

Bernard Lafayette
Class of 2020 Commencement Reflections
Salve Regina University

President Armstrong, University leadership, students, faculty, loving family members, University staff and friends. I am truly grateful for this honor.

I doubt this honor comes because you believe that at moments of great moral importance, I have remained silent. I also doubt this honor comes because you perceive that I have, throughout my life, nodded in acquiesce to injustice and violence. But on the contrary, I suppose you all believe I have done something in my life to advance a cause much greater than me. That I have done something in my life to contribute to the shaping and making of a better world. One in which the human dignity of my neighbor is respected, and people see each other as children of God and not enemies. Whatever the reason or reasons you have selected me for this recognition, I am not some anomaly. I am merely one among you. What gives me hope is that the capacity to change the world by advancing an agenda of peace rests in you.

On the evening before his assassination, I sat at the bedside of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., planning and strategizing for the next phases of the Poor People's Campaign. With a tired and weighted brow, Dr. King said five words that I have carried with me from that day. He said, "we are going for broke." We are going for broke. What he was saying was that we're giving this our all. Because he truly believed institutionalizing and internationalizing nonviolence and pursuing economic justice were the only way forward. Life is about going for broke. Life, I have come to find, is about mounting the pulpits of our purpose, and going for broke. Putting it all on the line for what we believe is true, noble, honest and praiseworthy. Going for broke is about living such that our lives improve the quality of life for others. For what are you willing to go for broke?

I choose to believe that there is One greater than us all. One who has invested the spark of life in all of us. One who sees our imperfections but still calls us worthy of life and love. And this is the kind of grace we're called to extend one to another. Amid much global division, rancor and partisan descension, we remain "caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. [And] whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

Salve Regina University is founded on this very principle – one that suggests that we offer all we have, and all of who we are, in service of one another. And it is my most sincere desire that all attending this ceremony today leave with a deeper sense of calling to serve others, to speak truth, to pursue justice and to love mercy. You all give me great hope that love will prevail. This is who you have been as a university, this is who you are and this is who you will continue to be.

Thank you for this honor. It is one for which I will always be grateful.