During the dark days of 1940, when England stood alone against the powerful and triumphant de-humanizing forces of Nazi tyranny, Prime Minister Winston Churchill rallied the British people to the cause of defending human freedom by asserting that history’s verdict on their courageous stand would be that it was their “finest hour.”

Today, a new and darker tyranny, shaped by the mass media, influenced by Hollywood, and sadly reinforced by many in the academy itself, is bent on enslaving man to the whims of fashion, moral relativism, and to a political collectivism that grows increasingly intolerant of our Judeo-Christian heritage. This tyranny robs man of his human dignity and leaves him without any reliable measure to determine the rightness or wrongness of his actions. A contributing factor to this sad state of affairs is the accelerating tendency in education to divide learning into highly compartmentalized disciplines that are unrelated to each other or to a unity with higher truths. There also exists in the academy strong pressure to cater to a parent/student consumerist mentality that views education merely as a utilitarian means of career training.

Today Catholic education is presented with an historic opportunity to play an unprecedented role in the struggle for human freedom and dignity, and in providing each person with a reliable tool to measure the value of his actions. Its mission can only succeed if it is united with and an integral part of the mission of the Catholic Church. As G.K. Chesterton noted, “The Catholic Church is the only thing which saves a man from the degrading slavery of being a child of his age.” There is no voice in the world today that champions the cause of authentic human freedom and human dignity more than the Catholic Church, the Mystical Body of Christ.

What role do Catholic colleges and universities play in this cause?

On April 17, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI gave Catholic educators here on the very campus of Catholic University some ideas in this regard. And
so, from a speech that inspired me that day and still inspires me in my role as president, I would like to recall a few of Pope Benedict’s central thoughts:

“First and foremost every Catholic educational institution is a place to encounter the living God.”

[Catholic universities] “become places in which God’s active presence in human affairs is recognized and in which every young person discovers the joy of entering into Christ’s ‘being for others.’”

“The Church’s primary mission of evangelization, in which educational institutions play a crucial role, is consonant with a nation’s fundamental aspiration to develop a society truly worthy of the human person’s dignity.”

“Christian educators can liberate the young from the limits of positivism and awaken receptivity to the truth, to God, and his goodness.”

“Authentic freedom can never be attained by turning away from God.”

“Any appeal to the principle of academic freedom in order to justify positions that contradict the faith and the teaching of the Church would obstruct or even betray the university’s identity and mission.”

Pope Benedict’s call to action reminded me of a great moment in U.S. history. In November 1863, in the middle of an epic struggle testing whether our union as a nation could survive, Abraham Lincoln spoke at the great battlefield of Gettysburg, which was set aside as a new national cemetery. He recalled the vision on which our founders conceived and dedicated our new country. He then challenged the living to be dedicated to the great, unfinished work that remained before them.

Today, Catholic universities have an opportunity to participate in the ongoing and life-saving work of our pilgrim Church on earth, namely the building up of the kingdom of God. Whether “the world will little note nor long remember what we say here” at this conference honoring the inauguration of Dr. John Garvey as the new president of Catholic University will depend on how we, as university presidents, accept this challenge. Do we fundamentally see our schools as independent from the mission of the Church? Or do we see them as institutions springing from the heart of the Church where, as Pope
Benedict said, “each and every aspect of your learning communities reverberates within the ecclesial life of faith”? 

We have the opportunity to make this our “finest hour” by forming men and women in a Christian anthropology that will equip them to advance the ever-growing fields of science, technology, business, and communications in a way that serves man, contributes to his authentic good and highest aspirations, and creates an environment where human life is affirmed and valued.

When Winston Churchill spoke his inspiring words, the outcome of England’s fate was yet to be determined, but he believed in the character of his people and in their ability to make sacrifices and to persevere until the dawn of a new era.

In the great cosmic struggle between good and evil, we already have the advantage of knowing the outcome of the ultimate contest, because Jesus Christ is our victor. The question remaining is what role will our Catholic universities play? Will they boldly seize the day or meekly surrender to “the degrading slavery of being a child of their age”?