Inaugural Address of President Ann McElaney-Johnson
March 16, 2012

Archbishop José Gomez; Los Angeles County Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas; Mayor Richard Riordan; Sr. Barbara Anne Stowasser, provincial of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet; Mr. Michael A. Enright, chair of the Board of Trustees; members of the Board of Trustees and the Regents Council; our beloved Sisters of St. Joseph; esteemed faculty, staff, and students; distinguished alumnae represented here today by 57 classes spanning nearly 70 years; honored delegates from our family of institutions of higher education and learned societies; distinguished guests, friends and family: let me add my words of welcome and gratitude for your presence here with us today.

Before I begin my formal remarks, I extend a heartfelt word of thanks to the remarkable community of Mount St. Mary’s College for your effusive welcome in this our first year together, for your deep commitment to this place and for your trust. I hold it close always.

I also extend the thanks of our community to St. Vincent’s Church for opening your doors to us today. We are deeply appreciative of your generous hospitality. We cannot imagine a more beautiful or sacred place to celebrate this moment in our College’s history. Thank you, Father Ruben Restrepo-Salazar and Brother Tony Wiedemer and many thanks to your staff for helping make this possible. I also want to thank the inauguration committee and the many volunteers who, under the gifted leadership of Dr. Jane Lingua, vice president for student affairs and chair of the committee, have made this occasion a true celebration of our community. A special
thanks to our 500 students who volunteered to make this a day where all members of our community and all of our guests experience the essence of Mount St. Mary’s College, or as we call her, the Mount.

I would also like to recognize and thank two individuals whose leadership and love of this College have served as a model to all of us, Sr. Karen Kennelly, Mount St. Mary’s College president from 1989–2000 and Dr. Jacqueline Powers Doud who served as president from 2000–2011. It is because of these gifted leaders, our future is sure. Would our Mount presidents please stand to receive the deep gratitude of this assembly?

Finally, I want to say a special thank you to my family who is here with me today: my wonderful husband David Johnson who has helped to make this all possible, our three daughters, Emma, Rachel and Caroline, our soon to be son-in-law, Matt, my mother, Katherine, my in-laws Phyllis and Walter, my sisters, my brothers-in-law, and my cousins who are here today. You have been my rock and my champions. Thank you all for making the trip west to meet this, our family of Mount St. Mary’s College.

Recently our senior cabinet mused about memorable opening lines from great novels. “It was the best of times; it was the worst of times;”¹ “It was a bright cold day in April and the clocks were striking 13;”² “You better not never tell nobody but God.”³ In storytelling, that first sentence must pull the reader into a different moment, a different place, into the very stuff of the story. Dickens, Orwell, and Morrison are among many talented writers who excel at this. We asked ourselves what would be an appropriate opening
line to the story of Mount St. Mary’s College? We had different responses but the simplest and most lucid response came from our vice president for student affairs, Dr. Jane Lingua. She put it aptly when she began our story this way:

“The lace bobbins flew and the design formed.”

The design of this institution dates back to 1650 when a small group of women came together in the town of Le Puy, France, to form a community of religious women dedicated to ministering to those most in need. Committed to caring for the dear neighbor and helping women become all they are capable of being, these early sisters of St. Joseph engaged in the making of lace to support themselves, and then taught this skill to impoverished women providing them the means to a life of dignity.

Lace: this intricate pattern formed by the braiding and looping of individual threads to form an artistic design of interwoven strands. In the hands of the Sisters of St. Joseph, the weaving of disparate threads into works of beauty was an act of faith and an act of liberation. Through the making of lace, they transformed lives. More than the simple creation of a cloth, lacemaking brought together women from difficult backgrounds and provided them access to a very different future.

“The bobbins flew and the design formed.”

We stand here today as the legacy of that simple and yet profound design. Eighty-six years ago, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet envisioned this college out of their mission to enable women to reach their full potential. In 1925, under the leadership of Mother Margaret Mary Brady, the sisters
founded Mount St. Mary’s College so that they might provide a superior education to the young women of Los Angeles.

As we gather here today I think of the vision and tenacity of those sisters who looked at a tract of land high above the city of Los Angeles, on the beautiful but somewhat impenetrable Santa Monica Mountains and said “This is where we will build our college.”

Our history tells us of the Sisters’ first trek up the hill to their chosen site. Mother Dolorosa Mannix wrote of that day:

“When the real estate agent took us to see the site, there was no road, and the climb had to be made through brush, — sage mostly, chaparral and sumac. The guide sent his dog on ahead of us saying, ‘If there is a rattlesnake in the brush, the dog will bark.’ We were grateful that the dog did not bark, though we did see rattlers coiled round the branches of the black walnut on the summit.”

I am grateful for the fortitude, imagination and deep faith of our founding mothers and I ask myself, would we have been able to see what they saw? Do we possess their ability to envision so bold a future atop that then desolate mount? And do we possess their courage of conviction and faith to realize that dream?

Gratefully, the community of Mount St. Mary’s has responded time and again with a resounding, “yes.” Yes, we have the courage to both imagine and then build our future.
This community said “yes” 49 years ago to the vision to open a campus here in the heart of Los Angeles. Our beautiful Doheny campus with its magnificent mansion and surrounding homes became a vehicle in the greater service of the Sisters’ vision. This expansion has allowed us to live more fully the college’s mission through the creation of our associate’s degree, the coeducational weekend College, and accelerated nursing and graduate programs. These programs allow us to offer a premiere education to women and men across their academic career in higher education. And they allow us to place our footprint in the center of this city we serve. At Mount St. Mary’s College, we have a particular calling to educate the “daughters of Los Angeles.” Our commitment to these women and this city never waivers but is lived out in new and different ways.

Today we in the higher education community find ourselves in a time of great flux and transition. The critical eye of the public is on higher education — and justifiably so. As a nation we have fallen from first in the world for college graduation to 15th; we share concerns about cost and financial support for young people and adults seeking a college degree; but perhaps most alarming is the genuine skepticism about the very quality of a college education. It is imperative that we in higher education do not ignore the issues our public has raised.

We must be willing to think in new ways about access, affordability and completion but most importantly — about quality. It is our sacred duty as members of the higher education community to think deeply about the mission of our individual college or university, and to ponder how we will fulfill the promise of our institution in this the 21st century. Today we are joined by over 50 delegates from colleges and universities across this country and I fervently believe that we are up to this task.
Far from being discouraged by the challenges that face us as a country and as members of this community of higher education, at the Mount we see this moment in time as a call to be true to our values and fearless in our planning. It is a moment that requires the vision, innovation and commitment continually exhibited by our founders, the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, in the work they have done and do — across time and across sectors.

We see this as a unique opportunity to rethink old models; examine new possibilities and provide greater access to the best possible educational experience.

*At the Mount, as the bobbins fly, new designs will emerge.*

As a Catholic liberal arts college of the 21st century, we understand the transformational imperative of higher education. We stand ready to help define the future of higher education, and it is our privilege to stand with others who believe that this is indeed “a crucible moment.” And as we do this we remain steadfast in our commitment to the liberal arts for we believe that there is no education more practical and more aspirational than the liberal arts and sciences.

At the Mount the liberal arts are at the heart of all we do. Whether our students are pursuing studies in nursing, English, education, business or music, we call on them to think across boundaries in their pursuit of knowledge and understanding. We push them to ask big questions that require complex answers. We train them to think deeply and critically and to communicate their thoughts with clarity and confidence. And we press them to integrate their intellectual skills with a real understanding of personal responsibility.
Through the liberal arts we prepare them for lives of purpose.

And what better preparation at a time when technology progresses at what seems the speed of light and the relentless onslaught of information only accelerates? What better preparation when we must prepare students for careers that do not yet exist, knowing that the positions they will one day hold will be critical to our country and the global community? We must prepare our students for a future that is out of our grasp. They will need nimble and creative minds. They will need to understand the value of collaboration and they will need the skills to think and work with people from a diversity of backgrounds. They will need experience in high level thinking that translates into high level problem solving and they will need to know how to set their moral compass at due north to navigate a complex and often distracting landscape. And our graduates must understand both their place in and their responsibility to local and global communities — for their responsibility will be great.

At this time of many unknowns, we take to heart the words of Dr. E. Gordon Gee, president of The Ohio State University, who put it in a way that we at the Mount understand well: “When the fabric of the universe becomes unknown, it is the duty of the university to produce weavers.” We stand ready to address issues of access, cost, completion and quality as we prepare the weavers of the future.

As we dream our future, what is absolutely clear is our unwavering commitment to pursuing excellence for we agree with teacher and author, Ron Berger when he writes in his book, *An Ethic of Excellence*,

“I believe the work of excellence is transformational. Once a student
sees that he or she is capable of excellence, the student is never quite the same. There is a new self-image, a new notion of possibility. There is an appetite for excellence.”

At Mount St. Mary’s College, we see excellence around us: in the classroom, in our labs, in research presentations and publications produced by our faculty and students, in our leadership programs, in the liturgies we celebrate together, in our graduate programs, in the work of our nurses in local hospitals and clinics, and in the contributions of our 18,000 alumnae across our city and our nation.

Excellence is part of who we are today and we commit to make it the foundation of all that we do tomorrow. We will build a culture of excellence that pervades every aspect of life at the Mount — and this excellence must be and will be inclusive. That is a hallmark of our college.

To achieve excellence in these challenging times, we must be forward thinking. We must be innovators in our work with students. We must bolt shut behind us the door to the ivory tower as we connect our students to the communities that surround us, be they local, national, international or digital. We must create partnerships locally and globally to prepare our students for what they will be called to do, and to contribute the expertise we bring to bear as an academic institution. At the Mount we will be guided by the entrepreneurial spirit of our founders. We will keep our eye out for rattlesnakes but we will forge up that hill as our sisters did before us.

As we look to the future, we are reminded as poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote, that “in today already walks tomorrow.” Indeed, we see electrifying examples of excellence and innovation on our campuses as we create the
design that will drive us forward. Let me briefly highlight several key areas that serve as markers of our future:

1) First, we remain committed to increasing the number of women in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Under the mentorship of our faculty, our students have known great success in these fields. Now, with the support of a recent $6 million federal grant to enhance curricula and support in the STEM areas, we will expand our program. We will lead in the creation of innovative models that will engage and support students in these areas of study in which we so desperately need bright and creative minds.

2) Mount St. Mary’s College reaffirms its commitment to prepare global citizens. We understand that global learning is not about expanding study abroad centers; it requires a change in attitude that moves us from 20th century thinking to this the “Global Century.” It requires a rethinking of our curricula, our co-curricular programs, and our partnerships. At the Mount we stand ready for this challenge. Through a generous grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, we will establish a national model for integrating international cultures into undergraduate and graduate curricula and we will build a framework for the establishment of partnerships with institutions of higher learning across the globe. We will create a comprehensive and dynamic educational experience that will ensure that our daughters of Los Angeles will be women of and for the world.

3) As a women’s college with a mission to serve and to lead, Mount St. Mary’s has an inherent interest in the forces that shape women’s lives. This month we will release The Report on the Status of Women and Girls
in California. Prepared by our faculty and staff, this report is the first of its kind in our state and focuses on the achievements and challenges our women and girls experience in critical areas including education, employment, and health. As a women’s college, we will shine a light on both the opportunities and injustices experienced by women. We will engage our students in critical research that will expand the discussion of the status of women in our state, in our nation and across the globe.

4) As a college committed to excellence in the teaching and learning process, we embrace innovative pedagogies and we explore new tools that impact student learning and performance in significant ways. Today, many of our nursing students have replaced their 32 lbs. of books they used to carry with them to clinicals with a Toucher, a handheld device that contains all necessary resources, and allows more time to work alongside patients. Our Film and Social Justice Program is exploring e-publishing to provide students and faculty the opportunity to work together in the creation of content. Faculty from across campus are reviewing digital texts and digital learning tools for use on mobile devices. We do not believe in technology for technology’s sake; but we are committed to using emerging programs and apps to create dynamic learning environments. Mount St. Mary’s College will be a leader in innovative teaching and learning across the liberal arts and professional programs.

5) Finally, the Mount has always been committed to leadership and service. As a college of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, it is a part of our DNA. We established the first leadership program for women west of the Mississippi 40 years ago; we were the first, 20 years ago, to have our students return to their local high schools to help high school counselors create pathways to college for the next generation of students. Today
we recommit ourselves to our longstanding tradition of leadership development and service and we pledge to increase significantly the number of women — and men — prepared for lives of public service. Our graduates will be ready to lead and to serve and they will understand their responsibility to communities across the globe.

The Catholic liberal arts education of the 21st century must prepare our students for lives in which “complexity, diversity, and change” are constants. To this end, at Mount St. Mary’s we will build a culture in which excellence and innovation define our every endeavor.

We stand at a critical juncture in higher education and in our communities. We face significant challenges but we cannot shy away from our task of creating the weavers of tomorrow. This is an electric moment in the history of higher education. We at Mount St. Mary’s stand ready to serve as pioneers in this changing landscape.

As the Sisters of St. Joseph did before us, it is now our responsibility to create new and intricate patterns of lace that will empower and transform the lives of our students and our communities.

As the bobbins fly, the design emerges.

It is with great joy that I accept the trust of the community of Mount St. Mary’s College. I am honored and humbled by your faith in me. This is a remarkable place. It is my greatest privilege to serve as your 12th president. I thank you all.
Notes

1 Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Calgary, Canada: Simon & Brown, 2010), 5.


7 Speech from Dr. Gordon Gee, Vanderbuilt University.


Mount St. Mary’s College Mission

Mount St. Mary’s College offers a dynamic learning experience in the liberal arts and sciences to a diverse student body. As a Catholic college primarily for women, we are dedicated to providing a superior education enhanced by an emphasis on building leadership skills and fostering a spirit to serve others. Our measure of success is graduates who are committed to using their knowledge and skills to better themselves, their environments, and the world.

The Significance of Lace

Mount St. Mary’s College was founded by the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in 1925. Since the order’s founding in Le Puy, France, lace has played a significant role in its history. In the 1600s, the Sisters taught young women this time-honored craft to lift them out of dire poverty and to provide them with the means for a dignified life. Today, their philosophy of educating women so that they may have meaningful and successful lives, continues on as the mission of Mount St. Mary’s College, and remains true to the spirit of the Mount’s founders.
Mount St. Mary’s College

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