

STRENGTH THROUGH CONSCIENCE

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Fr. John, staff, administrative leaders, students, faculty, guests, and friends: Welcome to our second annual celebration luncheon of Walk the Walk. I have the privilege of opening our event by offering you a brief reflection on the meaning of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King and his legacy at this moment in our country's history and our sense of nationhood, our sense of who we are as a people of linked fate and common destiny.

Among the many quotes of Dr. King from which we can learn is the following:

“Cowardice asks the question – is it safe?

Expediency asks the question – is it politic?

Vanity asks the question – is it popular?

But **conscience** asks the question – is it right?”

Among the most significant ways that Dr. King enlightened, and in this way, empowered us, was through his call that we use our faith, our reasoning, and our actions to become people of conscience. By this I mean that he gave his life in service of offering each of us the gift of deepening our understanding of who we truly are, who we are in our hearts, and what we are willing to sacrifice for each other. At celebrations like ours today we often recognize the ways that the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King helped our country grow. Less frequently do we explicitly recognize that, even more profoundly, he still helps each ONE of us grow in our individual consciences, in our own openness and understanding of what is right. After all, our nation's conscience, our nation's sense of what is right, is grounded in our individual senses of conscience; our individual understandings of what is right.

How I wonder what Dr. King would help us to understand about our country today. What would he say about our country's divisions, our

public discourse, and our national conscience? What would he say to each one of us as we walk, and at times stumble, as individuals to be guided by that sense of what is ethically, morally, and spiritually grounded in what is right?

On April 3, 1968, one day before he would be assassinated, he said the following in his speech “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop”: “Only when it is dark, can you see the stars.” For many years I have used these beautiful words to reflect, and reground, myself in times of challenge in our nation and in my life as a citizen of this nation, in my efforts to be a faith-filled citizen contributing to my country and my family. It is at times of great challenge when we are given the opportunity to reexamine our consciences, as individuals, to help us decide whether we will let our hearts be filled with the openness that is critical to allow our consciences to grow; to allow ourselves to see the stars.

How do we know when our conscience is guiding our individual lives and our common destiny as a nation of increasingly diverse, and worthy,

peoples? Dr. King's words again provide guidance. In 1963 in his essay "Strength to Love" he wrote: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

When we are deep in prayer, when we separate ourselves from the responsibilities of our ever more hectic professional and personal lives, and we give ourselves the chance to seek that wisdom and peace that can only come through prayer, we know when our thoughts and actions are guided by love, the type of love to which Dr. King referred, the type of love that allows our conscience to grow.

A definition of conscience reads that conscience is "an inner **feeling** or **voice** viewed as acting as a guide to the rightness or wrongness of one's beliefs, thoughts, and behavior." It is that *feeling* and that *voice* that, if our hearts are open to honest self-reflection of our beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors in discernment, that we feel the presence of the Holy Spirit.

We all know when we are at peace because of honest self-reflection.

How many times must Dr. King have had such moments? With self-reflection comes doubt, regret, and disappointment in one's self, but it

also leads to growth in our individual consciences where an inner feeling or voice let's us know that we are working to do what is right.

My wife Charlene Aguilar and I are blessed with three beautiful children. We have always known when our thoughts and actions have been guided by love in raising them. Not that any of us have always been guided by love, but when we have been, we have seen it in the eyes of our children, in the strength of their hugs, in the warmth of their kisses. We know what it feels like when we are acting to do what is right guided by love, when we are acting as a person of conscience.

At this celebration of Dr. King's life and legacy, may we all open our hearts to receive the Holy Spirit to allow our individual and our nation's consciences to grow. I can only think that he would agree that if we do this, as individual children of God and as a nation of high aspirations and ideals, we would grow in our abilities to allow love and its consequent goodness to guide our deepest beliefs, thoughts, and actions.

We will grow in our individual and national consciences. What a gift

Dr. King gives us once again on this day of celebration.

Thank you.