OLLU Staff and Faculty Convocation address by Sister Pearl Ceasar, CDP (edited for print)

Presented Aug. 11, 2020

Good morning. Thank you, Dr. Alvarez for your introduction and thank you Dr. Melby for inviting me to speak today. I’m honored to be here as we begin the 2020-2021 academic year. This gathering continues the University’s mission for you, faculty and staff, for students and for the Congregation of Divine Providence.

Our Congregation is proud of Our Lady of the Lake University’s achievements.

- This past year, OLLU was among the top 60 universities in the country and among the top 11 in Texas for granting master’s degrees to Hispanics.
- At OLLU, all undergraduate students can earn biliterate certification as a minor, demonstrating mastery of Spanish.
- Today, OLLU has the highest percentage of Hispanic enrollment of all U.S. Catholic colleges and universities.
- OLLU is ranked 49th nationally for the social mobility of its graduates.
- Studies show a graduate has a better chance of raising their standard of living because they attended OLLU.

Education is in the DNA of our Congregation and ultimately OLLU. The passion for education and our mission to make it accessible to all started with our founder over 250 years ago. John Martin Moye, a young French priest, believed that loving others meant loving as God loves, that is, loving the poor and the marginalized. He sent young women into the countryside of France to teach poor children with no access to education. These women were tireless in their work, unselfish in their generosity and sacrificial in their simplicity of living. Their commitment was so great, and they were so self-giving that the people named them “Sisters of Providence.” They believed that God had come to them.

In 1866, our foundress in this country, Mother St. Andrew, followed their example by successfully establishing 24 schools throughout Texas within twenty years.
In 1886, Mother Florence Walters was elected Superior General and nine years later she moved the Motherhouse from Castrovilla to San Antonio. On August 15, 1895, ground was broken for what is known today as Our Lady of the Lake University.

The institution was chartered as a two-year college in 1911 and as a four-year college in 1919. By 1945, not only had the University flourished, but the Congregation had established over 150 schools and hospitals in Texas, Louisiana, Oklahoma and New Mexico.

Initially, OLLU was founded to educate women because they were excluded from society. By 1969, OLLU became co-educational and focused on those with no access to higher education. Education for all was our Congregation’s heritage, passion and purpose and is embedded in OLLU’s mission. You have done well in your achievements and accomplishments. Education is now in your DNA.

OLLU’s initiatives, previously mentioned, honor our heritage and highlight our success in making education accessible to all. However, considering today’s realities, I propose that there are new challenges before us in creating OUR future.

Today the University is needed more than ever. With the racism that exists in today’s society, universities like Our Lady of the Lake breakdown barriers—showing no partiality. In the past year, our nation has experienced what the Sisters have worked so hard to eliminate.

Sisters of Divine Providence reflected on a moment which emerged shortly after the death of George Floyd. I quote, from the 1926 manuscript, "Pioneer Sisters," written at Mother Philothea Thiry’s request. Mother Antoinette Loth wrote:

“In 1921 in Tulsa, Oklahoma,] one sad event happened on one of our Commencement Nights: (entitled) ‘the Negro Uprising’...A man was shot down almost at our door. The night following and the next day and night we had between 250 and 300 Negro refugees in our basement. We gave clothing and medicine to the poor people and two dying Negroes we sent in our ambulance to an improvised hospital where they died that night. Sister George...helped to bathe and dress at least a dozen babies...(the people) were so well pleased with the attention received that when on the third day they were permitted to go out to seek shelter they came back again for meals; they refused to go anywhere else saying 'no, we want to go to the Catholic sisters, there we are waited on.'"

This CDP story reveals the presence of Providence, God with us. Victims of the Tulsa, Oklahoma massacre felt, through the love and service of our Sisters, that they were safe. They had a haven.

The University also has a history of activism. The following was written about actions taken at OLLU during the 1960’s in San Antonio during the desegregation of eating facilities. A publication in The Journal of Southern History, 1983 Vol. 49(3), recounts, “On February 1, 1960, four black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, sat at a segregated lunch counter and refused to leave when they were denied service. This simple act of protest ignited a chain reaction against segregation as blacks throughout the South adopted the sit-in tactic to secure equal treatment...The sit-in demonstrations
also affected the timing but not the desegregation plans of the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The organization had announced plans to integrate downtown eating facilities on January 1, 1960. Thus, with the support of the chapter's leadership, Mary Andrews, a freshman at Our Lady of the Lake College and president of the NAACP’s Youth Group, sent letters on March 7 to six stores asking that they serve blacks at their lunch counters. Black ministers followed these letters with visits to the targeted stores…”

OLLU was founded on the principles of equality, solidarity, inclusivity and diversity. Education is in your DNA. Together, we can achieve much more, and actions such as establishing the George Floyd Memorial Scholarship, the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities (HACU) and the Mexican American Civil Rights Institute (MACRI) obligates our society to be better.

And so, we come to today’s signing of this covenant. We, as a Congregation, take this covenant seriously. A covenant is a coming together. It means that we are bound by a promise, a relationship which represents our commitment to education and mission. We enter into this covenant with President Melby, Board Chair Paul Olivier, Faculty Assembly President Karina Gil, Staff Advisory President Jackie Walter and Student Government Association Nora Anda. This document reads that “…we pledge ourselves anew to hold in trust the spirit of dependence on Divine Providence and the tradition of serving the underserved and to pass on this sacred living legacy to all who enter this community.” May today’s gathering affirm our commitment to honor our heritage and create our future together. Thank you.