

LMU|LA Office of the President

Today and Two Tomorrows

Thank you, Executive Vice President and Provost Poon.

We welcome today:

Our esteemed Congresswoman of the 43rd district, the Honorable Maxine Waters and Ambassador Sidney Williams;

Members of the Board of Trustees: Reverend Scott Coble, S.J.; Reverend Allan Deck, S.J.; Karen Dial; Joseph Knott, here with us, led by Chair Paul Viviano;

Members of our Board of Regents, led by Chair Maria Salinas;

Chancellor Rev. Robert Walsh, S.J.;

LMU Faculty, Staff, and Students;

Sisters of St. Joseph of Orange, Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, Jesuits, interfaith clergy;

Alumni and Friends;

John Beatty, Johnny Mori, and Chris De Silva,

We thank them once again for that fabulous performance.

I thank each of you for joining us this morning.

I welcome our newest members to the LMU community: students, faculty, and staff. I celebrate our new leadership: Roberta Espinoza, vice provost for global-local initiatives; Terri Mangione, dean of students; Craig Pintens, Athletic Director; Peggy Rajski, Dean of SFTV; Dayle Smith, Dean of CBA; and Kat Weaver, associate provost for research and professional development. I also welcome to their new positions: José Badenes, associate provost for undergraduate education; Katherine Brown, staff senate president; Marne Campbell, faculty senate president; Marianne Carlton, associate dean for finance and administration at Loyola Law School; Mary McCullough, interim dean for the School of Education; Alo Coleman, ASLMU president, and Nicole Mann, GSLMU president. I thank each of you for helping us strengthen our ever-growing family of Lions.

My goal in each convocation is to explore where issues of our time rub shoulders with our shared work at LMU—to articulate and expand a vision of how LMU can engage the world with purpose. We’ve talked about diversity as the font of human creativity, and why collaborating in acts of imagination should be at the heart of what a university does—and how that can happen here. Today I invite you to join me in contemplating our present and our future, to “globally imagine” two distinct pathways that the future could take, and how we at LMU can help make the difference between them.

But before we get there, let’s celebrate. In yesterday’s LMU This Week, I shared a wide range of our recent achievements; today I highlight just a few.

Our primary commitment—to academic excellence—this year won long-overdue recognition for our achievements in teaching and scholarship in the liberal arts and sciences. At the end of July, the Phi Beta Kappa Society granted LMU a new chapter. This hard-earned distinction from the nation’s most prestigious academic honor society extols and affirms LMU’s rigorous standards of achievement. The three-year application process started when the late Rae Linda Brown, our beloved former associate provost for undergraduate education, laid the groundwork for pursuing Phi Beta Kappa. Other leaders shepherded the application process to fruition: we thank provost Tom Poon; vice-provost David Sapp; associate professor of history and committee chair Nick Rosenthal; our deans, Bryant Alexander, Kris Brancolini, Tina Choe, and Robbin Crabtree; and myriad faculty, staff, and students who contributed to this effort.

We rejoice at the opening of our new Playa Vista Campus, where our School of Film and Television graduate programs, our executive MBA program, and more will lead Los Angeles and Silicon Beach in pursuing innovative professional and interdisciplinary education. I thank those who helped establish our new campus, including Board Chair Paul Viviano, who led the committee that explored the project; Executive Vice President and Chief Administrative Officer Lynne Scarboro, who guided our internal planning process; Senior VP and Chief Financial Officer Tom Fleming and Associate VP Patrick Hogan, who led our budget planning; Provosts Joe Hellige and Tom Poon; the deans and faculty of the School of Film and Television; and leaders across the divisions of academic affairs, facilities management, finance, ITS, marketing and communications, parking and transportation, and more. Playa Vista is, as Dean Rajski has been proclaiming since she arrived, a “game changer” for LMU.

Fifty years ago, Loyola University welcomed a new partner, Marymount College, to its campus. The new partnership required collaboration, hope, and trailblazing conversations between Marymount College President Raymunde McKay and Loyola President Charles Casassa who ushered us into the future. We owe gratitude to these leaders—to their boldness and their creativity.

Speaking of bold, and creative, Dr. Abbie Robinson-Armstrong, our inimitable vice president of intercultural affairs, will retire this spring. Dr. Abbie, your visionary leadership has transformed the way LMU understands and cultivates educational equity. You have inspired us to nurture the discipline of thinking more openly and listening more empathetically. We have been blessed by your leadership, and we are grateful for the legacy you leave with us, a legacy upon which I promise we will build. Thank you, Vice-President Robinson-Armstrong.

Abbie’s work has made a better LMU, and by doing so, has helped make a better world. That dynamic is the theme for my talk today. The idea of a “better world” has been on my mind a lot this year, in part because a key phrase that emerged during our branding initiative was “Creating the World We Want to Live In,” or as I prefer, “Creating the World In Which We Want to Live.” But the notion of a “better

world” also continues to inhabit our thoughts as we look around the world these days: much of what we see troubles our minds and our spirits.

I’ll pick up today where Rev. José Badenes, SJ, led us in his homily at the Mass of the Holy Spirit last month. José warned us: “Rather than isolating ourselves inside the beauty of our gated community and creating an ivory tower to evade what goes on around us, our Ignatian mission compels us to engage reality, as difficult as it may be sometimes, and act to change it for the better.” My topic is thus a tale of two “tomorrows”: one, a world as we fear ours may become; the other, the world as we know it should be and can be—if touched by the students we help to form here at LMU.

Let’s start with today—a moment of heightened turmoil and anxiety, of rapid social upheaval—as has occurred episodically throughout human history. For millions of years, we, humans, have birthed technologies to assist in adaptation to our environment. We learned to fashion tools that could offload physical work to external devices—extensions of hands that helped us hunt and cook; of clothing that helped shelter us from the elements; of shoes and wheels and trailways that helped us move about more rapidly; and eventually, extensions of the mind—cave paintings that captured emotions, memories and dreams; later, alphabets that helped preserve with precision our words, customs, stories, and laws.

Today these tools have brought us wholly-new capacities—and: environments. Our shelters have central heat and air; our explosives reduce mountains to rubble; our “wheels” now drive themselves. And automated, self-guided, smart technologies are emerging to offload other tasks—even thinking—to external entities. Because of these technologies, we sometimes possess enhanced freedom from mundane tasks, but we also appropriate new dangers. Deadly byproducts of poor choices abound: the creation of weapons of mass destruction; devastation of our natural environment. At a more familiar level, these technologies threaten to distance us from nature and the simple life; and reduce our sense of dignity and agency.

Nothing in our “today” has shifted more dramatically than the tools of knowledge. A new world—one of rapid communication and information abundance—has opened astonishing possibilities: we hold devices that access immediately information that eclipses the contents of every book ever printed. Yet attending these developments, paradoxically, we find diminished confidence in the idea of truth; we find commercialization of information; increased vulnerability to unseen manipulations; invasiveness of the private and the personal; a ceaseless cacophony of voices that confuses even our most valiant efforts to distinguish what is noise from what is signal. Oddly—perversely so—our exponentiated communications environment now lures us toward insulation: a “gated” existence wherein each person can harness the power of algorithms to maintain a personalized partition of one’s own political, social, and disciplinary boundaries, rather than exploring beyond them in search of a chance encounter, an unsought insight, a serendipitous discovery.

To what might these conditions lead, tomorrow? Accelerated information proliferation, including maps of our DNA and our behavioral tendencies, will bring diminished privacy and autonomy. “Free choice” could become illusory, with information filtered by those in power, “customized” to the individual voter or consumer. We may even volunteer such customization in tomorrow’s social media, substituting artificial like-minded—that is, life-like, Turing-test-positive—bots—for true friendship—friendship traded for constant self-assurance via a customized platter of 0s and 1s.

And as our climate degrades, changes in our natural environment—temperature, coastal erosion, species extinction—will be accompanied by parallel social calamities: devastating famines, global inequality, social violence on an unprecedented scale, and access to health and education limited to a chosen few.

And more could be in the mix: We do not know the direction in which our continuing journey to map and model the human mind will take us. In the past, we have “offloaded” our memories to books and libraries; today, we have offloaded sequential mental processing to computers. What dimension of our mind and our humanity will we offload next? And what consequences will erupt when this next “offload” takes place?

That describes our first tomorrow: one whose seeds are the troubling tendencies of today.

OK, not pretty.

Most of you know: I am not a technophobe. I believe that today’s wondrous changes may yet prove to be among humankind’s greatest blessings. But let’s be clear: our evolved human blueprint is simply not attuned to navigate these creations and their effects—not without our brainpower—and our wisdom—intervening. We are past a stage where evolution can allow us a patient adaptation to the new environment—the one that we have created. We must now vie to pursue a chosen direction, rather than default to an unguided drift toward desolation.

How should a great university—a Catholic, Jesuit, and Marymount university—respond to today and our first tomorrow in a way that helps bring about a better tomorrow than the one I just outlined?

Let me speak to three keys to a second, better tomorrow, and then follow with several examples of how we are, this very day, creating such a tomorrow. Foremost is our first key, on which I will spend some time: the learning experience. I have noted many times that the intersection of ultimate consequence for our work as educators is the exchange of minds that occurs in our classrooms, studios, laboratories, library, living spaces, and online, between teacher and student.

As a math professor, my greatest moments came in breakthrough experiences, where I could see what had been mystifying to students suddenly become demystified. I loved, when introducing computational complexity to students, to sense their initial befuddlement—furrowed brows, mouths agape as they grasped for meaning upon learning, say, Stephen Cook’s theory of NP-completeness. But we broke it down. We used simpler examples, Rubik’s Cubes and traveling salespeople—to demonstrate the challenge of NP-hardness. Student questions led us to chase down what was in our way; and through them, I learned new ways of teaching the topic, of applying it, even of understanding it. The students’ anxieties evolved—into discovery—and, to my delight, so did mine.

When we teach, we build, step-by-step, upon known foundations of discipline and technique; modeling what curiosity is and rehearsing techniques until they become second nature. When this works best, together, we and our students create a camaraderie in inquiry: a sandbox in which students can explore new ideas, and yes, in which they can fail—again! and again!—on their way to greater mastery. We open avenues that ultimately enable something we have yet to understand, much like Stephen Cook did when he took a step that neither mathematics nor computer science had permitted, creating something remarkable—mind-shattering—but built on a foundation of what was known.

Amidst all the worries of our troubled world, our work matters precisely because these consequential moments of learning, over time, help determine our choice between our two tomorrows.

A second key to our second world—the world in which we want to live—will be learners who continually encounter the other—learners experienced in seeking and finding God and God’s attributes—truth, beauty, justice, compassion—in all people, in all things. Our better tomorrow will need learners who approach questions of meaning through purposeful encounter with others.

And a third key: an active existence founded in discernment: to recognize our inner senses of consolation and desolation; to give voice to our hearts’ and souls’ yearnings. I have always loved the advice that blues legend B.B. King gave to ZZ Top guitarist Billy Gibbons: “Learn to play what you want to hear.” This advice applies to creators of all types: write the kind of novel you like to read; teach as you hope to be taught; direct the kind of film you wish to experience. Buy yourself some cheap sunglasses! This capacity for discernment and action equips our students to create the world in which we want to live, provided the spirit of “persons for and with others” scaffolds our creativity.

Higher education has as much to offer as any sector of our society in helping to build a second, better tomorrow; and I am convinced that LMU is uniquely positioned to contribute as much to that effort as any university, anywhere. Here’s why: the seeds we are planting this very moment comprise our second tomorrow—one in which desolation dissolves... Into hope.

Our second tomorrow—still rife with abundance of information, communication, and automation—will have in its midst a Lion who discerns the intrinsic value of the persons with whom they work. Our Student and Intercultural Affairs professionals are laying a foundation from which our students can thrive throughout their lives: Students who have participated in LMU Cares, our Courageous Conversations program, our Inclusive Discourse events, or our Implicit Bias Initiative will enter their futures prepared to listen and continue to learn with compassion.

Our second world will be led by students and alumni who have helped support Mujer, a literacy nonprofit in Guatemala founded by professor of political science Jodi Finkel. Through Jodi's mentorship, these Lions will be versed in promoting women's rights through education; they will perceive the world around them differently and will address analogous opportunities in other lands.

In the same way, our teachers-in-training, with Magaly Lavadenz, executive director of our Center of Equity for English Learners, will enter our second tomorrow ready to meet America's critical need for highly qualified bilingual teachers, so children can maintain and be proud of their first language, while becoming proficient in English to achieve academic success—and a bonding of cultures for the greater good.

Students who take associate professor Heather Tarleton's "Health and Well Being in Homeless Communities" class will gain insight into how health challenges do not affect all persons equally, becoming voices that seek better health outcomes for those living on the margins of society.

And what of tomorrow's rapid communication and information abundance? Our Lions, having practiced contemplative learning, as taught by professors Cathleen McGrath or Paul Harris or Paul Humphreys, will possess the introspection and focus needed to crack through the clamor of their surroundings, finding deeper significances that otherwise might be missed.

Loyola Law School graduate Hannah Brown will inspire a deeper appreciation of the value of human life through her work for the Loyola Project for the Innocent. Because Hannah had the chance to help secure the freedom of four wrongfully-convicted clients, she and other Law School alumni will underscore the importance of evidence in an age when truth too often seems ablut.

Our Lions' hunger for finding and sharing truth in a rapidly changing—and often chaotic—environment has resolved into our new journalism major, directed by Evelyn McDonnell. Though our future journalists may not eliminate alternative facts, their perspicacity, sharpened in the classroom and in the field, will render them responsible and honest purveyors of the news.

Students like Alexandra Henry, who last year journeyed to China with assistant professor of art history Melody Rodari, learning the historical and aesthetic importance of artworks produced during the Silk Road period, will forever carry with them a deeper understanding of other times, places, and people.

Majors in our new environmental studies program will grasp the interconnectedness of our natural world and help discover ways to solve the troubles that plague our planet.

And the freedom of accelerated leisure via automation? I think of ASLMU Vice President Brenda Quintanilla: a young woman; a Dreamer; a doer, who already manages to accomplish more than people who have been with us twice as long. Imagine how Brenda's life might be enriched, and how hers would enrich others,' with a few more hours of purposeful "leisure." Talk about a better world!

These are some examples of how our students and alumni will be prepared to lead the way—toward a better world, making wise judgments, distinguishing signal from noise. They—and we, through our teaching and example—will model the Ignatian ethos of inculturation, which teaches us to welcome, accept, accomodate, engage, dialogue, and evolve.

I know I have walked us down a "change the world" path, and I am not the first to do so. And even to consider curing the world is intimidating. But to create the world in which we want to live, we do not have to change every heart, nor every mind. Like the leaven in Jesus's parable, a few measures of compassion, of courage, of purpose—a few Lions—may be just enough.

At LMU, we can trust our foundational commitment to the liberal arts tradition while applying its values to an ever-changing professional landscape. We can educate the whole person at a moment when what it means to be a whole person is up for grabs. And we have to lead: because no institution in higher education has yet grasped fully and met the challenges we are facing in the ways our world needs.

We must ask: what can I do to help make the most of this opportunity? I know what I intend to do: I am going to help raise a lot of money. In April, our Board of Trustees approved our plan to move forward with a comprehensive fundraising campaign, for which we are currently in the "quiet phase." Although the details of the campaign are still being determined, through our planning process—which included Trustees, Regents, Deans, and our Faculty Senate presidents—we clarified our primary needs—and I am going to knock on every door I can to make the case for the impact LMU can have on the larger world. This is what I will say:

- We need to expand dramatically our endowed support for student financial aid to improve the odds that each admitted student can receive an LMU education without undue financial burden.

- We seek new endowed faculty chairs and professorships to expand the proportion of tenure-line faculty, especially in areas of interdisciplinary expertise, that can help to address some of the world's most beguiling problems.
- We can and should build a creativity-centered campus, with new facilities worthy of our growing excellence in imagination-oriented fields: including the fine and performing arts; film and television; engineering; digital and immersive learning.
- We must expand endowed funding for further-internationalizing our academic programs, including Study Abroad, so that our students will become impassioned global citizens with a broader understanding of our complex, interdependent world.
- And we must re-invigorate our athletics facilities, to give our student athletes and our fans a world-class experience and to renew the ferocity of our pride as Lions—and the reputation that winning imputes.

Here is the conviction that will guide me in every conversation I have with LMU donors and friends: My certainty that what happens day by day in the intellectual encounters between teachers and students, and what more—CAN—happen, can and will change the world for the better. Will you too share your confidence in the significance of what we do with your students, with your colleagues, and with strangers whom you meet? Amidst today's challenges, we all crave for a better tomorrow: let us build that hope together in the work we do here each day; let us renew our commitment, to leaven the world with the richness that abounds in the hearts of we Lions; to shape together, with purpose, with faith, that better tomorrow—the world in which we want to live—with love and with joy.