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**President's Convocation Address 2002 – Mission And Identity**  
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I would like to speak with you today about the Marymount, Jesuit, and Catholic identity and mission of the University. By way of preface, I'm going to read Billy Collins' "*Questions About Angels*." A footnote first, though, to help you understand the poem. There was a question debated by medieval theologians that has come both to characterize and to caricature their way of thinking: how many angels can dance on the head of a pin? Now the poem:

*Of all the questions you might want to ask  
about angels, the only one you ever hear  
is how many can dance on the head of a pin.*

*No curiosity about how they pass the eternal time  
besides circling the Throne chanting in Latin  
or delivering a crust of bread to a hermit on earth  
or guiding a boy and girl across a rickety wooden bridge.*

*Do they fly through God's body and come out singing?  
Do they swing like children from the hinges  
of the spirit world saying their names backwards and  
forwards?  
Do they sit alone in little gardens changing colors?*

*What about their sleeping habits, the fabric of their robes,  
their diet of unfiltered divine light?  
What goes on inside their luminous heads? Is there a wall  
these tall presences can look over and see hell?*

*If an angel fell off a cloud, would he leave a hole  
in a river and would the hole float along endlessly  
filled with the silent letters of every angelic word?*

*If an angel delivered the mail, would he arrive  
in a blinding rush of wings or would he just assume  
the appearance of the regular mailman and  
whistle up the driveway reading the postcards?*

*No, the medieval theologians control the court.  
The only question you ever hear is about  
the little dance floor on the head of a pin  
where halos are meant to converge and drift invisibly.*

*It is designed to make us think in millions,  
billions, to make us run out of numbers and collapse  
into infinity, but perhaps the answer is simply one:  
one female angel dancing alone in her stocking feet,  
a small jazz combo working in the background.*

*She sways like a branch in the wind, her beautiful  
eyes closed, and the tall thin bassist leans over  
to glance at his watch because she has been dancing  
forever, and now it is very late, even for musicians.*

“The medieval theologians control the court.” One challenge for those of us, like myself, who lead Catholic colleges and universities, is that we do so in a world different from the one that shaped and formed us. Each of us replicates the experience of Henry Adams who, looking back on his birth and ancestry, observed: “What could become of such a child of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when he should wake up to find himself required to play the game of the twentieth.”

Even if the traditions which raised us do not completely “control the court,” they certainly condition it. Our early education and experience build the backdrop whose essentials we seek to preserve, whose distortions we strive to reject, as we struggle to view the present with imagination and love and to care for it with wisdom and grace. But how can we ever be sure how much old questions constrict our vision -- and our heart -- keep us from noticing “one female angel dancing alone in her stocking feet.”

To get to the point. I’m going to talk about the Catholic world in which I grew up. In light of that I’ll look out at the world as I see it today. Then this past and present will create the context for looking at LMU’s mission and identity.

## **THE PAST**

First, my youth. As I begin let me stress that my viewpoint is personal and anecdotal; I hope that it’s at least occasionally accurate (my youth is, after all, long ago!). It is also selective; I’m going to mention only certain elements.

My religious world was divided into three parts: Protestant, Jewish, Catholic. My child’s eye lumped Protestants and Jews together as “publics,” since they went to public school; they were most easily recognized by their inability to spell “transubstantiation.”

Our neighborhood friendships crossed religious lines, and I realized that people’s loves did as well. My own father was Methodist, his mother Jewish. But, as a grade-schooler, I never picked up that we should respect other religions -- much less learn from them. We could go to a synagogue or Protestant Church for a wedding or a funeral but we had to make it clear while

there that we didn't accept their religion. I gathered that that meant standing when they knelt, sitting when they stood. And although so-called "mixed marriages" occurred, they were not encouraged. My parents had to be married in the sacristy not the Church, and my father had to promise to raise any children Catholic.

I didn't realize it at the time, but aspects of my grade school education reflected a ghetto-mentality. We read mainly Catholic authors and thought that Joyce Kilmer's "*Trees*" ("I think that I shall never see/ A poem lovely as a tree") was a pinnacle of world literature. I just assumed that Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln were Catholics since so many of the heroes of our history books were. I would later learn that there were good reasons for these ghetto traces, but I was never aware myself of anti-Catholic prejudice except at a distance, chiefly when John Kennedy was running for President.

I went to a Catholic high school and there the curriculum, outside of religion classes, had no Catholic slant. We spent a year on Henry James, for example, and even learned that "*Trees*" wasn't great. We studied Cicero and Vergil, the new math and new physics. The administration of the school, and most of the faculty, were religious; the same had been true in the elementary years.

Another observation or two about my first twelve grades, before moving quickly to the college years. Perhaps because of the Church's missionary activity, we were quite aware of the larger world and of responsibilities to those not as advantaged as we. We sent money to other countries, wrote letters to children in foreign lands, ransomed pagan babies, prayed for the conversion of Russia. We also reached out to our needy neighborhoods: visited shut-ins; helped at hospitals; listened to the lonely in old-age homes. Ours was a faith with a social justice slant. It was also a faith nourished by rituals and retreats. Mass (at first in Latin, said facing the wall), confession, benediction, these dotted our days. And there were retreats, days of recollection, novenas of grace.

As a Jesuit I went to Fordham University. They were heady, exciting days. The University had high ambitions, proudly proclaimed its desire to become the Catholic Harvard. The corollary was interesting. There were at the time no truly distinguished Catholic universities, at least as measured by faculty scholarship. Fordham was determined to fill that void.

## **SEVEN ELEMENTS**

To summarize this survey of my Catholic youth:

1. a world of Protestants, Jews, and Catholics, with strong religious boundaries;
2. although occasionally influenced by a ghetto-mentality, a respect for secular learning;
3. an awareness of a world beyond our country's shores;
4. religious practices that nourished an interior life;
5. also activities that reached out to the poor in our neighborhood;
6. faculties and administration dominated by priests, brothers and nuns;

7. no Catholic university of the first rank.

That was the world some three or four decades ago. Seven elements, like the sacraments. I'll now review each of them at this new millennium's dawn.

## THE PRESENT

1. I graduated from high school in June, 1965. On July 4<sup>th</sup> of that year, Lyndon Johnson signed the new immigration act into law, and America's doors were once again open to immigrants from all over the world, basically for the first time since 1924. As Diana Eck, in her *A New Religious America* has observed: "The immigrants of the last three decades... have expanded the diversity of our religious life dramatically, exponentially. Buddhists have come from Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, and Korea; Hindus from India, East Africa, and Trinidad; Muslims from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Pakistan, the Middle East, and Nigeria; Sikhs and Jains from India; and Zoroastrians from both India and Iran. Immigrants from Haiti and Cuba have brought Afro-Caribbean traditions, blending both African and Catholic symbols and images. New Jewish immigrants have come from Russia and the Ukraine, and the internal diversity of American Judaism is greater than ever before. The face of American Christianity has also changed with large Latino, Filipino, and Vietnamese Catholic communities; Chinese, Haitian, and Brazilian Pentecostal Communities; Korean Presbyterians, Indian Mar Tomas, and Egyptian Copts. ... The United States has become the most religiously diverse nation on earth." (pp 4-5). Indeed Southern California alone is the most religiously rich place on the planet. Los Angeles, for instance, is the most complex Buddhist city in the world.

And there have been changes in the old triad as well. The Ecumenical movement has flourished in the Catholic Church, promoting greater respect for the religious beliefs of Protestants and Jews. Interdenominational dialogue, common projects, and interfaith services are taken-for-granted today. In short, my religious world is in every way more dappled today than when I was a child. And practically no one knows how to spell "transubstantiation!"

2. The respect for secular learning has continued strong over the past three decades, as indeed it has over the millennia of Catholic education. Mathematics and music, finance and philosophy, law, English, engineering, Catholic education values all these areas. And it struggles, like all educational institutions, with how to fund and deploy the information technologies that aid in their study. Moreover, unlike in the days of my youth, Catholic colleges and universities want their faculty to be actively engaged, through scholarship and creative works, in the dialogue of the disciplines and the creation of knowledge.

Secular knowledge in the Catholic tradition always has a recognizable signature, though. I see it clearly now and detect it too as my memory transports me to my early schooling. Knowledge and wisdom should both inspire and inform our engagement with the world; discernment is at the service of love.

To appreciate this thrust, let's consider for a moment a contrary view. Edward Gibbon tells us that he was inspired to write his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* "by the irony of the spectacle of ignorant monks celebrating their superstitious ceremonies in a church that stood on the ground where a pagan temple had once stood." This image is foundational to his

masterpiece, a work that has been called “the greatest achievement of sustained Irony in the history of historical literature.” But as one reflects with Gibbon on these ironies, seeing that action so often leads to nothing or achieves the opposite of what it intends, one wonders about one’s own action. Why get involved in anything at all? One doesn’t sense in Gibbon a passionate drive to understand the past so as to act more intelligently in the present, and we shouldn’t “dismiss too easily Gibbon’s own characterization of his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* as the product of an effort to divert and amuse himself,” that it was simply a way, to use Dr. Johnson’s phrase, “to disburden the day.”

All of this becomes even clearer with Jacob Burckhardt’s *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*. As Hayden White observes, “The remembrance of things past is (for Burckhardt) the sole obligation of the historian. He is required not to impose upon the fragments of the past fables that might inspire to heroism in the present. He is not permitted to ‘dramatize’ them in such a way as to induce faith in the healing capacities of cooperative social action. And he is specifically enjoined from seeking the general laws of historical, and cosmic process which might give to living generations a confidence in their own capacities to revive their flagging powers and to press on to the struggle for a proper humanity.”

And Burckhardt’s writings affected or reflected his life. He wrote: “I want to get away from them all... the ‘ists’ and ‘isms’ of every kind.” “I mean to be a good private individual .... I can do nothing with society as a whole.” With this famous historian, we get not a call to action but a hymn of resignation to things as they are. We get a call, if you will, in a kind of contemplation.

The Catholic intellectual tradition values contemplation, to be sure, but always views it as a moment in love. As Donne wrote:

“But as all else, being elemented too  
Love sometimes would contemplate, sometimes do.”

The Catholic appreciation for secular learning is deep and firm, and distinctive.

3. The awareness of countries touching our borders and beyond our shores is far heightened today. The vast immigration mentioned earlier, the reach of modern media, the ease of travel, improved methods of communication, the rise of the global corporation, make us more conscious of the rest of the world. Catholic schools continue to urge the question, “What are my responsibilities to this world I see?” I don’t know if it’s simply because I am older or whether it’s also the age, but in considering that question I’m far more sensitive to other cultures, their values and viewpoints, than I was thirty-some years ago.

Given that the Catholic Church is a worldwide institution, it is difficult to imagine a Catholic university without an international sensitivity.

4. Catholic schools still relish religious practices but they are different in number, quality, and type from what I knew. The improvement in the liturgy has not been linear over time; there’ve been some rocky moments along the way. But in general I’d say that the liturgy in Catholic schools is more welcoming and inclusive. And retreats are more sophisticated, more psychologically astute.

The liturgies at Catholic universities are important in a way we don't often appreciate. Universities depend on so many people living and working together to thrive as communities, and yet we too frequently divide ourselves into the traditional categories: faculty, staff, students. At interfaith services, at Catholic liturgies open to all, in quiet places reserved for prayer, people gather, commuter student, resident assistant, engineering professor, registrar, dancer, maintenance worker, we gather across all the normal boundaries to worship together. Liturgy symbolizes and stimulates the richer community to which we all aspire, reflecting the beautiful words of 1 Corinthians: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone."

5. Catholic schools continue to encourage their students to care for the less fortunate in the community. But there are some differences now. We are more aware today of structured injustices and try through the curriculum and scholarship to ponder and address them. Catholic institutions also try harder now, I think, to be good neighbors in their immediate communities.

Alan Wolfe, himself a non-Catholic, has remarked: "non-Catholics who teach at Catholic colleges and universities cannot help but recognize concerns with social justice as central to the mission of those institutions." But he adds another, more challenging observation: "Nonetheless, I am not at all happy with the ways in which concerns for social justice have been implemented at many Catholic colleges and universities. In brief, there is sometimes a conflict between the urge to do the right thing and an appreciation of the complexities of what the right thing to do actually is. As a social scientist, I have come to appreciate the ironies involved in human behavior, especially when it comes to politics and policy.... My experiences with Catholic colleges in universities...are that commitments to social justice are treated as if they are not intellectually problematic." The challenge for Catholic colleges is to marry their respect for learning with their concern for social justice.

6. The faculties and administration of Catholic schools are no longer dominated by nuns, brothers, and priests. Their steeply declining numbers, the increasing size and complexity of the institutions, and the deepened appreciation for the work of laypeople in the Church, have led to a different landscape, in many ways far lusher. But in looking to the horizon one sights a problem. Clerics and religious have traditionally been the hinges that have bound schools to the institutional Church. Will such schools remain Catholic in the decades to come? Thirty years from now will LMU's president even consider a topic like today's?

And of course, even raising these concerns can lead non-Catholics to another question: why am I here? Because of legal requirements (public benefit institutions can't discriminate based on religion); by default (there simply aren't enough Catholics in my discipline, professional field, or with my needed skills); in order to advance the university's prestige (even if there are enough, the Catholics aren't as qualified); or for other reasons.

7. There's still no Catholic Harvard or Stanford, Berkeley, or Yale. But there are now several Catholic universities in the *U.S. News & World Report* top 25. And Catholic colleges and universities are very much in evidence in the upper reaches of the regional rankings. So Catholic universities are perceived to be significantly stronger academically than thirty years ago. But there are those who wonder at what price this progress.

## LMU

Seven areas that show both continuities and changes in Catholic education. The selection has not been entirely random. Five of the seven constitute what I would call marks or signatures of Catholic colleges and universities. One, the relative roles of religious and lay, is slightly different. I'll treat that one, and the question of academic prestige, last as I turn my eye to LMU.

LMU must be a place where the varieties of religious traditions are taken seriously, and we are fortunate to have a theology department that does so. We must educate our students not simply to tolerate but even more to appreciate and learn from religions other than their own. And we want our faculty through their scholarly endeavors to contribute to inter-religious dialogue at its highest and deepest levels. Our location in southern California, needless to say, both helps us to fulfill this ambition, and confers a responsibility to do so. And, as a Catholic university, we also have an important role in helping the Church to understand its place in a world so religiously diverse.

LMU clearly respects secular learning. Indeed, academic excellence is both the overarching theme of our strategic plan and the foundation of all that we do here. It is important that we view not just theology and philosophy but all areas of human knowing as critical to the University's mission and identity. LMU's mission statement begins, after all, with the "encouragement of learning..."

When we talk of "hiring for mission" in recruiting faculty that phrase is often taken to refer to a host of characteristics that describe a "fit" with the particular university that LMU is. Since we take academic excellence as a prerequisite, we sometimes neglect to realize its centrality to our mission.

Let me try to put it more starkly. A mathematics professor who never mentions God, values, or justice in his or her class may still be contributing mightily to the University's mission simply by teaching mathematics supremely well and maintaining a vigorous research agenda. In my experience the Catholic Church has valued knowledge because of its importance to individuals becoming fully themselves, developing their skills to care for the world, and coming to know God. What would not fit with LMU's mission would be a view of all knowledge as merely a game, intellectual play with no relevance to large human goals and goods.

Because our belief in the importance and power of knowledge is so strong, we want our faculty to contribute through their scholarship and creative work to increasing knowledge. This is part of our mission, and the University has a corresponding obligation to help our professors in that endeavor.

If any Catholic university must educate its students for world citizenship, how much more LMU with its traditions and locations, its particular gifts of time and place. Both the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary and the Society of Jesus are international orders, and Los Angeles, as the new Rome, is a world center.

Our curriculum should offer ample opportunities for students to probe other countries and cultures and to study their languages. And perhaps most importantly we should encourage

students to study abroad and try to provide more financial aid assistance to enable more of them to do so.

I want to thank in a special way Dean Kenyon Chan for beginning the Bellarmine Forums. Each year, the Forum focuses on a topic of international importance, with particular attention to ethical issues. Last year's forum on genocide, directed by Professor Daniel Smith-Christopher, and this year's on globalization, directed by Professor Fredericks, are initiatives of which the University can be proud.

LMU boasts wonderful liturgies and a thriving retreat program. Interfaith services are well done and the CLC program is extraordinary. In the area of religious practices on campus, rites and retreats, we can be a leader in Catholic higher education. We are indebted to our Campus Ministry team for building such a distinguished program.

The topic of social justice at LMU is large and important and could well be a convocation address in itself. Fortunately, I can refer you to a thorough analysis of our situation. Last Fall, Dr. Jabbara asked Professors Coleman and Portnoy; Father Caro, the Assistant to the President for Mission and Identity; and Pam Rector, Director of the Center for Service and Action, to conduct a social justice audit of the University. I am grateful to them for doing so and refer you to their exhaustive and challenging report. Even to summarize it would, I fear, fail to do it justice.

I simply want to flag one aspect of what we are doing. I think that it is particularly important that we connect our respect for knowledge with our thirst for justice. Therefore, I am happy that we have implemented a competitive annual faculty grant program with five grant awards each year, for research on topics related to the service of faith and the promotion of justice. We have also initiated a similar program, with another five grants each year, to enhance the academic dimension of outreach programs and to encourage faculty to develop new courses with a faith/justice component.

The emphasis on knowledge joined with a concern for social justice reminds us that LMU is about the education of the whole person; we yearn to form men and women of both competence and compassion, sensitive to one another, conscious of the power of social structures, respectful of complexity, yet willing to engage the world around them with discerning love. Shaping such people requires both student affairs and the faculty to work together because the education of the whole person takes place both inside and outside the classroom.

And even while we pursue these lofty aims, we desire in pragmatic ways to be a good neighbor in our community. And so I am happy that Dolores Canizales has joined us in the position of Director of Community and Government Relations. Dolores will help us to serve Westchester, its surrounding communities, and the great City of Los Angeles.

I've been talking about my Catholic youth, my Catholic present, and LMU in light of them both. One could easily have organized these reflections in another way: the encouragement of learning, the education of the whole person, the service of faith and the promotion of justice. LMU's mission. It's a mission that has been birthed, protected, and promoted by the Catholic, Marymount, Jesuit traditions. How will that mission move into the future with relatively fewer sisters, brothers, and priests, with the ties to the Catholic Church no longer as clear?

## PARTNERSHIPS

Partnership has been embedded among the Marymount sisters and Jesuits from the very beginning. The Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary are in the United States because of Mrs. Sarah Peter, a laywoman from Cincinnati, who brought them here. The Jesuits are in education because the leading citizens of Messina paid for them to open a school.

The meanings and dimensions of this tradition of partnership have changed over the centuries. Our own time invites us to imagine it anew. How shall we think of ourselves at LMU?

As we consider that question, I'd like to call your attention to some reflections of Professor John Coleman, Casassa Professor of Social Values, which he delivered at this past year's President's Institute VI on the Catholic Nature of Loyola Marymount University. He suggests that the most impressive efforts of thinking through the identity of Catholic universities have sought a rationale with four elements:

1.           theologically grounded but with an inclusive theology which recognizes that God's word and action transcend any one church or Christian tradition such that inter-religious dialogue become essential to the grounding;
2.           have sought for what can be morally argued, with some appeal to an overlapping consensus between different religious groups and men and women of good will;
3.           have looked beyond rhetoric to institutional embodiment; and
4.           have relied on persuasion and public argument rather than sectarian fiat.

What does all of this mean most immediately and concretely? That we talk to one another and listen to each other. I am indebted to Fr. Caro for all that he is doing to facilitate our discussion of mission and identity and encourage all of you, whatever your background or beliefs, or position at the University, to enter into the conversations about our mission and identity.

We care for Loyola Marymount together. All partnership begins in conversation and sustains itself through conversation, often calm, sometimes passionate, occasionally heated, attempting always to be honest and respectful. This conversation can be richer in the years to come than it would have been decades ago given all that has happened in the world and at LMU over the years, given your talent and diversity. Where will that conversation and our partnership take us? There is no way to know. But I think that we can be confident that over time, through our talking and listening, the Word will take flesh, become incarnate, take hold in our institution in new ways as the eras change.

Where will we rank in the *U.S. News* ratings in the years to come? Who cares. If we become ever more a university that encourages learning, educates the whole person, serves faith and promotes justice then we will have done what matters; we will fulfill our promise for God's glory and the good of the world. Not ours to "think in millions, billions." We will be like

*one female angel dancing alone in her stocking feet,  
a small jazz combo working in the background.*

*She sways like a branch in the wind, her beautiful  
eyes closed, and the tall thin bassist leans over  
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