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The Challenge of Change

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Saturday December 17, 2022

By Eric F. Spina

(The University of Dayton conferred approximately 1,270 undergraduate, master's and doctoral degrees during winter commencement exercises on Saturday, Dec. 17, at University of Dayton Arena. Here are UD President Eric F. Spina's remarks to the Class of 2022.)

Good morning, Class of 2022! And what a joyous morning!

Congratulations, Flyers! Take a deep breath. Pause. Exhale. And let the realization of this moment wash over you. You. Did. It!

I offer a special welcome to all of our families, particularly those who traveled far to share this moment. I can feel your happiness, your pride, and yes, even a little bit of relief. This day is *finally* here! This is a day you'll always remember and cherish.

Graduates, your family members and dear friends have provided their support and love and made this momentous day possible. Will you please rise, face them, and give them a rousing round of applause?!

Some of you are first-generation college graduates. You personify the American dream, and you will continue to open doors of opportunity — not just for yourselves, but for future generations of your family. We're so proud of you AND so proud of the family members who made your dream — and theirs — come true.

Let's have a special round of applause for all the first-generation college graduates and their families!

We'd also like to invite all graduating service members, veterans, and commissioned cadets to stand and be recognized for your service and leadership.

Members of the faculty and staff: Thank *you* for creating an environment that has allowed these about-to-be graduates to stretch themselves academically, to dream big, to dare to be great. You have prepared them to use their education and faith to make a difference — a real difference — in a world hungry for their community-building skills and innovative thinking.

It's always a challenge to find the right words to share at commencement. Words that touch the heart and soul. Words to live by. Words that will matter to you. Words that might resonate years later.

The class of 2022 will face difficult challenges, but I fully believe in the innovative, can-do spirit of this class. That's why I'm giving you an assignment. We need you to roll up your sleeves, think critically, and work collaboratively on tackling some big problems. How big? How about:

- climate change;
- racism;
- violent extremism;
- incivility in the public square and on social media;
- poverty and inequality;
- the rise of anti-democratic movements worldwide; and
- an ongoing global pandemic — to name just the headliners.

Every generation is tested, and how you respond will define your character and your destiny. I'm often drawn to the words of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., a visionary leader who could read the signs of the times and move people to action. He said:

“One of the great liabilities of history is that all too many people fail to remain awake through great periods of social change. Every society has its protectors of status quo and its fraternities of the indifferent who are notorious for sleeping through revolutions. Today, our very survival depends on our ability to stay awake, to adjust to new ideas, to remain vigilant and to face the challenge of change.”

I'm confident that you are prepared to face "the challenge of change." You will not be defined — or sidelined — by the complexities of this moment in history. You are too talented, too focused, too intent on making a difference. Instead, you will define the days ahead. You are our future scientists, engineers, educators, poets, artists, humanitarians — and changemakers. I can't wait to see how you will use your world-class UD education to change the tenor of the times. To make positive change in the world.

You won't find an asterisk on your diploma that indicates a superpower, but you have one — you have developed habits of mind and heart that give you the resilience and wisdom you need to meet the moment — and future challenging times — in four important ways.

First of all, your education has prepared you to be doers. That's because you've taken advantage of the literally hundreds of experiential learning opportunities UD offers. You have learned by doing.

These high-impact hands-on experiences go beyond lessons learned in a textbook into the development of solutions society needs. Some of you tackled issues such as food insecurity, sustainable farming, human trafficking, and social justice in projects in our community and beyond.

Others ran the largest student-managed investment fund in the country, provided free consulting services to nonprofits, and started your own businesses. During the pandemic, when Premier Health put out a call for help, physician assistant practice students distributed thousands of COVID-19 vaccinations to the local elderly population.

You have learned to be creative problem solvers, and you will embark on your professions with "practical wisdom," a trait of your Marianist education that will enable you to be big-picture thinkers and pragmatic doers.

Secondly, with your UD degree comes the expectation that you will look at your life as a calling. For many of you, a professor or adviser helped you identify where your passion and knowledge can meet the world's greatest needs. I urge the Class of 2022 to use your education to serve others in ways that will change the narrative of our times. Work together to build socially just communities. Work across differences to find solutions for the world's most pressing problems. Always have the courage to follow your heart and intuition — and use the gift of your education to make a difference. And when the challenges look insurmountable, never lose faith that you can help create a better and more equitable future for all.

Thirdly, your education has prepared you to bridge divides in a divided world.

The Marianists often talk about "coming to the table." It's a round table, where no one sits at the head, and all share in spirited conversations and listen to one another respectfully. Each voice at this table has equal importance.

The table is a metaphor, representing inclusivity, respect, and acceptance for the dignity of all people, especially those who hold viewpoints different from your own.

As you enter the world outside this campus, I urge you to build a bigger table. Invite others with alternative viewpoints and those who look different from you to join you around your table. And, most importantly, stay at that table when conflicts and tensions arise.

Pope Francis calls us to create a “culture of dialogue” to be active listeners in an authentic, empathetic way — a way that builds bridges instead of burns them. We can disagree in ways that don’t denigrate or exclude others while holding firm in our own convictions. We are all made in the image of God, and therefore ***everyone*** deserves the same level of respect and dignity.

And while it’s easy to live in an echo chamber, engaging only with those who hold your views, it’s important to seek out others with divergent beliefs to test the validity of your ideas and to see issues from a different angle. You can hold firm to your values while hearing differing perspectives. This kind of engagement will help you discern your own positions and motivate you to work with others — even others of difference — toward building the future we all desire for our communities and our nation.

Our society needs you to build bigger tables — and to work to bridge divides. I challenge you as Marianist leaders, to always model civility and respect for others in your professions and in your lives.

Finally, your education has helped you develop a critical mind and a compassionate heart. Some people are book-smart, but lack empathy, kindness, and mercy. You cannot go about transforming the world — which is ultimately your assignment when you leave today — without both. As Flyers, you’re called to use your minds and hearts to work across disciplines and differences to make the kind of profound change the world needs.

As you imagine and shape your future, I urge you to dream boldly, act with conviction, and lean into the moment. Meet the “challenge of change.” Keep moving forward, without fear, toward lives of great purpose and service.

As your president — and as a representative of the UD faculty, staff, vowed religious, Board of Trustees, and all of Flyer Nation — I salute you and your accomplishments in this moment of human need and across your time as a University of Dayton student.

Congratulations, Class of 2022! May God bless you and keep you in his grace.

Go, Flyers!

(Photo by Shravanth Reddy Reddy)