



Inaugural Address

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I would like to start this address with something that we do often in Mass and that is to turn to your neighbors and greet them in peace. Could you do that for me as a sign of building our community?

Your Eminence, Fr. Rutler, students, alumni, faculty, staff, friends — Celts all!

Welcome to a place you all know so well, a place of Goodness, Discipline, Knowledge, and Community. And welcome to a place that springs forth from the heart of our Church, the heart of our city, and the hearts of our people. Also, welcome to a place that is at once joyfully Catholic and open to all of good will. And welcome to a place of the new: a new evangelization, a new hope, new ways of growing, new impact, and a new light.

Why new? Because we need to beat the new challenges that face us. This year we celebrate 70 remarkable years of this University, and those are remarkable years of growth. But all along the way, there have been voices of doom, voices of doubt.

Early on, Fr. Guinan – and this was right after the school opened – received a letter directing him to close the University of St. Thomas. And this was right after it started! The reason? Well, they didn't think they had enough money; it just didn't look good, things weren't going well, so they thought from afar. So he did what any practical Basilian would do, he disregarded the letter and set out to build a University ... and grow we did.

Then in later decades, there were other challenges. There was also a time of constriction of the University. There were fiscal concerns. We had a nursing program that was “temporarily” shuttered, for a few decades, and athletics went away. But through it all, we continued to grow, the University of St. Thomas continued to grow. And so it is today.

My opportunity to be on campus and to learn from those with whom I have interacted tells me we have some of those same challenges, some of those same voices of doom. There is distrust. There is internal strife. There is fear and there is doubt – all of those are present here. But we will not be defined by that darkness. No! Indeed, we will pray for those that have that doom and we will act, and we will become a beacon of light for all. And we will do that by building a Culture of Encounter.

Now, some of you have heard me talk about this before and that’s not an original idea of my own; I borrowed it from the Holy Father. A Culture of Encounter, as we will understand it here at the University of St. Thomas, is one that is very close to our DNA. One that we know from the very core of our fabric. We are about people and when we see the person in front of us, we are present with that person. There may be dissonant cords at times but the answer to that is that we will with dignity and respect engage with each other. We will be open to the love of each other, the one that is in front of us. And in fact that love will be how we will be known. Others will know us by our love for one another.

And, as with most things in the University, that Love oftentimes comes from our students. Our mascot here is the Celts, and many of you know what that stands for, right? Caring, Engaged, Loyal, Transformational Servant Leaders. And that moniker is one that we wear proudly. It will set the tone for how we are with one another. Ours will be a radical Christian hospitality where all of good will will be welcomed and there will be strong input from all quarters.

We are in the world but our way is not of the world – and the world has many challenges for us, especially those of us in higher education. I could talk for hours about the challenges that face higher education today. You know many of them because they

are in the news media and in the culture. There is the question of college cost. There is the question of the value of a college degree. And even locally, in our Houston Chronicle this summer, one of the headlines was “Is College a Good Investment? Maybe not.” Now I take strong exception to all of that, but those are good questions, and that’s why our University must step forward and be clear about the value that we bring to the individual and to society as a whole.

UST has, by some quarters, some financial concerns. But those concerns are not existential; those concerns are challenges that we will overcome as we have throughout the history of this University – and yet we continue to grow. We will grow in our partnerships. We already are a member of the Texas Medical Center, the world’s largest medical center and a point of pride. We contribute mightily to that and we will continue to expand those relationships. The City of Houston and the metropolitan area is one in which we take great pride in being an active partner. We will build relationships that will thrive. Our students will have internships and experiential opportunities. We will leverage our position in the marketplace of ideas in Houston. We will also continue to engage the arts community and museums; we sit right in the middle of that! We will continue to build those bridges and accelerate our connection with that community. With our Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston, we have perfect opportunities to build those bridges and extend them. It is one of the fastest-growing dioceses in the country and we will take a leadership role along with the Cardinal in helping that come to realization. We also have the Personal Ordinariate of the Chair of St. Peter here locally as well, and so we will engage with our newest members of the Church, at least here in the local area.

Our students are engaged in ways you can’t believe. They were some of the first people in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey to set out to the shelters to help people. And what did they do? They helped people and on their way, they were praying the Rosary. I think that speaks volumes for how our students are engaged and what their commitments are.

We will also continue to grow in the way of enrollment. I don’t know if I’ve shared this with all of you yet, but our undergraduate enrollment continues to grow and exceeded our target! We’re only one of about 30% of colleges in the country that did that. Most of

them didn't even make their target. We have much to celebrate as we look forward. Spring applications for transfer students are up and the institution is strong as a whole. Our philanthropy continues to build; we just closed a \$150 million dollar campaign successfully and launched our new Center for Science and Health Professions. Those are visible signs that we are overall strong. We have operational challenges and we will manage those and we will succeed with them.

I don't know if many of you understand this but the University of St. Thomas is bigger than most private colleges. Sometimes we don't always think about ourselves in that way. We are a light, and even a small light pierces the darkness. And so we have often thought of ourselves as a small light, a small college. But the University of St. Thomas is a light, yes! But, it is not small. That is not our destiny, and it is not our path. From the outset, we were meant to grow.

"Let us grow in Christ" is our University motto - and you've heard that - and we embrace boldly the righteous ambition that is embodied in our motto. To do otherwise is a betrayal of our heritage. The strength the University of St. Thomas has will set it apart from other institutions. In 1951, Bishop Nold, who was Bishop then of the Archdiocese, addressed the graduates of St. Thomas and I think his words are prophetic for us today. He said "May the infant St. Thomas University grow into a giant exulting in strength and vigor. May the feeble torch lit today grow into a mighty beacon light of influence and guidance. May the motto upon the University seal be every year more extensively realized, Crescamus in Christo — let us grow in Christ."

And why do we grow? Well, it's part of our heritage and it's what we have continued to do. But, there's more to that. Our world needs our voices, our students and our light. We've seen the darkness of the 20th century. It was a time of more martyrs than any other time in aggregate leading up to that period. We've been tested by that. Our University has an opportunity to address the questions that society poses. You know, some people think that now is a post-truth era, a post-Christian era. There is the notion that there is a dictatorship of relativism, a culture of death, a Church on the decline and some would say – it is finished! Yet we grow, we are a light.

Many lights have flickered into being over the course of the Christian experience and we heard about one of those earlier. In a particular way, one was ignited in France in the early 19th century. There, that small spark begun by a group of priests amid horrid governmental persecution endeavored to teach truth and to welcome each one's gifts and to bring them to light. That beginning of the Basilian Fathers continues to lead us today and in fact, what they began there is really the rally point for our institution. Our faculty and staff in a particular way have the ability to connect with our students, and our students to connect with them, in an almost mystical experience of bringing to life the gifts that the Spirit has imbued each one with, both students and faculty members. And that special connection is what really sets the University of St. Thomas apart because it is something — that is the vocational notion, as we Catholics understand it. It is that those gifts are brought to flourish, and then they are brought to be shared. That is something that we all agree on! That is the point from which we will go forward and build a united University of St. Thomas.

The parable of the talents I think is instructive in this notion. We are given those talents and what should we do with them? If we do not go out, if we do not share them, if we do not multiply them, then the University is worse for it and it is counter to what we are as a growing institution. Our truth must go out into the world. We are a Church on the march. We are a University on the march and that march is for the goodness of the world, for each individual. The individual growth of our students will impact the world in ways that we can't even imagine and they can't yet imagine either. Our New Evangelization that the University embraces is one that is not about proselytizing. Ours is an open University that welcomes people of all faiths and people of no faith. It is because we are Catholic that we must reach out to others of good will. We will be leaders in our location, the greater Houston area, and we will be leaders beyond. Houston sits at the center of a part of North America that continues to grow for the Church. It is a nexus point between cultures. It is what we do. It is our University. It is the Catholic Church and that's what we must embrace. It is our destiny in fulfilling that mission. We will become more of a center for religious expression and dialogue. It is in our nature and it is what we must do.

There is also some question that people have about the role of science and the role of faith - and we heard about that earlier today. They are like a beautiful couple dancing

together. The steps work in union with one another and we can sit back in awe and wonder as they perform the magic that brings to life their individual talents.

Our beacon will burn brightly. It will be a light shining in the darkness for others. All of you have seen the morning sun as it glints off the dome of the Chapel of St. Basil. That is the kind of beacon, a new morning, a new hope that springs forth from us.

And so I ask all of you to join me in that notion. Join together as the University of St. Thomas, as we grow together and as we light a way toward a new future for our institution, a new future for this community, and a new future for the world. Thank you very much.