

# Convocation Remarks 2009

Good morning!

In developing my brief remarks to you for this morning, I was inspired by two experiences last night as we all met in my office.

The first inspiration was from you – because as I was greeting you and personally welcoming you to Bellarmine, I became very aware of the fact that not only were you accepting my welcome, but, in a sense, you also were welcoming Bellarmine and me to come to know and love you and to teach you how to be your best possible self.

As you accept our welcome, therefore, we accept your welcome with great enthusiasm and delight as well.

The second inspiration came from the kind, generous comments of two parents who said that with their son, they looked seriously at many institutions, and that of them all, Bellarmine was above and beyond not only the most genuinely welcoming, but was the University that actually is who they say they are!

Thinking about those two things, your welcoming us to you, and the parents' affirmation that Bellarmine actually is who we say we are and do what we say we will do, reminded me that just a few years ago, Bellarmine undertook a market research effort that included an assessment of whether our students and graduates thought that Bellarmine was for them who we say we are and will be.

The answer was both a yes and a no – in that we said that Bellarmine was a caring, personal, and supportive place for students – and our students valued, appreciated, and affirmed that claim as true; but many students also told us that we did not make clear enough at the outset that Bellarmine and our faculty were also very challenging . While most students appreciated this fact that we do challenge you to be your very best, some said that they would have preferred that we were clearer and more direct about this fact up front.

As I've hoped you've noticed during your recruitment and admission process with us, Bellarmine now is very careful to consistently present ourselves to you in this more complete sense – in that Bellarmine is indeed a caring, nurturing, and supportive academic community, AND because we are a genuinely caring place, that we also challenge you, in the classroom, in student life, on the field and off the field, to be the very best you can be, to always give us your very best, to insist that you do your part and fully accept your responsibility as a learning partner as we work together to help you grow intellectually, personally, and socially.

If you have not already picked this up, though I believe that many of you have, Bellarmine at its core is a place that takes very seriously the intrinsic dignity and infinite value of each person in our community as an individual – and each individual in our

community as a whole person – consisting of a mind, body, heart, and soul – all in integration.

Because of this core value of Bellarmine, each of us on the faculty and staff takes very seriously our own individual value and dignity – and projecting out from that, we take seriously the value and dignity of one another, and especially of you, our students. In turn, we ask and challenge each of you to respect and value yourself, and then from your center, to be careful to respect and value the immense value and dignity of one another and of your faculty and staff.

And this is where we are caring for you and challenging you come together for us into a single, unified, integrated professional activity as your teachers and co-learners.

Because we value and respect you, we want to work closely with you over the next few years that we are privileged to have together – to help you become the very best person, the very best scholar, the very best human being you possibly can become – for your own sake of course, but also to put you in a stronger position to serve those in need and help make the world a better place.

We know that the most successful and effective way we can do this is by challenging ourselves to be the very best faculty and staff we can be, the very best teachers we can be – and also insisting and expecting that you do your part, and then, that you accept and act on your responsibility to be the best student and person you can be.

The Bellarmine University faculty and staff are highly qualified, experienced, skilled, and at the ready to care for you and support you – and to make this all work, we challenge you, we stretch you to give your very best and to be your very best.

The feedback that we are now getting in various ways from our students clearly indicates that we are being successful in saying that we are and being both caring and challenging, and balancing and integrating those things.

For example, *Princeton Review* has identified Bellarmine as one of the top 371 of over 3200 colleges and universities in the nation. They base their conclusions in this regard on institutional data, feedback from students, and input from their own *Princeton Review* staff members who visit campuses across the country every year.

In this process, our students praised Bellarmine for providing “a well rounded education” that is “demanding in academic excellence” and also for its “tight knit community.” Our students also said that our student body tends to be “open-minded and personable” and that at Bellarmine, it is easy to “find a place to fit in.”

In a similar vein, as part of our institutional research on our own efficacy in being who we say we are, and doing what we say we do, Bellarmine participates each year in the National Survey of Student Engagement, nicknamed “NESSIE.”

This survey is given each year to a representative sample of freshmen and then again three years later to that class's seniors to assess the change and improvement that has occurred.

In spring 2009, nearly 50 percent of Bellarmine freshmen and seniors participated, a great sample, and Bellarmine significantly increased its senior scores in "level of academic challenge" – the challenge dimension – and in "student-faculty interaction" – the caring and supportive side. And we equaled or surpassed our peers in these categories –including Centre, Elon, Sewanee and Xavier.

So that brings us back to this very day, the day before your first day of classes at Bellarmine. Basically, this Academic Convocation ceremony that finds its reflection in your Commencement just a few years hence, says that we, the Bellarmine University faculty and staff welcome you and are very grateful to you for choosing us as the place to educate yourself – to your best self – with both our care and support, and from the outset our challenge to you.

Now that you have applied here, been accepted here, confirmed here, arrived here and registered here, you also have signaled to us your willingness to care for and challenge yourself, one another, and us. Together, therefore, we are saying that as of today there is no more "we" and "they" in the Bellarmine teaching and learning community. You are an integral part of us now and we are an integral part of you. And we look forward, through exploring and illuminating the infinite knowability of reality, to caring for you as we challenge you to be the very best and complete self you can possibly be.

Together, we will accomplish this by teaching you not what to think, but how to think, how to discern the wheat from the chaff, how to create value and meaning in your lives.

If the over 16,000 Bellarmine University alumni and alumnae all over the world are any proof, beginning with our first graduating class, the Pioneer Class of 1954, and continuing through the Class of 2009 and now your class, the Bellarmine University Class of 2013, you will achieve your goals as individuals and as a class, and you will go forward to create great and meaningful lives – and through your lives, will help serve others and make the world a better place.

Go to it, and Godspeed!

Joseph J. McGowan  
President