

Remarks by Reverend Michael J. Garanzini, S.J.
President, Loyola University Chicago

On the occasion of Faculty Convocation
Sunday, September 11, 2011
The Tenth Anniversary of the 9-11 Tragedy

Let me begin by welcoming all of you to this event which marks the beginning of a new academic year. I am especially happy to see the new faculty who have joined us and to see that the size of this convocation continues to grow. It is a relatively new tradition here at Loyola, as most of you know. And, it is a good tradition: we are able to welcome new scholars and colleagues into the community, congratulate those with significant achievements like Dr. Peter Schraeder, our faculty Member of the Year, and those who were promoted to Tenure and to the rank of Full Professor, take advantage of the good weather to celebrate, catch up with one another and collectively wish each other well. And, my special thanks to Ann Reilly, Marian Claffey and Provost Pelissero for organizing our gathering today.

I will not review matters which I traditionally take up later this month in the semi-annual the state of the university address. This semester, those campus gatherings will be in a week or two and on each campus, here at Lakeshore, at Water Tower and in Maywood. At that time, I will speak about our academic and fiscal health, progress on our strategic plans, the exciting developments happening in Maywood, successes and honors of various kinds. And, of course, it is another opportunity for all of us to meet and greet.

As we all know, today's event is colored by the sad memories of September 11th ten years ago. And, as one might do in, say, a good homily, it is important to connect the readings of the day—in this case, the sentiments of the day—with an appropriate reflection on how these might impact or concern us as a University community. Or, perhaps said another way, how do the challenges of a 9/11 ten-year commemoration relate to or inform us about what it means to be a community of faculty, students and staff in this Catholic, Jesuit institution of higher learning here in Chicago.

Last week, I asked a small group of our first-year presidential scholars if they would consider reflecting on this event and sharing their thoughts with me. I was curious about what 9/11 might mean to them. It occurred to me during their own academic convocation on the East Lawn just over a week ago now, that they were in the third grade when the towers went down and had lived more than half of their lives in a post-9/11 world. What does 9/11 mean to them, I wondered? What do they think we are commemorating today? So, I asked them: "What is in your estimation the meaning of 9/11 for this country, and so what are we commemorating on this anniversary? At Labor Day, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving or Fourth of July, for instance, we know what we are celebrating or recalling. We have, as a nation, a shared sense of meaning about these commemorations. What is your sense of our shared meaning about this day?"

A brief aside. If you have followed the press as it has covered our preparations for today's memorials, you know that from the White House to various planning committees for memorial

events today and throughout the week, there is a hodgepodge of messages and talking points and in some instances considerable disagreement has erupted over what is appropriate or what the central message ought to be. It might be said that our leaders and our collective selves have not done a very fine job of shaping the story of 9/11 into a coherent meaning. (There is an interesting piece in today's "NYTimes" on how high school history books are handling the description of the event, which is telling. A survey of high school textbooks from this and others nations demonstrates how the event is still a filter for various agendas and becomes a "talking point" for everything from the dangers of American hegemony, to a salute to volunteerism.)

The responses from six of our students were, to be honest, what I expected. Here are a few: "This is a commemoration to help us be aware of the ever-present reality of terrorism in today's world." "This commemorates a pivotal moment in America's (seemingly endless stages of—my addition) lost innocence" "This day is about honoring the bravery and heroism of rescuers like police and fire-fighters and ordinary citizens in the two cities where the tragedy struck." Finally, "This is about the deaths of people who died without knowing why they died."

I counted twelve different "meanings" from the six students, as each of them had at least two or three different suggestions. The most poignant of the responses was one from a young man who wrote: "All I know is that from 9/11 onward, the adults in my world were a lot more fearful."

Not that our students are not insightful, but I was relieved when I got an unsolicited email from a member of our student development staff, someone closer to our generation. I would like to share a bit of what he wrote about 9/11 and his visit that day to this campus. I should say that while this person works in student development today, he was not an employee at the time. It was his experience that day, he says, that motivated him to seek a job here.

He began his letter by describing what his and his former colleagues reactions were doing when first learning about the tragedies unfolding on TV and how these co-workers were paralyzed for the rest of the day, not sure what to do, or how to make sense of the tragedy. "Then," he writes, "a friend of mine who was working at Merz Hall (our first-year residence Hall), invited me to a prayer service at Madonna Della Strada Chapel being held that night. You would be addressing the student body."

"We arrived to the chapel and sat in the choir loft. I had not spent much time there before this and it was a quiet meditative place in the midst of a shocked and grieving world beyond Sheridan Road. There was a different sense of grief at this place. It was a grief with a conviction beyond the question. There was an impenetrable sense of justice and faith that was standing against the overwhelming fear and death off campus. It seemed that there was no doubt that the God of Peace and Resurrection was present and would journey with this community."

He goes on: "I stepped out of the chapel when all was said and done. I gazed over the lake and saw one plane coming towards Chicago over the lake. I watched it turn back and fly toward

Michigan somewhere beyond the clear and steady horizon. I turned to see people huddled in groups on the Jesuit Residence lawn and walking in pairs along the sidewalk. They were listening to one another, supporting one another, truly being bread for one another. They were seeking more faith, hope, charity (and understanding) from each other....” He ends: “I often remember the moment I stepped out of that chapel and am filled with a sense of purpose that is rooted in our Jesuit tradition.”

Matt’s letter caused me to ask: what is that source from which we operate as a community of scholars and what is our individual and collective purpose? Perhaps, we see more clearly who we are and what we are about when the pressure and confusion of a crisis or special time reveals our deeper character or nature, like the embers of a fire that become hotter and glow more brightly when one blows on them. I propose to you that events like those that happened on 9/11, back in 2001, reveal to us that a university is more than a place for discovery and for the transmission of knowledge. We are a community with the special task of meaning- making or, as Matt said, finding a “conviction beyond the question.”

What happens at Loyola, I have come to see, precisely because our world requires it, is more than the discovery of fact and transmission of knowledge. Rather, this place is about the task of finding meaning in this or any important event, tragic and sudden, or gradual and evolving. For instance, since 9/11, we see on our campuses a heightened sense of awareness of our Muslim brothers and sisters, an appreciation of the plight of those in the Middle East, an appreciation of what inspires hatred and resentment and how fact can be twisted and distorted, And, so forth. We see, too, that some interpretations have led to disastrous consequences and that these might have been avoided had more of our leaders been educated about the world beyond their own, as Professor Buckolz likes to point out in his history course on Western Civilization. And, had more citizens reflected on potential consequences, there may have been a collective will to insist on alternatives to the strategies that they proposed. Few public speeches beyond those in a university will likely concern themselves with issue like this.

Yes, our task is to study, reflect upon and propose meaning for a generation that is searching for a deeper knowledge and a deeper sense of the value and purpose of life. Exploration, analysis, reflection should always precede action, because the significance of acts and facts, is never immediately apparent. Our broken, incomplete and needy world needs men and women of humility and wisdom, scholars, with such a vocation.

And, one more point, this is why we bring not only the latest, well-tested knowledge from our disciplines to reflect on our world but we are not blind to the contribution and the wisdom garnered from the intellectual heritage of our various faith traditions. In particular, we bring, a “catholic” perspective--big C and small c-- to the matters of our day. What I am saying is that we recognize that it is our duty to engage the young people who come into our classrooms and into our offices with not only our intellects but with our hearts as well. They come with a desire, or as we say in our document on “Transformational Education, ” with a hunger for a moral compass, for integration of knowledge, for opportunities to live their lives for something beyond their own personal concerns and individual worlds. They come looking for hope and even inspiration. The true job of a faculty member at Loyola is to inspire.

I would not--- and could not-- say this if I was standing before faculty at a different kind of

institution. Indeed, it would be inappropriate. But, that is why I am not working at a different kind of institution. At the same time, I believe that this is a sentiment and conviction that we in this room share with one another. We are dedicated to enhancing, expanding and building a larger vision for our students, a vision of a world that is eager for their talents and insights, a world that is desperate for justice and inclusion which they can help forge, a world that cannot survive without reconciliation and peace among and between people of all beliefs and ethnicities. This sort of vision is, in short, built from the bits and pieces, that is, the lectures, out-of-class conversations, the courses and program challenges of the education we offer and commit to delivering.

At the Candle light vigil this evening in the East Quad, only staff and faculty will likely have been here ten years ago when hundreds of students crammed into that chapel on this day. But, the students today from various backgrounds and faith traditions, just as the students then, are expecting us to help make sense of things and when rationality and facts elude our grasp, to point to those places where mystery and the infinite wisdom of our Creator call us to rededicate ourselves to a higher purpose, to offer them “a conviction beyond the question.”

And, in this assembly tonight in this room, we do the same. We rededicate ourselves to a higher purpose. How fortunate we are to be members of such a community of scholars and teachers.