

KEEPING OUR VISION BEFORE US

I'd like to begin this talk with a reference to the first President Bush, who I think will receive generally high marks from historians but who will also be remembered for something that may have prevented him from being an even better president. When he first ran for that office, in a campaign that he won, many of his supporters were concerned that he seemed unwilling or unable to articulate clearly his fundamental beliefs. One anecdote summed it up. In January of 1987, when he was vice-president under Ronald Reagan and already making remote preparations for the presidential campaign the following year, he asked a friend to help him identify some of the key issues that would arise. The friend suggested that he go alone to Camp David for a few days to figure out where he wanted to take the country. With some exasperation, he replied: "Oh, the vision thing." The friend's advice did not impress him. Although Bush beat Michael Dukakis in 1988, many pundits think that this attitude about "vision" (or lack thereof) was a definite factor in his loss to Bill Clinton four years later. Bush's bio on the official U.S. Senate website includes this stark sentence: "Bush...suffered from his lack of what he called 'the vision thing,' a clarity of ideas and principles that could shape public opinion and influence Congress." That phrase "the vision thing" is now used as a shorthand description of any politician's failure to incorporate a coherent vision when campaigning.

To make the same point in a positive way, though in a context far less momentous, consider the following account from the early days of Southwest Airlines, which has grown from being a regional puddle-jumper to one of the four largest airlines in the country. A man named Herb Kelleher, the firm's longest-serving CEO, once told someone: "I can teach you the secret of running this airline in 30 seconds. This is it: We are *the* low-cost airline. Once you understand that fact, you can make any decision about this company's future as well as I can. Here's an example. A woman named Tracy comes into your office saying that her survey indicates that the passengers might enjoy a light entrée on the Houston to Las Vegas flight. All we have been offering is peanuts, and she thinks a nice chicken Caesar salad would be popular. So how should you reply to her suggestion?" Kelleher's acquaintance stammered for a moment, so Kelleher responded himself: "You say this: 'Tracy, will adding that chicken Caesar salad make us *the* low-fare airline from Houston to Las Vegas? Because if it doesn't help us become the unchallenged low-fare airline, we're not serving any damn chicken salad.'" That man knew

what his airline was all about. Southwest wasn't trying to be all things to all people—after all, some persons might well prefer to pay for a more expensive flight on another carrier so as to enjoy a nice meal along the way—but Southwest carved out a special niche, acquired a certain identity, that has been a major factor in its becoming so successful.

You can probably guess my next point, a transition to our own monastery. Last school year we worked on some tweaking of what we had originally called our “Statement of Commitment” and now call our “Mission Statement.” It is not very long, and is readily available on our website, the very first item in the drop-down menu under the button called “About Us.” It's worth looking at from time to time to help us all stay focused, for it encapsulates *our vision* of who we are and want to be. To refresh your memory, here's how it reads:

We, the monks of St. Anselm's Abbey in Washington, D.C., have answered God's call to the following of Jesus Christ within the tradition of Benedictine monasticism as found in the Catholic Church. As part of this tradition we strive to seek God in all things. We do this principally

- through prayer, which we offer both in common and in solitude and which issues from an attentive listening to the Lord addressing us, above all in the Scriptures;
- through a life together which is marked by simplicity, celibacy, obedience, stability in this one community, and loving service to one another;
- and through work, especially in education, spiritual guidance, hospitality, and pastoral work, by which we seek to share with others the love and knowledge of God and of his creation which we have received.

Just like that airline, this won't be exactly what everyone is looking for. Some vocations inquirers will want a more active congregation, perhaps an order that doesn't have a vow of stability, while others might want something more secluded, along the lines of the Trappists or Carthusians. But we have something that is very good here, certainly a way of life that a number of men would be able to live in a way that is of genuine service to God and to our fellow human beings. Just as orthodox Jews keep certain verses from the Torah in phylacteries and wear these while praying, we would do well to keep these lines from our mission statement close to our own

minds and hearts, both in order that we might clearly know who we are and what we stand for and also to ensure that our identity will be clear to others. It was pointed out several times at General Chapter that this issue of identity could hardly be overemphasized.