

Convocation Remarks 2013

Good evening, and welcome to Bellarmine's 24th Annual Convocation! Tonight the Bellarmine University community and I welcome you, the Class of 2017, into the Bellarmine University family, and officially launch the 2013-2014 academic year!

Even before you take your first step into a classroom, your Bellarmine Class of 2017 holds a historic distinction: You are the first freshman class to have entered Bellarmine's campus through St. Robert Gate, our new signature entryway, which was a gift to the University, and completed over the summer.

St. Robert Bellarmine, the namesake of our university and our gate, was born in Montepulciano, one of the beautiful hill towns of Italy's Tuscany region. These ancient hill towns have inspired, and continue to inspire, much of the architecture and commons areas on Bellarmine University's campus, which we like to refer to as the "city on the Hill."

A major feature of the Tuscany hill towns is a grand entrance arch. I had hoped that someday we could build such an entrance for the university. My hopes were realized when Trustee Nick Carosi, Class of '69, and his wife, Gincy, Class of '70, who met and fell in love on our campus, generously offered to fund this project. In fact, Nick's company built it.

Of course, I was thoroughly delighted by their enthusiasm and generosity, and my delight only deepened as the entrance was constructed over the summer, turning out to be even more beautiful than I had imagined.

St. Robert Gate, therefore, is a compelling symbol for Bellarmine University and your Class. Hospitality is an exceptionally important value for our campus culture and community. By "hospitality," I mean hospitality in its deepest sense, with the inclusiveness and embrace of Thomas Merton, who is iconic and embodies values at the core of our University's Catholic identity. We regularly welcome new ideas, new perspectives, new knowledge and new friends and guests – and now, you, Class of 2017! – to our university. St. Robert Gate is a tangible symbol of the hospitality of Bellarmine University – in its deepest sense.

In addition, there is no better metaphor for what takes place at Bellarmine University each and every day than a monumental Gate, through which we enter into a vibrant community of knowledge, values, connections and discovery.

Again, Class of 2017, I welcome you through St. Robert Gate and into the rich 63 year old academic traditions of our community – a community that will enrich, nourish, and challenge you and while, in turn, we will be enriched by your unique gifts, talents and personalities.

I look forward to personally getting to know as many of you as possible over the coming days and weeks. For now, however, here are some things that we already know about you as the Class of 2017:

There are 685 of you, making this the largest first-time, full-time freshman class in Bellarmine history by more than 50 students!!

60% of you are from Kentucky and 40% are from 23 other states and 20 International countries.

You are academically impressive:

Your average high school grade-point average was 3.51.

And your average composite ACT score was 27.

About one-third of you are “first-generation” college-going students, and will be the first in your families to earn a college degree.

80% of you will be living on campus.

One in four of you have chosen to participate in one of our “learning communities” – the most successful learning community population in our history. These curricular structures connect two or more courses around a common theme to be taken by a particular cohort of students, developing a common commitment not only to your individual success, but to the success of your cohort.

Whether you are in a learning community, living in a residence hall, or commuting to Bellarmine from the greater community, we will make you feel at home here through a range of activities and services, such as the University Dining Hall, the Student and Recreation Sports Center – or “SuRF,” as we call it; the W.L. Lyons Brown Library; and more.

St. Robert Gate is not the only addition to our beautiful campus in recent months.

Over the summer, major improvements were made to this legendary 53-year old building in which we convene today. Knights Hall, the cherished home of our national champion Bellarmine Knights, has received an extensive renovation and rejuvenation. We’ve added new seating and a gorgeous new floor last year; and this year are adding more new seating and a new HVAC system, which I hope you are enjoying. As members now of what your fellow students call Knights Nation – I will look for you to be here at every home game to raise the roof and to make sure we never lose.

Also this summer, we completed a beautiful three-story addition to Nolen C. Allen Hall, located across Newburg Road from our main campus. The addition gives us needed room for our growing programs including the Department of Physical Therapy in the Lansing School of Nursing and Health Sciences, the Thornton Frazier School of Education, and the School of Environmental Studies. We created this region’s first School of Environmental Studies just a year ago to educate and provide graduates who

are prepared to produce leadership in fields such as environmental engineering, education, law, public policy, conservation, international development and corporate sustainability, in addition to research careers. This School affirms and strengthens Bellarmine University's strong, foundational commitment to environmental sustainability, an issue that already is of monumental importance in the world and that will become even more crucial in the years ahead.

I am very proud and grateful that Bellarmine is taking such a leadership role in providing solutions to some of the most pressing issues of our community and our world. The growth of our physical facilities may be highly visible and impressive, but Bellarmine's growth and progress are not limited to buildings.

Since 2005, we have launched 23 new degree and certificate programs, including two new doctoral degrees – a Ph.D. in Education and Social Change, and a Doctor of Nursing Practice – and added a new Master's in Taxation to address massive changes in federal tax laws.

We have added a School of Communication, in addition to the School of Environmental Studies, bringing our total number of schools to seven. And we are about to launch a whole new approach to educating adults in a revitalized School of Continuing and Professional Studies.

I mentioned that you are the largest class in our history, and as such your class continues a trend: The freshman enrollment record you broke was set just last year at 606. Since 2005, in fact, all enrollment has improved by 34 percent.

In that same time frame, of course, we have also increased the number of full-time faculty by 37 percent. This growth has allowed us to maintain an average student-to-faculty ratio of 12:1. We know that you are here because you want a highly personal educational experience, and we will never lose that quality, even as we grow.

All of these improvements – in faculty and facilities, in programming and projects, in activities and academics – all of them are part of Vision 2020, an ambitious plan we launched in 2005 to make Bellarmine University the Premier Independent Catholic University in the South and thereby the leading private university in the Commonwealth and region.

And all of these improvements are directly intended to benefit you, our students.

And I encourage you to take full advantage of everything we do and everything we offer. That eloquent rascal Oscar Wilde famously said, "Be yourself: Everyone else is already taken."

In your time here at Bellarmine, you will truly discover yourself – your best and authentic self. You will learn this through experiences inside the classroom and out. You will learn this from the professors who will challenge you as you've perhaps never been challenged before – but who will also be there every day to support you as you rise to

that challenge. You will learn about your best self as you step outside your comfort zones, whether that is to volunteer at a soup kitchen as part of a service project or to devote yourself to studying abroad for a month, a semester, or an entire year. You will learn about and create the best in yourself as you engage in conversations with people who are not necessarily like you – who are from different races, different backgrounds, different political perspectives, and so forth – and through that diversity you will be challenged to fully explore what you know, what you believe in, and why you have the values, beliefs and perspectives that you have.

Never again in your lifetime will you have this much luxury to devote to learning than you will have here at Bellarmine University. The faculty and staff are here to guide you, to instruct you, to nurture and support you, indeed to love you. But we can only do so much as the rest is up to you. You have worked hard to get here – but you can't rest on your laurels. We expect you to take your education seriously and push yourself, take the extra class, read the extra book, walk the extra mile, and fully engage in the life of the University.

I leave you with two brief quotes from an unlikely duo.

The first came to my attention just yesterday and is attributed to no less than Leonardo di Vinci who said, "it had long since come to my attention that people of accomplishment rarely sat back and let things happen to them. They went out and happened to things!"

The second is from Sir Ken Robinson, an internationally recognized leader in the development of creativity and human potential, and the author of "The Element: How Finding Your Passion Changes Everything" who says:

"For most of us the problem isn't that we aim too high and fail; it's just the opposite: We aim too low and succeed."

So welcome, Bellarmine University Class of 2017, as you journey now through our gateway to your undergraduate education and your future. We are delighted that you are here and wish you you great learning, great growth and progress, and great enjoyment. Godspeed.