

Convocation Remarks 2006

Good morning and welcome to Bellarmine University! Words of welcome are an appropriate way for us to begin, and begin again, the academic year at Bellarmine, because welcoming not only is what we do today but throughout every day here. Of course, at Bellarmine we not only greet and welcome one another, but also constantly greet and welcome new and different ways of thinking; new and different ways of seeing or perceiving; new and different ideas and values; and men and women who are different than we are.

As you welcome and come to understand -- not necessarily agree with, but understand -- new and different ideas, values, perspectives, and people at Bellarmine, you will experience the intellectual, personal, social and spiritual growth that will empower you not only to better see, understand, and love the world around you, but to better see, understand and love yourself -- both in your common bond with all other men and women, and in your own great personal value, dignity, and uniqueness.

This orientation of your mind and heart to “welcoming” is an orientation of your mind and heart to the profound virtue of hospitality – welcoming, openness, understanding, and appreciation of the new, of the unknown, the unfamiliar, the different.

And this orientation to intellectual, personal, social, and spiritual hospitality is an ancient, tried and true way of facilitating your learning and your growth as a person.

While certainly you can go further back than about 1500 years ago, 525 AD is a convenient root reference point on this matter for me, because that was when St. Benedict wrote his Rules to guide monastic life. Among other virtues, he saw “welcoming” as essential to personal growth -- welcoming of guests and strangers, welcoming visiting monks, welcoming the challenging culture and discipline of monastic life.

It also is appropriate that we root Bellarmine’s welcoming and hospitality early in the monastic tradition because of the very close connection that Bellarmine University has with the late monk of the nearby Abbey of Gethsemani, Thomas Merton, and the close connection that Thomas Merton had and has with Bellarmine.

As our Bellarmine community continues to deepen its understanding of its own unique character, essence, and spirit, and as we work together also to deepen our understanding of the ideas, values, perspectives, commitments and passions of Thomas Merton, the more we realize how thoroughly the institutional soul and character of the Bellarmine University community finds its inspiration, energy, direction, and resonance in the soul and spirit of Merton.

Thomas Merton was, among other things, a world class, highly educated, sophisticated intellectual who fully understood his responsibility to hospitality in its broadest and deepest sense, and his responsibility to others, and most importantly to God -- to seek to be truly excellent in everything he said and did and in everything he was as a person and monk. This commitment of Merton to always seek excellence and seek to be excellent never was confused in his mind and person with being perfect, or with actually and always in fact achieving the excellence he sought. But seeking excellence was always his aspiration and guide, and thus he regularly achieved excellence in the many dimensions of his life.

Thomas Merton had a welcoming and hospitable orientation to his fellow human beings, not only to his fellow monks, colleagues, and many great friends, but also to his brothers and sisters throughout the world, men and women from different continents, nations, and with difference ethnicities, religions, colors, cultures, values, beliefs, and traditions. Throughout his life, he embodied an international sensibility, a multicultural sensibility, respect and understanding, and he loved the rich diversity of the world – much as the Bellarmine University community, now including you, seeks to do in our work together.

Thomas Merton, as an intellectual, Christian, and monk, also loved, respected, and highly valued nature and the environment, and sought from the environment -- nurture and sustenance for his spirit and thus for his spirituality. He was keenly aware not only of our interconnectedness with and interdependence on our fellow human beings, but he saw clearly as well the interconnectedness and interdependence of life and of all living things, and loved and appreciated them as manifestations of God and of God's ongoing creation of the world.

As a community of teachers and learners, therefore, Bellarmine University is inspired, motivated, and encouraged by the great values in our founding Catholic tradition, the oldest continuing tradition of higher education in the Western world, in particular as these values find resonance and expression in the welcoming, hospitable, respectful, humble, loving spirit of Thomas Merton, the monk formed in the monastic tradition so influenced by St. Benedict -- with its orientation of the mind, heart, and spirit to welcoming, to authentic hospitality.

In addition to the seriousness, joyfulness, and playfulness with which the Bellarmine community takes hospitality, the Catholic and monastic tradition also influences us and forms us in another way, among others, and that is by also celebrating and affirming the importance and necessity of contemplation in life -- of listening, reading, reflecting, thinking and praying, preferably quietly, within our quiet personal space and with our fellow learners.

Because we are a university and not a monastery, however, and because we are helping to educate you to live well, love well, and serve well in the world of today and tomorrow, rather than helping form you for a life mainly of prayer and contemplation (and making delicious cheeses and bourbon fudge!), we integrate within our university community life and our Bellarmine education a commitment to both contemplation and action.

At Bellarmine, therefore, we will work with you to help you develop within yourself a durable capacity for quiet, for study, for reflection, and for prayer. In today's world, developing such a capacity for contemplation, so essential to learning and growing, is no easy task. But if you are able to develop this essential capacity and skill, it will enhance your life -- throughout your life.

We also will teach you how to take what you learn from information, experience, and contemplation, and apply it in the world of action. Thomas Merton himself, while trained in the monastic tradition that emphasizes contemplation, also saw his responsibility to connect and to integrate contemplation and action in his life, especially as it concerns matters of ethics, of public policy, of violence and war, and of the social justice issues and dimensions of all these things, always thinking before acting, and reflecting after acting – contemplation and action and contemplation and action.

As your parents and older friends and relatives know, and perhaps as you realize as well, your next four years as a student at Bellarmine University are a great gift, a great privilege, a great and once-in-a-lifetime opportunity in your life – for you to step back from your busy, noisy life with its inevitable distractions and illusions and to learn about yourself and the world around you. And then, both while you are here and after you graduate, we will ask you to take this person you become during this relatively contemplative, quiet, and reflective time in your life, and then to bring your best self into the world – to use your gifts to serve others and to

help make the world a better place -- in your career, family life, community life, and the many other dimensions of your life and future.

So welcome to Bellarmine, and welcome to your experience and that of your fellow classmates of welcoming all sorts of wonderful challenging, and exciting new ideas, values, perspectives, and people.

Welcome to a Bellarmine that in addition to quiet, also provides you with a lot of glorious noise, whether from laughter, music, sports, dance, technology or other sources. But most importantly for your given major purpose for being here, Bellarmine is and must be for you also a place of quiet contemplation, certainly relative to the world of action. Here you can and will think deeply about things, and then take what you learn from that thinking and apply it in action in the world – as a centered, whole, integrated, rational, passionate, loving and effective human being.

Welcome, therefore, to the Bellarmine community of teachers and learners, of teaching and learning, a place and a community whose major purpose and privilege is to work with you as a unique individual and to help you become in all your glory -- the full, authentic, and true person we know you can be.

Welcome to a Bellarmine community inspired by and in so many ways represented by the great monk Thomas Merton, and we will make sure over your time here that you will come to know and be inspired by him as we are.

Welcome to a Bellarmine community distinguished not only by our inspiration in the spirit of Thomas Merton, but because of that, by our institutional and individual commitment to excellence and seeking to be excellent in all we do, say, and are; by our international sensibility and global awareness of the equality, dignity, and value of all human beings here and throughout the world; and by our interest in studying, understanding, protecting, and enhancing our environment.

Finally, as my welcome gift, I will leave you with a brief poem by Pablo Neruda – a spiritual brother of the Bellarmine community – as he addresses some of the things mentioned in my welcome to you.

It is called: “And now we will count to twelve . . .”

And now we will count to twelve
and we will all keep still . . .

For once on the face of the earth
let’s not speak in any language;
let’s stop for one second,
and not move our arms so much.

It would be an exotic moment
without rush, without engines,
we would all be together
in a sudden strangeness.

Fishermen in the cold sea
would not harm whales
and the man gathering salt
would look at his hurt hands.

Those who prepare green wars,
wars with gas, wars with fire,
victory with no survivors,
would put on clean clothes
and walk about with their brothers
in the shade, doing nothing.

What I want should not be confused
with total inactivity.

(Life is what it is about;
I want no truck with death.)

If we were not so single-minded
about keeping our lives moving,
and for once could do nothing,
perhaps a huge silence
might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.

Perhaps the earth can teach us
as when everything seems dead
and later proves to be alive.

Now I'll count up to twelve,
and you keep quiet and I will go.

Again, welcome to Bellarmine University, and thank you very much for being
here.

Joseph J. McGowan
President