It is with great pleasure that I would like to welcome the Class of 2021 and our entering Graduate Institute students into our St. John’s community. We are honored to have you here. I would like to welcome as well all family and friends who are joining us today – thank you for all the support you give these wonderful young people. And to the returning students, faculty and staff – I would like to thank you personally for allowing me to join this community. Just like our first-year students, I feel like I’ve entered a place of a garden of delight and wonder.

It was customary in the nineteenth century, at American colleges such as St. John’s, for the college president to offer a capstone course to graduating seniors. This class, generally titled “Moral Philosophy”, was meant to be the culmination of one’s college experience. “Moral philosophy” was the end towards which all the separate courses of study pointed. It represented the telos of one’s education.

Those nineteenth-century presidents must have been made of sterner stuff than this twenty-first century president. I am certain, were I to presume to offer instruction in moral philosophy at the end of your St. John’s experience, I would could only do more harm than good. Let us leave the end of your studies in more qualified hands, those of your tutors, those of the texts you encounter, and most critically, your very own.

Yet here we are at a beginning, called together in assembly, which is the meaning of convocation, a radical beginning for those of you who are joining us in your first year, and an only slight less profound beginning for those of us who have already been resident in this community.

And at this beginning, I would like to draw inspiration from those past presidents and have us take a look at our end. In fact, what I would like to do this afternoon is provide a framework for you to think about the arc of your education at St. John’s College. To this end, I would like to fix in your mind a tableau, an evocative image provided by one of your teachers, the great lover of wisdom, Plato. My hope is that this image will remain with you during your time here in the college, and that it will be one that you will return to again and again in the years that follow.
The endpoint of the experience of the Program of Instruction is a text, Plato’s Phaedrus. This is the final work on our four-year long seminar reading list in Annapolis. This may seem anomalous to some, given that all the other readings in seminar are roughly chronological in sequence. Why, at the end of the arc, after having marched resolutely from the classical world to Wittgenstein and Heidegger, are we circling back around to this ancient work?

And to strike yet another seemingly discordant note, those of you who study the seminar reading list with any attention, will mark another peculiarity – there is only one text over our four-year course of study, that we read not once, but twice – Plato’s Phaedrus.

The Phaedrus marks the end point of our first undergraduate year of study; it also marks the endpoint of the Program of Instruction. Thus when we reach the end of the Program we are both at an end, yet also circling back around to an earlier point. We complete a circuit, a coming again, a revolution. The end is, and is not, the end.

Which brings us to the image that I would like to fix in your mind as you charge forth into this year and those to come.

Picture a chariot. This chariot, pulled by two winged steeds, is traversing the sky. The driver, sweating, straining, struggles to maintain control. One of the horses, white, noble in bearing, heaves upward, wrenching the chariot towards the heavens. The other horse, black, disfigured, drags the craft perilously towards the earth. Their journey is an erratic one, a dangerous one.

This dynamic image is taken from the Phaedrus. It is an image of the human soul.

In the Phaedrus, Plato describes the chariots of the gods, each harnessed to two white, noble horses, parading one after the other into the heavens. Led by Zeus, the gods ascend effortlessly into the ether, where they contemplate the Forms:

"What is in this place is without color and without shape and without solidity, a reality that really is what it is, the subject of all true knowledge, visible only to intelligence, the soul’s steersman. Now a god’s mind is nourished by intelligence and pure knowledge, as is the mind of any soul that is concerned to take in what is appropriate to it, and so it is delighted at last to be seeing what is real and watching what is true, feeding on all this and feeling wonderful, until the circular motion brings it around to where it started. On the way around it has a view of Justice as it is; it has a view of Self-control; it has a view of Truth. And when the soul has seen all the things that are as they are and feasted on them, it sinks back inside heaven and goes home. On its arrival, the charioteer stables the horses by the manger, throws in ambrosia, and gives them nectar to drink besides. Now that is the life of the gods.”
The life of mortals, however, is not quite so serene. The chariot represents for Plato the tripartite human soul. The driver of the chariot signifies the intellect, our ratiocinative powers. The white horse represents what the Greeks termed our “thumos” or spiritedness. Our thumos seeks glory, honor, and recognition. It goads us towards excellence and pricks us when we act shamefully. The black horse embodies our appetites, which are drawn towards earthly pleasures, material gain and comfort. Human reason, in the figure of the charioteer, aims for enlightenment. But it is yoked to these other human drives. Thus, trailing the gods, desperately following in their wake, the human soul invariably falters.

Again, from the Phaedrus: "As for the other souls, one that follows a god most closely, making itself most like that god, raises the head of its charioteer up to the place outside and is carried around in the circular motion with the others. Although distracted by the horses, this soul does have a view of Reality, just barely. Another soul rises at one time and falls at another, and because its horses pull it violently in different directions, it sees some real things and misses others. The remaining souls are all eagerly straining to keep up, but are unable to rise; they are carried around below the surface, trampling and striking one another as each tries to get ahead of the others...”

Such is the fate of human souls. What comes without effort to the gods, possessed of pure intellect, is attained only fleetingly by mortals, and even then, only by a select few. Depending upon on how extensive a glimpse of the Forms they achieve, determines their human identity.

Those who have steered their chariots above the rim of the sky and who have glimpsed Reality in its authentic form are compelled by an overwhelming desire to return that exalted station. The longer the soul has spent among the universals, the stronger the memory of what it has witnessed. Souls whose experience of the heavens was most sustained, return to earth as philosophers. Their compulsion to return to an unalloyed Reality manifests itself in desire, in a passion for truth – hence they are denominated lovers of wisdom.

Other souls return to earth in descending order, each having seen and understood less and less of Reality, from law-abiding kings, to merchants, physicians, prophets, poets, craftsmen or farmers, sophists, and finally, the least enlightened, tyrants. You may read that final category as you will...

This is neither the time nor place to offer an extended exegesis on Plato’s Allegory of the Chariot. Instead, I would like to offer a set of six brief observations. Then I would like to address how this allegory may be applied to your education.

1. The soul described by Plato is dynamic. It is in motion. Its path is not predetermined, but is rather the result of effort. We are creatures that change and develop.
2. The soul is multifaceted, composite. We are not simply rational creatures, but creatures of passion. We are driven by desires, both edifying and destructive. The intellect may try to steer these desires, yet it is also dependent upon them for forward motion.

3. We cannot simply cut the black horse loose – without its strength, we cannot ascend into the heavens. Yet our earthly desires must be informed by our reason and aligned with our spiritedness to propel us in the right direction.

4. The white horse may also present dangers. Thumos properly directed can lead to noble action. But thumos unbridled, like the anger of Achilles, can lead to rage and the loss of control.

5. As mortals, even our greatest efforts to seek Truth ultimately falter. Yet what marks us most is the desire for Truth, rather than its attainment. In this we are more glorious than even the gods.

6. It is the memory of what they have seen that draws souls back into the heavens. To know something is to return to it. To love something is to desire to return to it.

So what do these unruly steeds and frantic charioteer have to do with your experience at St. John’s?

To answer this question, we must first ask ourselves others: Is this thing we call education the formation of the intellect or the formation of the soul? Is knowledge dependent upon powers of the mind, or habits of character? Are these things separable?

For Plato, they clearly are not. To seek truth, one must cultivate one’s character, one must allow the passion for what is honorable to rein in and lead the passion for baser things. In fact, one must train the passions to act in accord with the Good.

As Aristotle says, “To be always seeking after the useful, does not become free and exalted souls.” Liberal education is an education that liberates – this is the root implication of liberal. Plato’s chariot is an image of free and exalted souls, those souls that soar as best they can towards the heavens.

The course of that flight for those of you joining St. John’s, as well as for those of you currently mid-air, is the course of your experience in the Program. Yours are minds traversing a set of texts, a constellation of intensified human experience. Yet the Program is not the end itself. It is an opportunity for you to strive for higher things. And your striving will be animated by your thumos.

Let me provide an example. Recently, I ran into a couple of Johnnies at a restaurant on Main Street in Annapolis. Our conversation turned towards the coming semester. I mentioned that I would be leading a preceptorial, but was still mulling over the topic. I asked them what they would be interested in taking. One of the young women immediately responded, “Anything!
As long as it’s really difficult.” That right there, that impulse that rose in this young woman to seek the challenging path, was an expression of her thumos. You could practically feel the white horse lifting her upwards.

As you make your way through St. John’s, the black horse will be at work as well, tugging you in the other direction. It will be most obviously evident in simple, base distractions: when Netflix calls more loudly than Plato. When your confidence is shaken and you question the utility of your education. Most perniciously, you may also find yourself subject to the cynicism that seems to pervade the general culture about the pursuit of truth itself. To resist these impulses, you must have courage.

This is not to say that you should only read books. Dancing, sports, conversation, and courtship are all arenas for thumos, where the passions quicken and where one may strive for excellence. We are composite beings, not disembodied minds. Live your life robustly while you are here. Be engaged. Be active. Be open to other remarkable souls that share this journey with you.

Like the arc of Plato’s chariot, your pathway through St. John’s will come to its end. This may feel to you like a falling from the heavens to the earth. Yet as Plato instructs us, the end is not the end. Your future will be nourished by the memory of what you encounter here. The higher you soar, the longer you sustain your flight, the more potent your memory will be of the finer things. We are not gods – what we apprehend we apprehend only fleetingly. Yet you will continue to be free and exalted souls as you continue to be propelled by what is honorable, what is excellent and what is good. This will be fed by your love for wisdom. Remember, to know something is to return to it. To love something is to desire to return to it. The end is not the end.

In Plato’s account, the wings of the both horses are nourished by beauty, enabling us to soar. At this moment, at the beginning of this journey, I would like to invite Mr. Stoltzfus to lead our students in a particular offering of beauty to sustain us as we move forward into this academic year. Mr. Stoltzfus!

Thank you all for that truly inspiring rendition of Sicut Cervus. Immediately following the ceremony today, please join us for a reception in the FSK lobby. I will ask all guest to remain in your places until the platform party freshmen, new GI students and faculty have processed out.

With great pleasure, “I officially declare the College in session. CONVOCATUM EST.”