

Convocation Remarks 1994

The Bellarmine Story

Welcome to Bellarmine and to your Convocation. The faculty and I began this ceremony a few years ago when it occurred to us that while we make a big deal of when you leave us at graduation, we don't celebrate an occasion which is at least as important – when we first meet one another and you join our community of teachers and learners.

Today and this week you are beginning what is literally a once in a lifetime experience of being who you are at this point of your life, at Bellarmine and beginning your undergraduate education. With today's help, we want you to be as conscious and serious about what you are about to do with your life as we are.

To get underway with this, we all don the ritual robes of academic life, the robes of medieval clerks and scholars, which remind us among other things, that what you and we begin today is not only brand new but also an ancient and time-honored activity that has served as the basis of transformation over the years, not for just individual lives but for nations, civilizations and even the human condition.

So today you begin this challenging and often exhilarating process of your undergraduate education, and you have humbled and delighted us by choosing to educate yourself with our assistance at Bellarmine College.

As you will discover, Bellarmine is an excellent place to learn because the main thing that we do here, the major reason we exist at all as an institution, is to teach you and support you in your efforts to learn all sorts of important and necessary things.

As you will also discover, there is considerable and impressive research and scholarship taking place at the College as well, conducted by a highly qualified and nationally distinguished faculty. But the purpose of this research is not just to create new knowledge. It also serves to inform and enhance our efforts at doing, better than anyone else, what you have asked us to do... to teach you to the best of our and your ability.

For us to teach you well, there are some expectations you must meet. These expectations are simple, straightforward, and sensible. We expect you to be serious and responsible about yourself, about ideas and values, about your classroom work, about your classmates, and about us as well. Once you join us in this work to which we have committed our lives, we need you to do your part to make your education at Bellarmine enjoyable and successful.

Bellarmino is a young and vigorous place, started in 1950 by the Catholic Archdiocese of Louisville. It originally functioned as a liberal arts college, mainly for men. In 1968 it became coeducational, thanks to a marriage to a women's college called Ursuline. In fact the college was called Bellarmine-Ursuline College for several years. In 1968, something else happened. For financial reasons, the Catholic Archdiocese withdrew the ownership of the College and turned it over to a predominately lay Board of Trustees, which was independent and self-perpetuating in that it selects its own members. While the College has been legally secular for 26 years, it continues to integrate and motivate its curricular and co-curricular activities with the deepest, most important, most enduring, and most inclusive values in its Catholic heritage, well-accepted by and beneficial to Catholics and non-Catholics alike.

To understand how its Catholic heritage plays out in the daily life of the College, you have only to understand the forefathers and foremothers of the colleges and universities of today were the great Catholic universities of the Middle Ages.

Then, like today, great teaching and scholarship were highly valued. The philosophical centerpiece of the university was liberal arts with emphasis on philosophy and theology. Professional education in law and medicine in particular were also important emphases in this tradition. At Bellarmine, the liberal arts and sciences are our foundation as well. And our professional education in business, nursing and teacher education is a professional education integrated with the value-rich liberal arts and sciences.

The important beliefs in the Catholic faith and in Catholic higher education are that each and every individual person has human dignity and self worth and also that every individual person is a majestic and mysterious integration of mind and heart and soul and body. You will find these values reflected in your daily interaction with our faculty. Each individual is valued and taken seriously at Bellarmine. And each individual is educated as a whole person. So what we do in and outside the classroom attends to the cultivation not only of your mind but of your heart and soul and body as well.

Because in this tradition each individual is seen to have God-given value, we work to view others and treat others inside and outside the college in a special and caring way.

You will see, therefore, that in our teaching of you, we will work with you not only to help you become an even better human being and to develop your potential, but we will try as well to teach you to make a difference in life and to make the world a better place.

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In your education at Bellarmine, you will learn about and think about goodness, truth, and beauty, and how these things are created and experienced. In the process, you will also be exposed through your reading, lectures, and other methods of learning to those things in life and in reality that are evil, false, and grotesque; and you will develop your capacity to discern the difference, which isn't always as easy or apparent as you might think.

At the same time that you are learning more about these things, you will also have many opportunities to test and experience what you are learning in the classroom in situations outside the classroom.

At Bellarmine, the values in our Catholic heritage encourage each of us to take others seriously, as well as ourselves, and so you will experience here a real interest in service to others and in helping others improve themselves and the circumstances of their lives. There are many service organizations at Bellarmine and their number is growing.

In the same spirit, as an institution we also have a continuing interest in peaceful and nonviolent solutions to human conflict, and to freedom and justice where we see basic freedoms constrained and fundamental justice denied.

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Further, Bellarmine is a real community of alumni, trustees, students, faculty, and staff who work and live together in accord with basic Judeo-Christian principles of human conduct. A basic tenet of our community is that we have a responsibility to help one another live and learn in an atmosphere conducive to living well and learning well.

Campus Ministry is very important at the college, with outreach not only to Catholic alumni, trustees, students, faculty, and staff but to those of many faith traditions and to nonbelievers as well.

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These, then, are some of the ways that the best and most inclusive values of our Catholic heritage inform the academic, social, and cultural life of the college. A non-Catholic colleague recently remarked to me that he feels most welcome and comfortable at Bellarmine because here we take seriously issues of basic human values, including ethics, morals, religion, and spirituality, and that he felt intellectually freer here than he did earlier in his career at a more secular institution where such reflection and discourse was discouraged and devalued.

In addition to your interest in learning a great deal and in developing your intellectual and personal potential, I am well aware that you are also interested in preparing yourself for careers and professions in the work force which you will be joining after graduation, if not before. Your full immersion in the curricular and co-curricular experiences I have mentioned thus far will prepare you for that. You will learn to think more clearly, to communicate more effectively, verbally and in writing, what you think and feel and know. You will become more adept at

managing information through technology and learn to become not only more competitive in an appropriate way but to become a better team member as well.

Because you will come to know a lot about a lot of things, you will also learn to become better at anticipating and responding to changing situations, and will become in the process more flexible, resourceful and resilient.

You will have the opportunity here to learn to work hard, to organize yourself, and to make a difference.

When educators in colleges and universities ask business leaders in the work force what kind of qualities they want college graduates to have, business leaders consistently identify the skills and abilities I just mentioned. The point of this is that if you take your academic work seriously and participate fully in the co-curricular activities of student life at Bellarmine, you will not only develop your potential and learn how to make the world a better place, you will also learn the basics for whatever career you will choose.

You have come to Bellarmine at a very exciting time in its history; and your class, the Class of 1998, is an historic class. You number 341 students, the most students in a Bellarmine freshman class in 27 years. You come from 15 states including California, Colorado, Connecticut, New York and Texas, and several foreign countries. About 80 percent of you are from Kentucky and 20 percent from outside the state. You come from 119 different high schools and the average percentile of your class rank is the 76th percentile. Your average grade point is 3.34 and the average ACT score is above 23. About 1 in 4 of you have come here as a varsity student athlete. I am also pleased to report that our efforts to improve diversity in the freshman class are increasingly successful and your class has more racial and ethnic diversity than previous classes. There are 139 Academic Achievement Scholars and 10 Bellarmine Scholars with an average GPA of 3.9.

You join the Bellarmine community at the same time as seven new faculty members: a new dean of the business school, Ed Popper; the librarian, David Chatham; the director of academic advising, Cathy Sutton; the director of athletics, Jay Gardiner; the men's basketball coach, Robert Valvano; my executive assistant, Holly Gathright; and two new members of the student affairs staff, Monique Pillow and Andrea Fechner. We have several new members of our clerical staff as well. So as you walk across campus and make your way through the hallways, say hi to the faculty, staff, and administrators, because odds are they are as new to Bellarmine as you are.

Other encouraging signs of progress at the college include the fact that the residence halls are filled and our summer session registration increased.

Also, during the summer and continuing into this academic year, our hundred full-time faculty members have been busy beginning the revision of the core curriculum. A technology task force and their consultant are developing short-term and long-term plans for improving technology at the college, and faculty have been writing grants, doing research here and abroad, and generally getting ready for a good year. In fact, today I welcome back to campus all of those many faculty and students who have been studying abroad recently, and I look forward to hearing about your adventures and seeing your slides.

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It is also my hope and expectation to be able to announce later this semester when in the spring term we will break ground for the new library, as it is very important that we have our new library in place for the fall of 1996, your junior year. The new library will not only be a beautiful structure, but technologically it will be a state-of-the-art facility. It will cost about \$8.4 million. We have raised

over \$6.3 million in cash and pledges and, therefore, have \$2.1 million more to raise. The trustees, the Institutional Advancement staff and I have been working hard on this and are awaiting replies to over \$2.3 million in recent requests to donors for funding. The full plans and drawings for the library will be completed within a very short time, so I will do my best to get the remaining funds in and an announcement made before this term is over.

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In addition to welcoming you and to telling you the Bellarmine story, I also want to say a few personal things to you in closing. I know that you have received more than your share of information and advice over the past few days, but I am not going to let that stop me:

1. Few experiences, situations, issues, and circumstances in life are truly life-and-death matters which actually threaten your very physical survival. Yet it is a human tendency to feel as though a lot of things in life are life-and-death matters. Don’t waste your energy attributing more seriousness, urgency, or importance to things than their reality merits.
2. Nurture and develop your faith in God, your hope for an improved future, and your capacity and ability to give and to receive love. If that sounds like the three most important things in life are faith, hope, and love and the greatest of these is love, the coincidence is purely intentional.
3. Service to others is a great way to develop your capacity as a loving human being. At Bellarmine, there are many opportunities for service. Take advantage of them. You will find that you will learn more about

yourself and others and loving this way than by just sitting around thinking about things.

4. While I am encouraging you to love and serve your neighbor as yourself, I want to be sure to emphasize that this bit of New Testament wisdom is based on the *a priori* condition that you love yourself. If you truly love yourself with all that implies, then you can love others more effectively. You have to have water in your own well in order to give someone else a drink of water. To stay with this metaphor, by continuing to love yourself first and foremost, you will assure that there will always be water in your well to give to others. If you do not love yourself first and foremost, you will run dry of love to share with others.
5. The real action of adolescence, in my opinion, is not so much as separating your identity from your parents, though that is important. Rather it is in becoming a father and mother to yourself, to transforming the child within you to an adult. Don't waste too much time and energy fighting your parents and other authorities for your independence, autonomy and freedom. Focus more energy and attention simply on becoming more responsible, accountable, and dependable yourself within the context of freedom and you will find your parents and other authority types eventually will recognize your development and your adulthood. You don't get adulthood from your parents or achieve it over and against them. You create it within yourself.
6. After faith, hope, and love, humor is the most important thing in life. Nurture humor, perspective, and a poignant sense of irony as diligently and consistently as the other three things. All four virtues – faith, hope, love, and humor – sustain and support one another.
7. I share it with you for what it is worth my belief that whether we are happy and pleased persons, or sad and miserable persons, is more a matter of choice, habit, and will than we realize. I also think that humans are by

nature disposed to happiness and pleasure at the very core of their being. Happy people believe that they deserve to be happy, so to some extent this is tied up with the issue of self-love discussed earlier. In Christian terms, I think Easter people have the whole picture, while Good Friday people have only half the picture. My hope for each of you is that you will be a happy and pleased person, an Easter person.

God gave Moses Ten Commandments. I don't want to be competitive with God, so I give you these seven suggestions on this occasion of your coming to Bellarmine. In addition, some academic people, as you now know, have a way of saying in a thousand words what can easily be said in a hundred, so I'll quit now just to show you that even at my age I am capable of learning, changing and growing.

Welcome and Mazel Tov!