 Tomorrow I am going to the University of Notre Dame to give a presentation at a national conference on preaching. One of the rules of the road for Catholic preaching is that the preacher is not to be too autobiographical, calling attention to himself rather than to the gospel. I think that is an excellent rule but I am afraid I am going to bend the rule a bit this afternoon!

The gospel for this Sunday's Mass poses a very key question about Jesus for all Christians? *Who do you say I am?* Well, bear with me at the outset here if I turn that question around and ask myself the question: Who am I?

--Well, today, right now, I am one of the most blessed people I can think of! I look out and see what everyone should occasionally have the chance to see in their lifetime: a whole room full of dear friends, of beautiful, familiar faces. Faces of my dear family, of friends I have known and trusted for so many years, colleagues I have worked with at CTU all these years. What a gift this is!

--And I am blessed to have been called to serve as a priest. What a privilege this had been for me—to given entre into people’s lives on the deepest level, to be able to celebrate the Eucharist as today, to be able to be close to families at
moments of great joy and wrenching sorrow. As we all know, the priesthood has
gone through some hard times recently. But I will tell you I have absolutely no
regrets and am deeply grateful to God for allowing me to serve in this way. And I
am a Passionist priest—belonging to a religious community with a truly
magnificent heritage—a band of brothers that has supported me every step of the
way.

--And I am blessed because for almost all of my professional life I have been
associated with Catholic Theological Union. A place totally dear to me--where I
have had the chance to teach and to serve as president for many years. Something
that has been a great joy and a great satisfaction. I have absolutely no regrets for
having spent these years here in a great school and at an institution with a sacred
mission. It is a great blessing, isn’t it, to find meaning in your work?

--And I am blessed because years ago my Passionist Community assigned
me to pursue biblical studies at the graduate level and sent me off to the University
of Louvain in Belgium to earn my doctorate--opening a whole new world and a
whole new horizon for me. Living in Europe at a great medieval university. I
need to explain that neither the choice to study the Scriptures nor the assignment to
teach at CTU when I was done was my personal choice. In those days, religious
communities handled assignments something like an arranged marriage! I had
always assumed that I would be a missionary--one of the primary works of my
order the Passionists. That's what I aspired to. I remember as a student in theology when one of our Passionists come back on furlough from Korea and told us about the Island of Sorokdo off the southern coast of Korea where there was a leper colony and where he had spent some time as a chaplain. I had dreams of doing just that--of being another Damian of Molokai who gave his life in solidarity with the lepers he served. But it wasn't to be--I was asked (read: told) instead to plan on teaching Scripture and to start my language preparation. The nearest I would get to the life of Damian of Molokai was that I ended up at the University of Louvain--the city where he was born and where he is buried.

But to have the chance to study the Bible in depth--to have the privilege of teaching it for so many years, to have the chance to visit the lands of the Bible--a place I love and where I have had the privilege of travelling with so many of you--and, after having served as president all this time, to have the chance to return to this first love of mine--I am blessed indeed.

Over my years here at CTU there have been even more blessings...to have had the privilege of working alongside so many inspiring colleagues on the faculty and the staff. I think of our beloved Carroll Stuhlmueller, a fellow Passionist, a great scholar, and a genuine saint, who first mentored me when I joined the CTU faculty in 1972. I think of the trustees who have guided CTU through thick and thin. One of the truly great blessings for me is that I have had the privilege of
becoming friends with so many of them--of being invited into their families and their lives by links of friendship.

I think of such great colleagues who worked with me in the administration: Tom McGonigle, Kathleen Hughes, Maureen Meter, Gary Riebe-Estrella, Cy Maus, Bill Booth. And the team I leave behind now: Barbara Reid, our Academic Dean, and Mike Connors, our Vice President for Administration and Finance and Anne Marie Tirpak, our Director of Development--who, by the way, has been the spearhead for so much of this celebration. And there is one other person I have to cite when counting my blessings--Phil White! He is incredible. I don't even know if the CTU community realizes how much Phil has done for CTU for more than 15 years--not taking a penny in compensation--a pure volunteer, even insisting on paying for his coffee! Phil, thank you for sharing your expertise, your good judgment, your great spirit!!

And hardly least I am blessed to have had the Board select a successor that I have full confidence in and who I know will be a great blessing for CTU. Fr. Mark Francis is here today and so I will break another rule of preaching and ask him to stand up and be acknowledged!! Mark brings a wealth of experience to his new role: as a missionary, a former faculty member, the superior general of his community in Rome. Thank you, Mark, for taking up this new role!
So, dear friends, if someone asks me today--who are you? I can say I am very blessed and very peaceful and very happy--and I have given you only a few of the reasons for that.

It's time to turn back to the gospel for today... Who do we as Christians say Jesus is? We echo Peter's response: he is the Christ of God. In the fullness of Christian faith, we dare to say even more. That Jesus is God's Word incarnate. That in the human face of Jesus we get a glimpse of the transcendent and awesome God of the Bible-- In his healing touch, in his words of forgiveness and compassion, in his commitment to justice, in his tender care for those in need, in his outreach to those pushed to the margins, in his sense of inclusion and solidarity with the poor. In the beauty and power of the Jesus portrayed in the gospels we who seek the face of God in our lives, are given a sense of who God is and there can find our hope. The God of Israel, the God of Moses and Mohammed, the God revealed by Jesus is a God of infinite love, of steadfast fidelity, of gracious tenderness, of limitless forgiveness, and abiding compassion.

And, dear friends, therein lies the mission of CTU and the rationale for all of the efforts made by our faculty and staff and formation directors, by our trustees and our sponsoring religious superiors--all of their collective efforts which you so generously support is bent toward selecting and preparing witnesses to God's great love, to shaping thoughtful and skilled ministers of the gospel who will bring God's
message of peace and justice to the world. My hope for the Church of the future and for the world of the future rests on the goodness and idealism and vibrant spirit of our CTU students—men and women who have felt God’s call to serve and come here to hone their skills, to learn their heritage, and to deepen their holiness in order to be ready.

May God bless them. For when people may ask who do you say Christ is—they can look to the commitment and work and goodness of our students and begin to find the answer.

And may God bless you—for all of your goodness and support, for your friendship and encouragement. God Bless you.