks we run into every day. Here on campus, these are the professors and professional staff members, dorm leaders and cafeteria workers, campus visitors and shopkeepers in Moraga or Rheims, the person who drives the bus to BART, and the one who takes our ticket for basketball games. For you students, pursuing this core principle also means putting yourself in places where there is a high potential for being challenged, for encountering those you normally would not encounter. There's mosaic light there. All we have to do is put ourselves in a place where it can shine on us.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle and the first Brothers in the late 17th century made a radical commitment to educating the working class and the poor, those neglected by most of society and often not seen as persons who deserve great respect. When he and the Brothers provided the kind of education that even the wealthier members of society desired for their sons, De La Salle was happy to have these more privileged students in his schools, but only on the condition that they would be treated exactly the same as those from the working class and the poor. De La Salle did not get into trouble because the Brothers were serving the poor; they ran into trouble because they didn't stick to teaching the poor—all were welcome and all were treated the same. It's a really good example of how genuine respect for all persons was lived out in that early Lasallian context. De La Salle wrote this to his Brothers: "Learn to recognize Jesus beneath the poor rags of the children whom you have to instruct. Adore him in them."³ (Med. 96.3) That's real respect, respect lived out.

I'll finish my remarks by doing a short dive into the deeper end of the pool.

When we see someone as a person, someone worthy of respect simply because they are a person, we quietly slip into a deeply mysterious existential dynamic. The failure to respect others is, at its root, a failure to see them as persons. And when we don't see others as persons, not deserving or receiving our respect at some level, I think that we also diminish our own humanity along with theirs. A lack of basic respect for others is finally a lack of respect for God.

I'll say that again: A lack of respect for other persons is a lack of respect for God, a refusal to recognize the presence of God in the concrete relationships of daily life.

One person who helped me understand this was the late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the chief rabbi of Great Britain. He wrote that faith is the "belief in the objective reality of the personal. The God heard by Abraham, Moses, and the prophets was not a tribal deity, group self-interest projected onto the sky. Nor was He a member of the pantheon of paganism, a capricious spirit invoked to explain why things are as they are, a pseudo-scientific construct rendered redundant by proper science. The God our ancestors heard was the voice of reality as it responds to and affirms the personal, echoing our consciousness, telling us that we are not alone. It is here, in the mystery and majesty of the personal, that God lives."⁴

This mystery and majesty of the personal surrounds us every day. To quote an old movie, "Life is a banquet, and most poor suckers are starving to death."⁵ It's especially challenging for those of us in the grip of an ambient technological environment that saturates our minds, behaviors, habits, and hearts. Someone recently asked ChatGPT, "If you were the devil, how would you destroy the next generation, without them even knowing it?" The disturbing answer was worthy of the C.S. Lewis character Screwtape: "I wouldn't come with violence. I'd come with convenience. I'd keep them busy. Always distracted. I'd watch their minds rot slowly, sweetly, silently. And the best part is, they'd never know it was me. They'd call it freedom."⁶ Happily, I've met many who have realized this contemporary challenge and are actively, though not without difficulty, working toward an appropriate balance with technology in their lives. I would suggest that pursuing the mystery and majesty of the personal is a very good start and an attentive companion along the way.

Finally, I'd like to leave you with a quote from someone I very much respected as a person, now deceased. While I was doing my Ph.D. at Boston College in the early nineties, I lived in a nearby religious community where he was an OMI priest. Eventually, he became a bishop in several places, then the archbishop of Chicago, and finally a cardinal. His name was Francis George. Highly educated, full of experience, and truly wise, he once said something profoundly simple and true. I keep these words on a plaque in my room: "What we take with us from this life into the next are simply the relationships. Everything else disappears, but they are forever."⁷

With every encounter that you have-on this campus or elsewhere-you are building personal relationships that will last forever: relationships with other persons and relationships with God. If you want to love God, love the next person you meet. That is what Jesus Christ taught us, and it is beautifully expressed by his beloved disciple John in his letter in the New Testament: "Whoever does not love a brother or sister whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20).

And if you want further details, read chapter 13 of Saint Paul's letter to the Corinthians. It says it all much better than I ever could.

Thank you for your kind attention.

¹ These remarks were delivered at Saint Mary's College's Spring Academic Convocation, on the occasion of Br. George receiving an honorary doctorate from the college, April 22, 2026.

² Brother George Van Grieken is a De La Salle Christian Brother who served as the secretary-coordinator of the Lasallian Research and Resources Service at the Casa Generalizia in Rome and is the coordinator of the Lasallian Resource Center (www.lasallianresources.org). A graduate of Saint Mary's College of California (BA and MA) and of Boston College (Ph.D.), he has worked as a classroom teacher and in Lasallian formation, vocation ministry, and school leadership, including two years as president and CEO of St. Joseph's Institution International School in Singapore. His writings and workshops focus on Lasallian spirituality and formation, especially their application and integration in today's society and educational contexts.

³ John Baptist de La Salle, *Meditations*, trans. Richard Arnandez and Augustine Loes, FSC, vol. 4 of *Lasallian Sources: The Complete Works of Saint John Baptist de La Salle* (Landover, MD: Christian Brothers Conference, 1994), Med. 93.3.

⁴ Jonathan Sacks, *Celebrating Life: Finding Happiness in Unexpected Places* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2019), page 69.

⁵ Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, *Auntie Mame* (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1958).

⁶ Haidt, Jon. 2025. "The Devil's Plan to Ruin the Next Generation." *After Babel*, December 1, 2025.

⁷ Francis Cardinal George, OMI, actually wrote: "In the end, we bring into eternity only our relationships," *Catholic New World*, October 12, 2003; cf. also Archbishop J. Peter Sartain's funeral homily (April 23, 2015), paraphrasing George: "The only thing we take with us when we die is what we have given away... the only things that endure are our relationships with God and with others." He may have actually said provided quotation, however, in a homily that wasn't transcribed or recorded.