

Address by Prof. François Boëdec, SJ
Rector of Saint Joseph University of Beirut

“THE UNIVERSITY IN THE FACE OF THE RISKS OF A DEHUMANIZING WORLD”

On the occasion of the patronal feast
of Saint Joseph University of Beirut
Thursday, March 19, 2026

At Saint Joseph Church of the Jesuit Fathers
Saint Joseph University Street - Monnot - Ashrafieh

His Eminence, Monsignor Paolo Borgia, Apostolic Nuncio of the Holy See to Lebanon,

His Excellency, Mr. Joe Saddi, President of the USJ Board of Trustees,

Ladies and Gentlemen, Ministers, Ambassadors, and Members of Parliament,

Ladies and Gentlemen, Members of the Board of Trustees,

Reverend Father Michael Zammit, SJ, Provincial of the Society of Jesus in the Near East and Maghreb,

Reverend Father Salim Daccache, SJ,

His Excellency, Mr. Abbas El Halabi, President of the Federation of USJ Alumni Associations,

Dear instructors, dear members of the staff, dear students,

Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished guests,

Dear friends,

One year ago, the Very Reverend Father Arturo Sosa, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, honored us with his presence as we celebrated the 150th anniversary of our university. His visit was far from certain at the time, as the security situation in the country remained uncertain in the weeks leading up to it. Today, we are faced with the same situation, which prevents us from celebrating our patronal feast as we would have wished. Over the past year, much has happened in the country, in the region, and in the world. Yet, the situation has not improved; in fact, it has worsened.

Amid the humanitarian and security crisis we are experiencing, our University is determined to stand alongside every member of our community, students, instructors, and staff whose lives have been affected in one way or another. However, the University's response to the challenges of the moment cannot be limited to the indispensable support

required in times of emergency. It must go further. It must reach deeper.

As you know, the Rector's addresses on the occasion of the patronal feast have, for more than fifty years, become a customary, if not anticipated, moment in the life of the University. At a particular moment in its history, these addresses give voice to the questions, the hopes, and the convictions not only of a person entrusted with responsibility, but also, I believe, to those of an entire university community, and at times perhaps even of a country.

In recent months, I have taken the time to reread the addresses delivered by those who preceded me in this mission. I will not hide that it took quite some time. Not so much to draw inspiration from them, although perhaps a little, but above all to grasp, through the themes they addressed and the words they chose – words such as culture, conscience, resistance, democratic principles, public freedoms, and living together, as well as innovation, boldness, trust, and solidarity. Through the intuitions and the indignations, the nuances and the affirmations they expressed, I came to see one of the places where the life of our University beats most strongly. It is one of the threads that reveals the meaning, the aspirations, and the very reason for being of our *Alma Mater*.

There are words, and there are images that remain engraved in memory. Without trying to be exhaustive, as I address you today for the first time on the feast of Saint Joseph, in this particular context, allow me to share what comes to mind. I remember the emotion of Father Ducruet, Rector of our University from 1975 to 1995. His voice would tighten when he spoke with passion about the situation of the country and the conditions for its recovery. It was on March 19, 1994, in the auditorium that now bears his name at the Campus in Mar Roukoz, in the presence of President Elias Hraoui, who was the

guest of honor at the patronal feast. I was a young Jesuit then. I will never forget that moment. More than any great speech, that emotion spoke to me about our University and about its mission in the service of Lebanon.

Another image also resonates with me today. It is the memory of a scene that revealed something different, yet just as powerful, about the vision and spirit of USJ. It was in 2000, during the celebrations marking the 125th anniversary of the University. On June 24, as those celebratory days came to a close, I was surprised and delighted to witness a magnificent tango performance in the midst of the guests. The idea came from Father Sélim Abou and from his Argentine heart. That tango surprised people. It unsettled them. It carried them toward new harmonies and opened new spaces. In its own way, it spoke of the life and the horizons that the University must celebrate, encourage, and accompany.

More than twenty-five years have passed since that memorable evening. Through all the trials, the crises, and the wars that Lebanon has endured and continues to endure, despite the disappointments, the weariness, and the fatigue, the pulse of life has never stopped beating in the body and heart of our University. The rectors who carried their share of the burden and heat of the day all sought to serve that life. This was the case for Father Chamussy, and then for his successor, Father Daccache, whom I am particularly pleased to greet this evening in your name.

For more than two months now, I have come to understand more clearly each day the extent of the work accomplished in recent years. Much of it has been carried out quietly, often amid the complexity of multiple responsibilities. These past weeks have also confirmed something essential for me. A vision becomes fruitful only when it is shared and received. There can be no university unless it relies on all its human,

intellectual, and spiritual resources, in the diversity of talents and responsibilities. There can be no university unless it truly becomes a community where each person feels respected and encouraged, serving a project greater than themselves and animated by the same spirit.

At every moment in its history, the University must therefore undertake this exercise of renewal. It must find new ways to express its project. Reflecting on the mission of Saint Joseph University, which we are called to carry together and prepare for the future, always requires that we question what we are living and what is happening in the world around us. It also requires that we do not remain confined within a familiar and reassuring circle. We must cultivate the ability, and above all the desire, to encounter those who are different from ourselves. We must listen to what is moving and searching, sometimes uncertainly, both in the human mind and heart and in the transformations of the world. And we must not fear the renewals and transformations that are necessary.

How should we understand what we are living today, and how we are situated within history? One might think here of the well-known distinction Charles Péguy drew in 1910 when speaking about History, between *periods* and *epochs*¹. Periods are times of transition, often without decisive events. Epochs, on the other hand, move quickly and creatively. They shape the destiny of humanity and may leave a mark for a long time.

Later, in his major work *Time and Narrative*, that monumental inquiry devoted to literary theory², Paul Ricoeur shed new light on a third notion: *the event*. For him, an event has historical significance because it carries meaning for the future. However, if it shapes the future, it somehow

1. *Notre jeunesse*, 1910.

2. P. Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, volume 1, Paris, *Le Seuil*, 1983, 324 p.

also reshapes the past. An event creates its own framework of interpretation and transforms the way we read what has already happened.

These philosophical reflections, these interpretive notions and distinctions, are certainly debatable. Reality is often more complex and more intertwined. We live within different temporalities that overlap and intersect. And perhaps, today, such reflections may seem somewhat abstract, distant from our immediate perception of reality, especially in the painful, uncertain, and anxiety-filled period we are going through.

Yet they remind us of something essential. We cannot simply allow ourselves to be carried along by the waves of events that we endure. We must constantly try to discern the signs of the times. We must reread what is happening and what is happening to us. We must identify what truly matters beyond the daily noise of the media. We must take a step back to understand what is unfolding beyond false rumors, conspiracy narratives, and ready-made explanations. And in the midst of all this, we must try to trace a path of meaning.

One might add that the event-based nature of meaning lies at the very heart of the biblical message. Just as with every individual life, the spiritual history of the world is also shaped by events. What matters is not an order fixed for eternity. What matters is what comes into being through the shared action of God and human beings.

I do not know how to define the times we are living through. But what I do know, what we all know and feel, is that these are times of uncertainty and hope, times of powerful storms and of necessary foundations. They are times that call for choices. Choices that require trust, boldness, and quiet determination.

What is also certain is that today, perhaps even more than yesterday, the University cannot simply watch time

pass without seeking to understand what is at stake. It must strive to clearly grasp what the philosopher Karl Jaspers, in 1931, called in the broadest sense of the term, “*the spiritual situation of our time.*” Faced with the rise of scientism and the loss of meaning, Jaspers warned that modern Man risks reducing himself to a purely technical or economic function. He therefore called for a return to authentic existence and to inner freedom.

Where do we stand today? On some days, it is difficult to look to the future with confidence. For those who are believers, it can even be difficult to discern how any plan of God might be unfolding. Yes, the future is unclear. It is often unsettling. What will tomorrow bring? For our world, for Lebanon, for our societies, for the planet itself..

What do we see before us? A climate imbalance that we seem unable to slow, with its fires, its floods, and the steady rise in temperatures, along with the migrations that follow. We see wars, sometimes far away, sometimes at our doorstep, sometimes on our own soil, wars that remind us how easily the world can be drawn toward the abyss, conflicts in many other regions of the planet, religious persecutions, a form of neoliberalism that we cannot, or perhaps do not wish to, control, leaving so many people behind along the way, the rise of populism and extremism, the multiplication of illiberal democracies and, in many places, the return of authoritarian or even totalitarian regimes, a global order shaken by the resurgence of imperial ambitions, and a democratic model that is increasingly contested.

In many countries, societies themselves seem fragile and fractured, dialogue becomes difficult, violence is never far away. And we know this all too well, once violence takes root in our lives and in our streets, it is not easy to drive it away.

Everywhere, the horizon seems clouded. The persistence of wars deepens the sense of global devastation. Geopolitical anxiety often pushes the ecological emergency into the background. The word revolution now seems to belong more to the vocabulary of technology than to that of politics, as humanity enters a new digital condition. And resilience, that capacity to endure and overcome hardship, a word so often used, perhaps too often, to describe the Lebanese, sometimes appears to be one of the few remaining forms of hope.

A few years ago, in 2015, Pope Francis, in his Encyclical *Laudato Si'*³, offered a powerful reminder of the links that exist between the crises we are experiencing across the world: social crisis, ecological crisis, spiritual crisis. Yes, as he often reminded us, “*everything is connected.*” He also added that a crisis is always a moment of choice. We may emerge from it better or worse, but we never emerge from it unchanged.

We are living in a time when, across the world, some leaders, sometimes lacking scruples or ethical grounding, seem guided above all by personal interests and personal egos, often hidden behind the mask of nationalism. These leaders exercise power through force. They manipulate communication and information whenever they can. The international community increasingly appears as a notion that has lost much of its substance. International law itself has lost much of its authority. Multilateral organizations see their role diminished, while many nations struggle with a lack of political leadership because of their economic and military weakness.

3. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* on Care for Our Common Home, Encyclical Letter, May 24, 2015. Edition presented and commented by CERAS, Brussels, Lessius Editions, 2020.

On another level, the evolution of technology in all its forms both fascinates us and unsettles us. How could we not think, for example, of the questions raised by artificial intelligence? The pace of change is immense, and it continues to accelerate. These technologies promise efficiency and innovation. At the same time, they raise serious questions about our ability to control them. Even more deeply, they force us to reflect on what these transformations are doing to our very way of being human. They challenge our understanding of judgment, of moral responsibility, and of inner freedom. How can we preserve critical thinking in a world saturated with data? And beyond artificial intelligence, many other ethical questions emerge from the evolution of technologies and ideas, including those that concern the beginning and the end of life. These questions are all the more sensitive because our societies increasingly lack a common anthropology, a common understanding of what it means to be human. In this context, the profound changes we are witnessing make places of reflection and formation more necessary than ever.

To this we must add something else, and it is not new: the transformation of our relationship to time and space. We have become “citizens” of a world where distance matters less and less. Speed has taken the upper hand. Those who defend another way of living, who try to restore time to its rightful place, struggle to make themselves heard. And it is even harder for them to change ways of life that have grown accustomed to immediate access to everything⁴.

Then there are images and screens. In our hyperconnected society, the image has become central. We know this well for we spend a large part of our day looking at the screen of our mobile phones. Images have become the main vehicle of

4. Cf. Carl Honoré, *Éloge de la lenteur*, Marabout, 2013, 288 p. and Pierre Sansot, *Du bon usage de la lenteur*, Rivages Poche, 2000, 203 p.

communication, information, and emotional influence. They are everywhere, they shape our perception of reality, they feed our collective memory, they contribute to defining our personal and social identities, and they influence how we interact with others and how we experience our emotions.

As early as 1998, the sociologist and philosopher of Polish origin Zygmunt Bauman described our time as an age of “*liquid modernity*,” following what had been called “postmodernity.” In this liquid modernity, the fragility of economic and social conditions leads men and women to perceive the world as a collection of disposable objects, objects meant for single use, sometimes even human beings themselves⁵. Restless, anxious, often uncertain of themselves, people struggle to build lasting communities. They seek security in identities that sometimes take shape by keeping others at a distance. According to Bauman, we live in a time marked by the weakening of social bonds and by forms of identity fundamentalism. He describes a society without stable reference points, where individuals are constantly required to adapt to change.

We could add many other elements to this picture of our time, elements that help define the era we are living in and the increasingly rapid changes that shape it. As we observe these developments, and while the very idea of progress now seems to have fewer and fewer defenders, we can say that an old world has disappeared, together with the culture that sustained it, its reference points, its traditions, and its ways of thinking. The future often appears more as a threat than as the assured promise of happiness to come. What now seems to unite us is not so much the hope of a new world as the shared fear of catastrophe, whether military, health-related, environmental, or otherwise.

5. *Liquid Modernity*, Polity Press, 2000.

However, dear friends, the fact that the world is changing should not surprise us. It is normal, inevitable. In every era, change has always brought with it both good and bad, both threats and opportunities. In many ways, the essential questions remain the same, even if they appear in different forms. But in the time that is ours, one question stands out, that of our humanity itself. How do the changes I have just described transform, or perhaps even affect, our humanity? What kind of humanity is emerging before our eyes? And in the face of these transformations, what responsibilities does the University bear? Allow me a few reflections on this point. They are simply free thoughts and make no claim to be exhaustive.

When receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1957, Albert Camus identified the challenge facing the generations that would follow, *“They have had – he said, referring to all those who, like him, had fought to put an end to Nazi barbarism – to forge for themselves an art of living in times of catastrophe in order to be born a second time and to fight openly against the instinct of death at work in our history. (...) Heir to a corrupt history, in which are mingled fallen revolutions, technology gone mad, dead gods, and worn-out ideologies, where mediocre powers can destroy all yet no longer know how to convince, where intelligence has debased itself to become the servant of hatred and oppression, this generation starting from its own negations has had to re-establish, both within and without, a little of that which constitutes the dignity of life and death. In a world threatened by disintegration, in which our grand inquisitors run the risk of establishing forever the kingdom of death, it knows that it should, in an insane race against the clock, restore among the nations a peace that is not servitude, reconcile anew labour and culture, and remake with all men the Ark of the Covenant. It is not certain that this generation will ever be able to accomplish this immense task, but already it is rising everywhere in the world to the double*

challenge of truth and liberty and, if necessary, knows how to die for it without hate.”

Albert Camus added, *“Each generation doubtless feels called upon to reform the world. Mine knows that it will not reform it, but its task is perhaps even greater. It consists in preventing the world from destroying itself.”*⁶

These words, my friends, these simple and clear-sighted words, seem to have been written for our own time. The generations of today can take them as a guiding line for life. In the end, they express what may well be the central challenge of our era and of our lives.

What does it mean today *“to prevent the world from destroying itself”*? It can, of course, mean many things. I would simply say that it means preventing the world from becoming dehumanized. Today, time itself seems to have narrowed. Climate, social, and economic crises follow one another. They are already here. And Lebanon, more than many other countries, seems to have experienced before others the descent into the abyss. Faced with the rising wave that will inevitably crash upon the world, faced with the announcement of misfortune already present and still to come, *“Nineveh will be destroyed,”* what do we do? When the storms begin, inevitably, to bring everything down, how do we respond? Do we remain paralyzed and fatalistic? Do we blame others? Do we protect ourselves, believing that we might be among those who escape the worst? Or is it rather a matter of standing upright in the wave, refusing to be carried away by it? And of helping others to remain standing as well, so that in the profound transformations that are coming, the world does

6. Albert Camus, Speech at the Nobel Prize in Literature Award Ceremony, Stockholm, December 10, 1957.

7. Jonah 3:4. The prophet Jonah announces to the inhabitants of Nineveh that in forty days their city will be destroyed.

not become dehumanized? This is where the University must assume its role.

Some will say, and they will be right, that for years our country, Lebanon, through its wars and its crises, has brushed against, endured, and even compromised with dehumanization, with inhumanity. Nothing new. Others will say that after so many repeated tragedies it is natural to enjoy life, and to believe that an open modernity will create new spaces for well-deserved pleasure, legitimate carefreeness, and necessary enrichment, even when these are not regulated and sometimes seem indecent.

Yet we are indeed living in a period that destroys our humanity, in the many ways I have just mentioned. The challenge is to remain human when change, fear, and violence can so quickly lead to dehumanization. It is to continue believing, for ourselves and for others, that the history of humanity is still being made. Let us ask ourselves, then: do the choices we make, however small they may seem, carry a universal value? Do they take into account a good that is greater than our own? Do they help preserve humanity, even in what is most hidden, most modest, most fragile? Faced with the uncertain course of history, are we capable of the necessary inner renewal and the firm commitments that I mentioned earlier? I believe we are. Even if this often begins with small numbers, like yeast in the dough, quietly acting as catalysts for change.

Dear friends, we have just celebrated the 150th anniversary of our University. And we can legitimately be proud of this history in the service of the youth of Lebanon, a history in which so many men and women have inscribed their names, sometimes in letters of blood, so that this deeply human project might live. Allow me this morning to remember and to pay tribute to Father Alban de Jerphanion, Rector of the

University from 1958 to 1965, Chancellor of the School of Engineering of Beirut, who was shot by a sniper exactly fifty years ago, on March 14, 1976. Our task now is to continue. Our task is to ensure that our University continues to care for the humanity of today, and therefore for that of tomorrow. And the times we are living through, these days of fire and blood, make this responsibility all the more necessary.

Our University must certainly strive for excellence. That is not optional. And I say this simply: I believe we have no reason to be ashamed of what we offer. Of course, the University must remain at the forefront of research and integrate the latest technological innovations, both in its academic programs and in the way it operates, and we are working toward that. Of course, our University must remain open to the world. It does so through a trilingual academic offering, in French, English, and Arabic, and through strong connections with leading institutions so that intellectual, academic, professional, cultural, and technological projects can continue to grow and flourish. Yes, all of this is essential. It requires constant attention to the quality of what we offer. It calls for regular questioning and renewal in our programs, our teaching methods, and the resources we need to sustain to this mission. A university that did not have such ambition and such objectives would not fulfill its mission.

But all of this, my friends, cannot be enough. It cannot be enough if it does not also build the human person. It cannot be enough if it does not care for our humanity. The University must serve each student, certainly, but through them it must also serve the wider human community. A university cannot be only a place where knowledge is produced and skills are developed. It must also be a place where an inner experience becomes possible.

In this quieter and often less visible work, what should we pay attention to? I am sure that each of you already carries your own answers, shaped by your personal story, your professional and academic experience, and your own understanding of what it means to live a successful life and to live in relationship with others. Allow me simply to mention, briefly and without any particular order, a few attitudes that, alongside the strategic objectives necessary for a major institution like USJ, should form the foundations of our human adventure and our university project. They are part of what gives this University its character, its originality, and its pride.

- First, **the importance of rootedness, interiority, and depth.** Our task is to form men and women who are rooted. You know the words of Psalm 11: *“When the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do?”* At a time when everything moves quickly, when the country is changing rapidly, when families are scattered, and when the future seems difficult to read, the challenge is to develop roots and foundations that allow us to stand firm rather than becoming like straw carried away by every wave and every current. These foundations touch upon our personal histories, our religious traditions, our communities, and our nation. But they also reach something deeper: the recognition of our shared humanity with every human being, especially with those who are different from us. Such foundations, which are a sign of our humanity, require genuine inner formation. The University must encourage, support, and protect spaces of interiority, where thoughtful reflection takes shape and where convictions capable of guiding action are formed. In today’s world, spaces for true interiority are becoming rare. However, they are essential if we want to form human beings capable of discernment. Let us not be mistaken: to remain standing, an inner structure is far

more precious and far more useful than any armor, which in reality protects little and often isolates us.

- A second attitude is **not to have an accustomed soul**. Charles Péguy once said, *“There is something worse than having a bad thought. It is having a ready-made thought. There is something worse than having a bad soul, even worse than forming a bad soul. It is having a ready-made soul. There is something worse than having a perverse soul. It is having an accustomed soul.”*⁸ This temptation, the temptation to settle comfortably into things as they are, concerns every one of us. To avoid having an accustomed soul means remaining open, curious, ready to welcome new ideas and different perspectives. But it also requires a vigilant conscience. We must not fall asleep. One of the risks is that we become accustomed to what is happening around us, out of fatigue, complacency, or quiet self-interest. We let things continue without reacting because they do not concern us directly, or because speaking out would cost us something. Even worse is the moment when we lose the ability to believe that a different future is still possible. We need help in keeping our personal and national consciences alive, nourished by something deeper than easy slogans or the simple pursuit of worldly success. The search for truth, the commitment to integrity, and respect for the rules that sustain life in society cannot be matters of convenience. We know that this is a struggle that must be renewed every day. It is both a personal and a national challenge if this country is to rise again. The university community, and the experience of student life itself, must help sustain this effort, modestly perhaps, but in a real and meaningful way.

8. Charles Péguy, *Note sur M. Bergson et la philosophie bergsonienne*, followed by excerpts from *Note conjointe sur M. Descartes et la philosophie cartésienne*, Preface by Camille Riquier, Paris, Paris Ouest, 2020.

- Next, we need to **cultivate a broader vision**. Pope Leo, speaking last October to the students of the pontifical universities in Rome, insisted strongly on this point. I quote him: *“Today, we have become experts in the smallest details of reality, yet we have lost the capability of an overarching vision that integrates things through a deeper and greater meaning.”* And he added: *“Indeed, the grace of being a student, researcher or scholar means accepting a broad vision that can see far into the distance; that does not simplify problems nor fear questions; that overcomes intellectual laziness and, in doing so, also defeats spiritual decay. (...) The Christian experience (...) wishes to teach us to look at life and reality with a unified gaze, capable of embracing everything while rejecting merely partial ways of thinking.”*⁹ These words echo what the Very Reverend Father Pedro Arrupe, then Superior General of the Society of Jesus, liked to repeat more than fifty years ago: *“Think globally, act locally. I am convinced that this way of seeing has a real future.”* This is precisely what we try to do at Saint Joseph University of Beirut, and what we must continue to do.
- A fourth attitude, and I reassure you there are only five, is **learning how to listen and how to speak**. This is the first step of living with others and of living in society. Unfortunately, this is far from obvious. We know this well. We experience it every day, when it becomes difficult not to react immediately, to interrupt the other person in order to defend ourselves, or to impose our own point of view before truly understanding what the other person is trying to say. Listening is never a sign of weakness. It is the place where the humanity of the other person

9. Homily of Pope Leo XIV, Eucharistic Celebration with students of Pontifical Universities, Monday, October 27, 2025.

is recognized and respected. It opens a space where something new can emerge between different viewpoints. It requires accepting complexity, choosing nuance rather than black-and-white positions, refusing the forms of Manichaeism or fatalism that discourage action, and resisting the destructive comparisons that cause so much damage in our societies. The University must help students learn to listen so that they can speak with clarity and fairness, without fear, yet always with respect for others. More and more, it must remain a place where debate and reflection can flourish, in the service of strengthening our institutions and nurturing the democratic and civic life of our country.

- Finally, and I will conclude with this. Every form of education must, in one way or another, aim at **concern for others** and service to the community. Saint Joseph University of Beirut encourages, in many ways, opportunities during the years of study for students to concretely engage in service. The knowledge and skills that are acquired should not be kept only for personal advantage. They must always bear a broader purpose. This is not always easy, but it is precisely what is meant by the well-known expression *“to form men and women for others.”* Each person leaving the University, enriched by what they have learned and received, must ask themselves how they will take responsibility for caring for our shared humanity.

All these attitudes, and many others that are just as essential, draw strength from the Ignatian pedagogical tradition. They are more relevant than ever in the difficult time we are living through. Ladies and gentlemen, in these uncertain days, when each and every one of us feels shaken and our country once again finds itself brought to its knees, we must remain standing and support one another so that

together we may continue to care for this precious and fragile humanity. It is through this commitment that Saint Joseph University will fully accomplish its mission. And it is through this that it will never be a university quite like the others.

May Saint Joseph continue to watch over us.

Long live Saint Joseph University of Beirut! And long live Lebanon!