The following is the text of the keynote address delivered by Boston College Law School Dean Vincent Rougeau at the University's 2019 Martin Luther King Jr. Scholarship Banquet.

I thought I would offer some thoughts about Martin Luther King’s legacy in our current era, in relationship to the service and accomplishments of the students we are celebrating here tonight. Although what I am about to say to our student finalists is said often, it deserves to be repeated because it is true: you stand on the shoulders of many who have come before you, and some who are with you here tonight. Your success has captured the hopes and dreams of so many people who sacrificed to get you to this place. This is in no way meant to diminish the hard work that you did on your own to succeed, but the Martin Luther King scholarship honors a legacy of paying it forward that I hope you are proud to embrace.

So, in that spirit, I need to begin by spending a few minutes talking about my mother. I am going to do that by sharing a personal story about Martin Luther King, which involves a small connection I have to him and his family.

My family lived in Atlanta from 1967-1969, and I attended pre-school and kindergarten there. My parents, my mother in particular, were part of a group of black and white families that developed the first integrated pre-school in Atlanta. From there, children moved into one of the city’s first integrated public elementary school kindergartens. Many civil rights pioneers were part of this group, including the Kings. Of course, as a child, I had no idea how significant the King family was, and I certainly had no idea that we were making history by integrating schools in Atlanta.

A few weeks ago, I was discussing this talk with my mom. She got very excited as she recalled a
memory from that time and suggested that I share it with all of you.

“I am sure you remember Dr. King’s funeral. You and all the children from the pre-school lined up hand in hand along Ashby Avenue as the funeral cortege passed. Then you walked together with the parents and the teachers toward the church. It was such a beautiful and powerful moment, even in the midst of such sadness. Don’t you recall?”

I really was moved by mother’s story, and as she retrieved the memory and remembered the events of that day, I could tell it was a very emotional experience for her. I really wanted to share that memory and to be in that moment with her. There was one problem. I was four years old at the time and, honestly—I really don’t remember. I really wanted to remember, and perhaps I can call up some flashes of memory here and there. But all of the glorious images that she was recalling—little black boys and girls holding hands with little white boys and girls just as in Dr. King’s dream. Honestly, no, I don’t remember. But I was there.

Well, the fact that my mother’s memories of that time are so vivid, and that she was able to share them with me, that certainly is important and I am glad to be able to share them with you. The vision and dedication of all of the parents who started those integrated schools in Atlanta because they were inspired by Dr. King is testament to the power of what he achieved as a leader of the Civil Rights Movement. Because of the efforts and sacrifices of those mothers and fathers, those grandmothers and grandfathers, my siblings and I—all of us born in the 1960s—have no memory of legal segregation. We never attended segregated schools, and we have been the beneficiaries of some remarkable racial progress. Black people are present in mainstream American life today in ways that would have been unimaginable and shocking in 1968. After all, although it seems a very long time ago, we just had an African-American president who served two terms. My parents and their friends were expecting and working for a lot of change in 1968, but honestly, at that time, I don’t think many of them seriously entertained the thought of a black president being elected in their lifetimes. Things do change.
“You all represent a belief in a better future that drove so many people to challenge the social practices and politics of their time. They took risks and made sacrifices because they knew this country was headed in the wrong direction. They didn’t wait for the leaders at the top to make things right. They wanted a better world for their children, so they got to work in their own communities to work for change and to demand justice.”

But—and this is a big but—the story around change is complicated. The United States is still in many ways a prisoner to its racist history, a history that has not been adequately acknowledged and confronted, and which continues to compromise the full membership and participation of blacks in American society. There is a long, depressing litany of examples: police shootings of unarmed black men, the school to prison pipeline, and the ongoing wealth gap between black and white households, just to name just a few things. We all know that there are many more. Fifty years after his death Martin Luther King would see much progress, it is true, but he also would see a nation still being torn apart by racial animosity, made worse by an era of public incivility and political debasement that I believe he would have found hard to comprehend.

As the pre-eminent leader of the Civil Rights Movement, King saw all of the American people as his audience, and in his public remarks and actions, he worked to appeal to their higher values, such as their belief in equality and their respect for human dignity. For King, these values drew on America's diverse religious traditions and, more broadly, on Americans’ respect for the core principles of democracy articulated in our nation’s founding documents. Little girls dying in a church bombing in Birmingham, or peaceful demonstrators being attacked in Selma, shocked and disturbed most Americans, which allowed King build a national moral consensus around the inherent justice of the civil rights movement and, ultimately, to encourage Congress to produce groundbreaking legislation that sought to end racial discrimination.

This is why celebrating the accomplishments of these MKL Scholarship finalists gives me such joy tonight. You all represent a belief in a better future that drove so many people to challenge the social practices and politics of their time. They took risks and made sacrifices because they knew this country was headed in the wrong direction. They didn’t wait for the leaders at the top to make things right. They wanted a better world for their children, so they got to work in their own communities to work for change and to demand justice.
It is impossible to look at our current political circumstances and not be concerned once again about where our country is heading, and we cannot ignore some very deep divisions that remain in the American social fabric. Race is one of them, and its salience in cannot be underestimated. But we are now seeing the breakdown of some of our most basic civic values at the highest levels of our government, along with a shocking coarsening of public discourse, and a cynicism among our citizens that threatens to destroy the foundations of our democratic institutions.

Despite the deepening divisions, both sides agree that for many, a loss of hope in the future lies at the heart of America’s social crisis. Increasing numbers of people find that a decent education is out of reach; wages have been stagnant for most people for decades; the working class has been devastated, and the middle class has shrunk. The failure of our political and economic systems to address the need for a more profound commitment to social justice, which was the focus of King’s thinking and activism in the final years of his life, has now become urgent and obvious. Social justice, and its intricate relationship to racial justice, is the aspect of Dr. King’s legacy that lies at the heart of the work these students have been doing on campus and in the community. Despite the progress that has been made — real progress, that has benefitted many of us here tonight—these young people know that more needs to be done, and that this is no time to be complacent.

“Like the students that we honor tonight, let us not forget those who continue to struggle and for whom this society has been more ruthless and less kind. Let those of us who have a voice, use it to support the voiceless, to call out hate and vulgarity of our current political moment, and to remind ourselves of what our democratic ideals truly call us to be as a nation.”

A rich understanding of justice, one that looks beyond the individual to consider the needs of the weak and the marginalized, the stability of communities, the distribution of resources, and the fairness of the structures of society, is at the heart of the teachings of most faith traditions, and it is an integral part of Catholic social teaching. These richer understandings of justice have long existed in an ongoing tension with certain aspects of American culture and the American model of market capitalism, which is highly individualistic and rewards a ‘winner-take-all’ mentality.
What MLK saw at the end of his life as a pioneer for racial justice and social justice was how
dependent American capitalism was on maintaining the existence of large groups of marginalized
and excluded people whose purpose in the social order was to enrich and empower a relatively small
group of people at the top. This certainly was an essential part of the explanation for slavery in the
United States, which has produced so much bitter fruit for race relations in American society today.
But it also explains, at least to some degree, indentured servitude, sharecropping, the mistreatment of
immigrants, and most recently, the indifference many have to the human rights of refugees and
undocumented migrants.

The students we celebrate tonight embody Dr. King's dream of a society in which men and women are
judged by the content of their character. The outstanding character of these young men and women is
demonstrated not only by the hard work they have done to excel academically, but also by their
devotion to the needs of others, and their passion for service that seeks justice and fairness for all
people. In particular, they have not forgotten the ongoing needs of Black and African American
people in this country and have used their talents to continue to serve those communities. They
honor both Dr. King's legacy and the Jesuit tradition of academic excellence and service that animates
the educational enterprise of our university. We celebrate not only what they have accomplished, but
also the wonderful impact we know they will have on this world as they move beyond Boston College.

Marin Luther King was a visionary leader who led this nation out of the worst aspects of its racism.
He was a healer who brought people together from many backgrounds and walks of life to move the
country forward toward a better vision of itself and a better future for its children. He also was a man
of faith. A Christian theologian who saw all men and women as having a God-given dignity that
imbued them with rights no person or government should be able to take away. Finally, he was, at the
end of his life, a critic of certain aspects of American capitalism. Not because he was a communist or a
socialist, but because he was a Christian who saw that the dignity of men and women could not be
sustained if they were viewed as a means for the enrichment of others. Like the students that we
honor tonight, let us not forget those who continue to struggle and for whom this society has been
more ruthless and less kind. Let those of us who have a voice, use it to support the voiceless, to call
out hate and vulgarity of our current political moment, and to remind ourselves of what our
democratic ideals truly call us to be as a nation.

In what was probably his most controversial speech, Beyond Vietnam, delivered at Riverside Church
in New York City in April, 1967, King exhorted those attending with these words:

"I am convinced that if we are to get on the right side of the world revolution, we as a nation must
undergo a radical revolution of values. We must rapidly begin the shift from a thing-oriented society to a person-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motives and property rights, are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, extreme materialism, and militarism are incapable of being conquered.”

Over fifty years later those words resonate in ways no one could have imagined in 1967. I am confident that these young people we celebrate tonight will continue to work to move this nation toward the things that matter and away from the things that don’t. Then, and only then, will we fully realize the dream Martin Luther King had for all of us.

Congratulations once again to all of our Martin Luther King scholarship finalists. It truly has been my honor to be your keynote speaker tonight, and I look forward to following all your accomplishments in the years ahead.

*February 19, 2019*