

OLLU Commencement

Sister Pearl Ceasar, CDP

December 12, 2020

Congratulations, Class of 2020! I am honored to be with you on such an important milestone in your life. We gather today to celebrate YOU and to commemorate those who built this University 125 years ago. I would like to put your graduation and Our Lady of the Lake University's history within the context of a story. It is significant that you are graduating on the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe. Together let us explore that significance.

Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to Juan Diego in Mexico in 1531. She spoke Nahuatl, (Nawatel) the language of the Aztecs. She did not speak Spanish, the language of the conquistadores from Spain. Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared to this 57-year old Nahua man who was born and became an adult within the pre-Colombian, pre-conquest Aztec empire. Under these dire historical conditions, she appeared to Juan Diego speaking his language and looking just like him with dark brown skin.

To Spanish conquistadores, the Nahua people were inferior. The conquistadores believed the Nahua's language and way of life had to be replaced with a new dominant and superior culture. God rebuked this colonial and cultural supremacy when Our Lady of Guadalupe appeared in Aztec skin, speaking the Nahua language. God showed his divine compassion for a demoralized people. Speaking to Juan Diego in his own language and looking like him, Our Lady of Guadalupe not only delivered a message, she was the message. She showed compassion and solidarity, not superiority and domination. Juan Diego, in spreading Our Lady's message, brought hope to his people. In 2002, he became the first indigenous saint from the Americas.

This University was also founded as a rebuke to what our culture says should dominate. Since the foundation of our Congregation, the Sisters have always served the poor and those disenfranchised by society. In our history, Mother Florence Walter, Superior General at the time, epitomized this mission. Peter Drucker, a management guru, would have called her an entrepreneur.

We remember her as a deeply committed woman who took risks, trusted in Divine Providence and was committed to serving those excluded from society. Building on the foundation of our Congregation, she was Juan Diego. She brought hope to others.

Mother Florence was elected Superior General in 1886 at the age of twenty-eight. It was a tumultuous time in the Congregation's history. That same year, Mayor Elmendorf offered the Congregation 16 acres of land in San Antonio. The stipulation was the Sisters had to construct buildings on these grounds within ten years. Mother Florence was undaunted and accepted the challenge. She raised \$75,000 and on August 15, 1895, the foundation was laid for Our Lady of the Lake University. In today's currency, \$75,000 is \$2,323,000. You heard right. She raised \$2,323,000 by 1895. It took courage, passion, boldness, resilience, perseverance and sheer grit to build an institution like OLLU at that time. She never gave up and did not quit. She believed we were to do God's work in furthering the mission of Jesus. Education of those excluded from the dominant culture was our call. Mother Florence's vision was to establish a college that would instill community, integrity, trust and service in its students. Within these walls, her vision embodied the Congregation's call and mission.

Today, Graduates, the story continues in you. It is your time to move our society forward and bring hope to those who are poor, excluded and alienated. Our country is confronted with the same challenges that defined the Aztecs in 1531 and faced OLLU 125 years ago. People are still rejected, dismissed and marginalized in our society. We call this racism. People are treated as inferior based on their race or ethnicity.

There are countless inequities in our country leading to homelessness, hunger and disease; the poor are excluded. We call this alienation. Racism and alienation of the poor are only a fraction of the major social issues our country faces today. It will take leaders and builders of communities to overcome these struggles so that our society can achieve a people united instead of a country divided. It will take YOU.

Our Lady of the Lake University has tackled these challenges. The eradication of racism and alienation is deeply embedded in OLLU's history evidenced by its consistent mission to address these issues.

From its inception, OLLU embraced those excluded from society. Initially, the Sisters built the University to educate women, an alienated group in our culture. By 1969, OLLU became co-educational and focused on those with no access to higher education. That focus continues today. Current students at OLLU are 65% Hispanic and 11% African American. OLLU ranks seventh in Texas and 54th nationally for the social mobility of its graduates. This is not just a dead legacy. It is a challenge for you, Graduates, to have this goal in your chosen profession.

In the latest Encyclical, entitled, "Fratelli Tutti," which translates to "All Brothers," Pope Francis calls each of us to develop community in this world. Pope Francis carries forward what Our Lady of Guadalupe revealed to Juan Diego and our Sisters have lived. "God is universal love, and as long as we are part of that love and share in it, we are called to universal fraternity and sisterhood, which is openness to all. There are no 'others,' no 'them,' there is only 'us.' We want, with God and in God, an open world, a world without walls, without borders, without people rejected, without strangers. To achieve this world, we must have an open heart."

The Pope continues, "Every human being has the right to live with dignity... a dignity based not on circumstances but on the intrinsic worth of their being. Unless this basic principle is upheld, there will be no future for brotherhood, sisterhood or for the survival of humanity."

You, Graduates, can now answer the challenge that Pope Francis gives all of us and that our country desperately needs today. It is the challenge to work for the right of every human being to live with dignity, be productive and pursue justice.

During this time in our country, especially as the nation endeavors to overcome a global pandemic, national divisiveness, and a deeply embedded racism, you are challenged to restore relationships and people's faith in each other. There can be no "them," no "others," there is only US. To do this, you will need the same vision, courage, boldness, resilience, perseverance and true grit that the Sisters had when they built this University. Do not quit and never give up.

Your education at OLLU has prepared you and fostered your spiritual, personal and professional growth; it has equipped you not only for success but also for continued leadership and service. It is possible. The DNA of our Sisters is now your DNA. Their courage is now your courage. Their passion is now your passion. Their resilience is your resilience. Juan Diego's hope is now your hope.

As graduates of Our Lady of the Lake University, you have the tools to make an impactful change and confront the challenges our society faces. We are proud of you and have great confidence in you.

We send you forth today. Congratulations to you, Class of 2020!