Headmaster's Lecture: Stonyhurst September 11th, 2026. *Disagreeing Well.*

On the first occasion that I gave a lecture at Stonyhurst, I was a young member of the House of Commons, and never having been here before that, managed to lose my way, and kept the school waiting for half an hour.

Little did I realise that in due course I would marry and that my four children would become pupils here and that the local roads would become etched in my memory.

Tonight I have arrived on time and have been asked to address the topic *"Disagreeing Well".* ?

And on what an auspicious and apposite day to do this– with the House of Commons defeating a Bill to legalise assisted suicide by 286 votes to 270. I think that this decisive vote has a great deal to teach us about standing firm on what we believe, how to advance our arguments and how to win them.

The title, "*Disagreeing Well"* springs, of course, from the Jesuit tradition *of Eloquentia perfecta* - "*perfect eloquence,*" - an educational tradition bringing together skilled communication, ethical and moral responsibility with action for the common good. That fits well with the Stonyhurst ambition to create men and women for others.

Perfect eloquence has its roots in *Ratio Studiorum* , the sixteenth century plan for Jesuit education. But it is just as relevant today as it was then.

In the context of modern mass media, and communications, forming men and women who can think critically, develop curiosity, write, post, text, speak and intervene without descending into a bear pit of personal abuse and toxicity, merely relying on a louder voice or abuse, is an urgent need today.

The summit of a Stonyhurst education is contained in the line names of Poetry and Rhetoric.

Perfect eloquence – and the ability to disagree well will combine the beauty of poetry and the power of rhetoric with an authenticity which doesn't come about by accident.

It is formed through intellectual curiosity – by learning how to articulate principles derived from your Christian faith – and by your deeds.

Words and actions are two sides of one coin. St Francis of Assisi and St.Mother Teresa of Calcutta both enjoined us to match our words with our deeds.

I have always been grateful that elements of *Eloquentia perfecta – perfect eloquence* were part of my own education and formation.

In the 1960s the Jesuits – including some who had taught here - had built a new grammar school on the outskirts of London.

It was named for the Jesuit martyr, St.Edmund Campion. I was a scholarship boy, a kid off the council estate, with an Irish speaking mother and a demobbed Desert Rat father.

Contrary to what opponents of church inspired schools often say, I was never indoctrinated but I was taught about Christianity and how it has informed out individual lives and the life of whole nations. We were encouraged to question, encouraged to explore, allowed to accept or reject.

By my time in sixth form I had become curious about politics and the way in which it determined priorities and laws – domestically and internationally; how it interacted with the things I believed.

I joined my town's branch of Young Liberals and was then elected as its chairman. Slightly to the alarm – but later with the encouragement - of my Headmaster, who lived in the same town, I organised protests against the Russian tanks which had sent tanks into Prague to flatten the democracy movement, collecting petitions on the town's streets.

I regularly wrote letters to the editor of the local paper on everything from apartheid in South Africa to the failure to provide a children's play area in a safe place, from the nature of Soviet Communist dictatorship, to my support for pirate radio stations being closed down by the Government.

At school I organised a petition against the new Bill making abortion legal, immersed myself in the lives of Robert Kennedy and Martin Lither King – both assassinated by opponents – organised an overnight walk to raise funds for the victims of the war in Nigeria, and persuaded my Headmaster to hold a mock election – in which four of us put alternative political views.

Having cut my teeth as a sixth former, beginning to learn how to articulate my opinions, I left home at 18, the first from either side of my family to go into higher education, and found myself studying in Liverpool.

In my College Student Union, I nervously got to me feet and made my first public speech in favour of a Motion which I had proposed – successfully committing the student body to campaign against apartheid.

I also became active in community politics, choosing to live in a neighbourhood where half the homes had no inside sanitation and which had been designated as a slum clearance area. Local people did not want their homes demolished, they wanted them improved and communities kept together.

No one was listening to them.

And as I had no access to mainstream media, I learned how, on a shoestring, to use an offset litho printing machine and produced a regular newsletter to the people living in that neighbourhood. While still a student, aged 21, those same people elected me to Liverpool City Council for the Low Hill Ward.

I made my maiden speech in the Council against its housing policies and attacked the policy of breaking up neighbourhoods, dividing families.

Ruling party councillors got up and walked out in protest.

They had not heard of *Eloquentia perfecta* - "*perfect eloquence*" – and certainly did not believe in disagreeing well.

Sidelined as an irritating minority I realised I had to persuade other like-minded people to stand for election and help them to be elected. Creating alliances, forming committees, pursuing causes is all part of the machinery needed to disagree well.

Within a couple of years, we managed to win enough seats to take control of the city, and, in due course, I became the city's Housing Chairman and Deputy Leader. I was able to pension off the bulldozer and instigate the biggest housing renewal programme in the UK.

Although I built successful political alliances it was far from plain sailing.

On one occasion a man, who had crossed the Council Chamber, and had his hands around my throat, had to be pulled off me. On another occasion, returning home, I had a brick thrown in my face. On another occasion my racists whitewashed the windows of my home. And having exposed a councillor involved in corrupt grant applications I had to see off an unsuccessful attempt to expel me from my party.

Later still, as an MP, my home and my advice centres were picketed and my constituency offices burnt out.

These may not, on the face of it, seem to be examples of disagreeing well, but as I will continue to argue this evening, that phrase is open to another interpretation.

Holding firm in your beliefs and opinions is not about capitulation or about crowd pleasing. It's not about watering down or disowning your beliefs in order to have a quiet life.

In politics its far too easy to be a weather vane – putting your finger in the wind, see which way its blowing and saying, *"these are my principles and if you don't like them, I'll change them."*

That would be agreeing badly, not disagreeing well.

Ten years after arriving in Liverpool, as a student, people began to have some idea of my strengths and weaknesses.

They saw me matching words with actions and in a parliamentary by election in 1979, in Liverpool Edge Hill they elected me as their MP, becoming the *"Baby of the House"* – the youngest member – with a swing of 36.8% and 64% of the vote.

I was also the shortest-lived MP as a General Election was called the night before my by election. The day after my election a Conservative MP, Airey Neave, was murdered by an Irish republican terrorist organisation in the precincts of Parliament.

As Parliament was being dissolved for the General Election I had to make my Maiden Speech within a couple of hours of arriving.

I reflected on the use of violence for political purposes and how, in Liverpool, great progress had been made in combatting sectarianism and promoting reconciliation – and what might be learned from that.

The IRA were still committed to the ballot box in one hand and the Armalite in the other.

To this day, I contest the poisonous notion that, in pursuit of your political agenda, you can, for instance, legitimately leave a bomb in a shopping precinct in a town like Warrington – killing two little boys in the process.

During those years I spent a lot of time in Northern Ireland as a Party Spokesman. Never forget that 3,500 people lost their lives and 25,000 were injured during the so called Troubles and, to this day, we live with the consequences.

Ultimately it took British and Irish leadership, political skills, and dogged persistence, to bring the warring factions together and to create the 1998 Good Friday Agreement which was not about victors and vanquished but about creating conditions for coexistence and mutual respect for each other's traditions.

Although people were not asked to renounce their beliefs or allegiances, the Good Friday Agreement meant disavowing violence and sharing power.

It's a good example of disagreeing well.

Over four and a half decades serving in Parliament, I have often found myself in a minority and in genuine disagreement with colleagues – especially on issues like euthanasia, eugenics, abortion and destructive experiments on human embryos. But it isn't impossible to find some common ground and to make a start with that.

Last night at midnight I was still sending out messages and putting up a post about today's vote in the House of Commons – articulating a series of reasons why even people who believe in assisted suicide should nevertheless vote against this particular Bill – because of a lack of safeguards, because of fears of disabled people, because of opposition from medics, because of an absence of comprehensive palliative care and hospice provision.

And then there is the incrementalist argument – if you start on this slippery slope – even with good intentions - you will end up in a quagmire.

As a schoolboy, having collected a petition against abortion – which Parliament said would only be used in extreme circumstances, I have seen 11 million abortions and abortion up to birth. I have seen it lead to laws which permit the grotesque creation of animal human embryos, and I have seen recurring attempts to legalise euthanasia – as they have done in countries like Holland and Canada.

I have been disappointed by many of the outcomes, but I have also seen progress, like today's parliamentary vote.

In 1967 just 29 MPs opposed the Abortion Act, today hundreds hold a variety of pro-life views.

I think that is because your generation have learned how to refocus the debate from merely being anti-abortion to being positively prolife, for the woman and her child, for being for disabled people, for the sick and terminally ill – arguing for palliative care and hospices rather than just opposing lethal injections.

I believe that life begins at conception and ends at natural death – that the foundational human right is the right to life and all the others are irrelevant if that right is denied.

Not everyone shares that view but, in disagreeing respectfully, and providing other reasons for voting against particular measures, in Parliament we have been able to make progress.

This is not by vilifying opponents – but by asking pertinent and sharp questions.

Doing this shows engagement and courtesy and often makes your opponent uncomfortable and encourages them to think again.

Eloquentia perfecta - "perfect eloquence," also seeks understanding.

It clarifies ambiguity. It defines the fault lines establishing where exactly you disagree – and on what grounds, principle or practicalities.

It recognises that there will be red lines you won't cross and that you heard correctly when St.John Paul II said it was the calling of faithful Christians from the Catholic tradition to be "*signs of contradiction*" and not to be afraid of being those signs.

Pope John Paul made people feel uncomfortable but also had the ability to touch millions in a profoundly personal way – both marks of a man who did not compromise his beliefs. He did not make concordats with dictators or opt to live as a neutral in a sort of spiritual Switzerland.
John Paul's view of politics – whether shaped by the communist tyranny of his native Poland, the rampant materialism of the West or the poverty and lack of human dignity of the favelas and shanty towns of the developing world – was based on universal transcendent principles that he believed could guide statecraft, diplomacy, politics and economics.

His belief in the value of the human person led him to take an uncompromising stand against all that degrades the human being. This prophetic role is intrinsically different from "religious meddling" in the detail of the political process.

We must not abandon the pursuit of truth to avoid polarization. We cannot be *"nice*" people and fail to speak out in the face of heinous crimes through fear of offending someone.

So how best to be a sign of contradiction – and to disagree well? how best to counter a culture of death and promote the civilisation of love?

We can call to mind St. Thomas Acquinas, the theologian and philosopher who blended Christian theology with the philosophy of Aristotle, and who framed Christian beliefs around faith and reason, often took his opponents arguments and restated them with generosity and eloquence - often presenting the merit of the opposing view with greater eloquence than they could must themselves. Then, devastatingly, he identified the flaw or false moves. This dialectical technique is very persuasive rhetorically and avoids the danger of an ineffective ad hominem diatribe.

But this is about more than how to use debate. We have to address culture and use every available means of communication.

While my youngest son was a student here he told me that if I wanted to get some of my own arguments heard more widely, I needed a better web site. He accepted the challenge and set it up.

Your generation knows how to use social media – and I would challenge you, as James challenged me, to find better ways to express and direct the arguments that you want the world to hear.

In the nineteenth century William Booth, the founder of the Salvation Army positioned his Christian bands outside public houses where they played new hymns with catchy tunes. Some people said it was disrespectful, but he countered by saying "*Why should the devil have all the best tunes?*"

Today, some people despise social media because of some of its content, but we must apply William Booth's dictum and take our message to where people are. But that doesn't mean emulating the bad things.

Nor is sitting with a tablet, a phone or a computer, sending off messages via Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, the same thing as knocking on doors and engaging directly with people. One-dimensional zoom meetings can have their place but are not a substitute for three-dimensional human interaction. The political parties in Britain and elsewhere spend millions on social media messaging, but it is not the same as being close to the people and explaining yourself to the man or woman on the street.

In his poem, *The Secret People*, the Catholic writer, G.K.Chesterton, warned the political classes that they forget to stay close to the people of England at their peril.

I think the rise of extremism – right across the democratic world – has its roots in this disconnection between the political classes and the people; a failure to listen and a failure to articulate genuine grievances and to offer and execute solutions.

Politics is not a dirty business – even if some of the players have dirty hands.

Aristotle, the father of democracy, saw it as the highest calling and that each of us has a duty to take part. But this call into political life is not about simply climbing Disraeli's greasy pole or selling yourself to the devil in a Faustian Pact. It mustn't be about surrendering your beliefs for advancement. Nothing good will come of that.

I look at politicians not through the lens of left or right, but through the lens of right or wrong.

I ask what are their causes – and if they are only interested in becoming things rather than doing things you have a pretty good idea of what makes them tick.

I want to end by giving two examples – or what can happen for the good when you engage and speak out and what happens for the bad when you remain silent.

In the eighteenth early nineteenth century it was widely held that it was a right to own another man or woman as a slave. A small group of people, driven by their faith, disagreed, believing that every person is made in God's image and worthy of human dignity.

What for me is the first recognizably modern human rights campaign had its origins in a printing shop and bookstore at 2 George Yard in the City of London.

The year was 1787. The abomination of the slave trade had drawn together a small group of like-minded people. But beyond that immediate cause, they also puzzled over what it meant to be human and on the duty to act, which falls on those privileged citizens who enjoy the freedoms denied to vast swathes of the human race.

Of the dozen men who met in May 1787, nine were Quakers and one of the others, Thomas Clarkson, was a Cambridge University student who, after a religious experience, abandoned his studies and vowed to give his life to organizing opposition to the slave trade.
Like Clarkson, a group of Quaker women had become greatly disturbed by the stories reaching England about the harrowing seizures and enslavement of West Africans, barbaric and perilous Atlantic voyages and the brutalities of the plantation owners.
Although motivated by religious sentiment, these doughty advocates knew that they had to be worldly – learn how to campaign, lobby and create a broad-based coalition way beyond their small circle of friends.
So, they created a Committee - the Society for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. The group set itself the task of changing hearts, minds and laws. To spearhead their legislative battles, it recruited a young member of Parliament, William Wilberforce.
Notwithstanding fierce vested interest and opposition, by 1807 they had persuaded Parliament to abolish the transatlantic slave trade and, by 1833, to pass the Slavery Abolition Act. French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville said that what happened that day at 2 George Yard was *"absolutely without precedent. … If you pore over the histories of all peoples, I doubt that you will find anything more extraordinary."*
Wilberforce said that the House of Commons had become like a ring for prize fighters – so bitter was the opposition and so great the vested interest.
But their alliance achieved its goal because they did not emulate their opponents and because they refused to stay silent.
Those who gathered in 2 George Yard demonstrated, the vested and ideological interests which trade in human misery and subjugation do not have to have the last word. That group of like-minded and highly motivated people set out to change the world – and did just that.

But now turn the clock forward to the 1930s and the craven silence and appeasement in the face of the rise of antisemitism and Nazi racist ideology leading to the abominations of the Holocaust.
As a young Jewish boy Judge Thomas Buergenthal was incarcerated in Auschwitz. He survived. I conclude my book on Genoicde with the challenge which he throws down to each of us and what happens when we simply remain silent : *"The human mind is simply not able to grasp this terrible truth: a nation transformed into a killing machine programmed to destroy millions of innocent human beings for no reason other than that they were different. … If we humans can so easily wash the blood of our fellow humans off our hands, then what hope is there for sparing future generations from a repeat of the genocides and mass killings of the past? … One cannot hope to protect mankind from crimes such as those that were visited upon us unless one struggles to break the cycle of hatred and violence that invariably leads to ever more suffering by innocent human beings."*

So as we see today's genocides in places like China's Xinjiang, or the Yazidi and Rohingya genocides and atrocities in countries like Sudan and Nigeria, and persecution of millions of people globally because of their religious beliefs, we need to ask ourselves some questions about our own indifference and silence.

In preceding centuries, we have the inspiring example of Thomas More – who stand at the head of the tradition of Catholic lay engagement in English political life. But, as with Edmund Campion, disagreeing, and standing for truth, cost More his life.

They and many others couldn't remain silent about their beliefs. More and Campion both avowed their loyalty to their monarch but insisted that could not be at the price of disowning their faith.

Closer to our own times, at the end of the Second World War, Pastor Martin Niemoller was asked how the Holocaust could have occurred with so many nominally Christian people living in Germany and he described to the American Congress the consequences of failing to speak out.

He said:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist.
Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew.
Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.

Niemoller survived. Others did not

Saint Edith Stein was executed by the Nazis. She famously wrote that: *"Those who remain silent are responsible."* - that staying quiet in the face of injustice, oppression, or evil makes a person a partner in that guilt.

While the Deitrich Bonhoeffer the Protestant theologian executed by the Nazis, said
"Not to speak is to be speak, not to act is to act."

For each of you, that should be the framework which governs how and when you speak and having the courage to deploy *Eloquentia perfecta* - "*perfect eloquence*" .

Thank you for inviting me to address you tonight.