

Commencement Address Spring 2006

Commencement Address - Dr. Joseph J. McGowan

Earlier in this Senior Week, I made my annual pilgrimage to and brief audience at the shrine at Shenanigan's There, in conversation with one of the owners, I was convinced to buy a Sheningan's shirt as a souvenir of my visit. On the back of the shirt was the saying, "One more and I'm outta here."

So to you this afternoon, Bellarmine graduates, I say to you, "Hang on, just one more president's speech, and you're outta here!!"

Congratulations and Welcome Alumni

At the outset, therefore, allow me first to extend my personal congratulations to each of you, to each of the 347 students who have just been granted your Bellarmine University degree, 276 undergraduates and 71 graduates. And on behalf of the Board of Trustees, faculty, staff, and alumni of Bellarmine, I now officially welcome you to the distinguished legion of over 16, 000 men and women across the nation and across the world who also are proud to call themselves the alumnae and alumni of Bellarmine University!

Be Aware Of and Grateful For Your Support

As you are well aware, today is a very joyful, emotional, triumphant and historic day in your personal life. But as you also know, today, like all days of distinguished individual achievement, takes place within a broader context and

network of the loving, caring, nurturing and supportive community that has made today and this great accomplishment possible for you.

Just think of everything you have received from others that made today possible, most obviously from your parents, spouses, grandparents, and your other family and friends who have supported you through thick and thin.

Family

After the wonderful Academic Awards Ceremony Thursday night, I was visiting with two of my faculty colleagues and an outstanding non-traditional student who graduates today, and we were wondering aloud about how many people realize and appreciate what it takes for a married, working mother with a family, for instance, to be a loving spouse, attentive, nurturing mother, productive and contributing employee, and a diligent, responsible student all at the same time. Therefore, as we thank those who have helped you make today possible, we should recognize and celebrate in particular the great sacrifice, love, and support provided among others to our non-traditional, often part-time, and evening students -- by their husbands, wives, and loved ones. So here's to you and all family members today, parents, spouses, and grandparents, for all the love and support you have provided for our graduates over their degree program, indeed throughout their lives!

Faculty

Just a few years ago it seems, I also participated, as you are doing now, in at my own undergraduate commencement -- as I prepared to begin graduate studies and a career in higher education. The main reason I chose this career and vocation was because of the transformational effect my undergraduate faculty had had upon me, one faculty mentor in particular. Their brilliance, knowledge, caring and dedication to me and to my project of trying to become the best and most authentic me I could be, created the passion within me for dedicating my

life to facilitating the growth and transformation of other students -- as my faculty had done for me. From my many conversations with you over the years, I know that the Bellarmine faculty have had this effect in your life, and so now I know you join me in thanking and recognizing them.

(Applause.)

Vision: Personal and Institution

Bellarmino University is approaching almost 60 years of its life and so we can think of its outstanding history in terms of nearly four 15-year great periods of growth and development.

As we grow as individuals, as a community, as a university, indeed as a nation, it is important that we always are able to imagine a future for ourselves; to believe deeply that we can realize our future; and then to the best of our ability to create that future for ourselves. If we are able to imagine, believe, and create a future for ourselves, then we can have hope for and in that future; and if we have hope, we can be inspired and motivated to realize that future.

Bellarmino as a university community is very much like you and every other individual in that regard. As you know, Bellarmine now has imagined for itself a bright, promising, and powerful future for its next 15 years during which time we will become the premier, independent, Catholic university in the South, and thereby the leading private university in the Commonwealth and region, and one of the best in the nation! As we realize this hoped-for vision of our future, we will grow from 2,500 to 8,000 students, double our facilities, and develop a campus along the lines of the beautiful hill towns and monasteries of Tuscany, the home of our patron saint. St. Robert Bellarmine. We will add five new schools, including a Graduate School, Graduate School of Management, and School of Communications, Media & Culture, and in the process, we will become a doctoral/research university with three or more doctoral programs. For people in

this sports-savvy part of the country, we also may develop an NCAA Division I program, and then proceed to go about regularly defeating currently prominent Division I schools in our City, State, and region!!

We will realize our new vision by being the most academically excellent school in the region; the university that best prepares students for successful, meaningful lives in a globalized, international world, and one that teaches in the Catholic educational tradition -- with its commitment to excellent teaching and scholarship in the liberal arts and professional schools; commitment to ethics, morality, spirituality, religious faith, social justice and service to others; and, at the heart of who we are and what we do, a commitment to the intrinsic value and dignity of each and every individual human being.

Alumni

The main reason that I have absolute confidence that we will realize our vision is because of you, our alumni as well as our current and future students. Neither of the previous two legendary men who had the privilege to serve as Bellarmine's President had the resource that I now have of over 16,000 graduates; the resource of our alumni population ranging 22 years of age to 80 years of age; and the sizeable and growing number of alumni we now have who possess the great resources, material and otherwise, to help us really make happen the Bellarmine we now envision.

Student

If you wish to share my confidence in Bellarmine's vision, all you have to do is to come to know our students. Each year at this time, I ask my fellow faculty and staff to bring to my attention special stories of students in our graduating class, stories that individually and collectively tell us who Bellarmine is, the great Bellarmine story.

In response, I am blessed to receive so many amazing stories that it simply is impossible to mention them all.

Over the past week, for example, we have had the privilege and pleasure to recognize and celebrate many of our most distinguished students, and that recognition and celebration continues today: Alan Montgomery Hall (our Valedictorian); Joan [NEM-SHEF-SKI]; Christopher Schaeffer; Megan Edwards, Stephanie Pieper; Richard Cox; Andrea Hunt (our Salutatorian); Dustin Humphrey; Eric Scott; Lacinda Wininger, and many, many others. I am and we are as a community very proud of each of you and grateful to you for all that you are and all that you have done for Bellarmine.

Three Students

But I do wish to mention three other students in particular who are international students, one man and two women, who have come to Bellarmine from other lands, and who have made Bellarmine not only their second home but have enhanced, enriched, and improved it by their presence and contributions to our life and work.

First, I'll mention [KNOCK-WHEN-WHEN].

She came to the United States as a refugee from Viet Nam and became at Bellarmine a double major, a Bellarmine scholar, and the winner of her department's academic excellence award.

- She has studied French and Japanese at Bellarmine.
- With her French, she has studied abroad at the University of Montpellier in Louisville's sister city in southern France.
- She will use her Japanese to teach in Japan next year.

- And this summer before she goes to Japan for a year, she will study Arabic in Tunisia.
- Finally, we will patiently await KNOCK-WHEN's eventual return to the United States in July 2007 to begin law school and, no doubt become one of the greatest immigration lawyers in the nation.

Next, I want to mention a student I have come to know as a friend, especially as I make my way back and forth from my office in the library. Her name is Mariya Ivanova and she's a Bellarmine Scholar who came to Bellarmine from Romania. Of course, we have many students at Bellarmine who work hard. But, in the opinion of many faculty and staff, as well as myself, Mariya have proven herself to be the hardest working student at Bellarmine – both in her academic life, and in her employment in countless and often concurrent jobs, to say nothing of her passion for salsa dancing. Not only is she graduating today, but she also is working to persuade her younger brother to join us upon his graduation from high school; and to all of our great delight, her graduation celebration and joy is deepened today by the presence of her Dad who has come to us today from Bulgaria. Congratulations, Mariya, and congratulations to you -- Poppa Ivanova!

Last but not least among the examples of our students who are responsible for my hope and confidence in Bellarmine's vision for the future is a young man from Nigeria who is well known for his regular response to life and its phenomena with his the phrase, "That is SO good!" Well, Bellarmine University and I think that Dennis Ogbe is "SO good!"

As I have told Dennis many times, one of the many reasons that I am glad he is here is that at least I know that there is one other guy on campus with a build as powerful as my own – I feel like we could be twins!

Seriously, Dennis Ogbe has almost single-handedly created within the Bellarmine University community a comprehensive and profound sense of an internationalized world, and its immense hope and possibilities.

He has been a scholar who will now continue his studies at the Masters level; he has distinguished himself in his internship at Brown-Forman Corporation, Ina, and plans to join that great company as a full-time member of their team.

Speaking of teams, Dennis also is a world-class athlete who has won many gold medals in Para-Olympics during his student days at Bellarmine. Dennis and I are both grateful to Coach Jim Vargo for bringing Dennis to Bellarmine as well as Vitalis Lanshima.

Dennis Ogbe, today in your spectacular speech, you spoke to us of “light.” Well, my brother, you light up our lives at Bellarmine, and we are grateful to you and for you for teaching us so much as we have worked to teach you!

Prayer and Blessing

Finally from your President to you, a closing prayer and a blessing. In a recent article in Commonwealth magazine, the author, William McDonough, referenced the great German Reformed theologian Jurgen Moltmann who has pointed out that some languages (German and Latin, for example) have two words for the English word “future:” In Latin, “futurus” -- is that which develops in a predictable way out of the present. Moltmann said that to think of the future only in this way is a failure of hope; by itself, the author goes on to mention, futurus is “the planners future, a way of trying to control life and thus a way of posing as God.”

The other Latin word for future, “adventus,” indicates the future as coming toward us from God, as breaking into our plans and making a claim on our lives (ad + venio – coming to or toward us). McDonough goes on to remind us that we are not in charge of this future, but that we must seek to embrace it as part of God’s

providential care for us. To truly practice the virtue of hope, therefore, means always opening ourselves to the future's claim on us.

It is my hope and prayer, therefore, that your Bellarmine education has prepared you -- both for your future as *futurus* for sure, for being able to develop the plans and future that may develop in a predictable way for you out of the present, but even more so -- for your future as *adventus*, the root word of "advent" and "adventure," among others. In other words, I hope and pray that we have helped to educate not only your mind, but your heart and soul as well, so that you also are well prepared to truly, confidently, courageously, and faithfully open yourselves to life and to God and to embrace life and God as they break into your plans (as they are gloriously wont to do) and make a claim on your lives.

My closing blessing, therefore, is this:

May you go forth now and plan and live your life to the best of your ability, with intelligence, imagination, creativity, responsibility, and authenticity -- but most of all and above all, may you always be welcoming and embracing of God and the future that will come to you from Him as you go forward and as He seeks to break into your plans and make a claim on your lives.

Thank you and Godspeed.