

Address by Rev. Fr. Dr. Talal Hachem
President of the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik
Award Ceremony for the Doctorate Honoris Causa to PM Saad
Hariri
and Commencement Ceremony of June 27, 2019

Your Excellency, Prime Minister Saad Hariri,

In the name of Most Reverend Father Abbot Neemtallah Hachem, Superior General of the Lebanese Maronite Order (OLM) and Chancellor of USEK, whom I salute and ask for his blessing, I have the pleasure of welcoming you.

I would also like to welcome His Excellency Bishop Joseph Spiteri, Apostolic Nuncio to Lebanon.

Allow me to further extend my welcome to Your Excellencies ministers, MPs and bishops,

Reverend Fathers Assistants General,

The Director General of the Internal Security Forces and military and security commanders,

Members of the USEK Board of Trustees,

Religious, academic, political, party, military, security, municipal, arts and media figures,

Reverend Fathers and members of the University Council,

Our beloved graduates and their families,

Ladies and gentlemen attending this special ceremony today.

1. Your Excellency, time is flying today, as we are truly rejoicing.

We rejoice, first and foremost, in your dignified and gracious presence among us, and in the fact that your chairing our first commencement ceremony for this year in our beloved Holy Spirit University of Kaslik is a great honor and pleasure for us. Moreover, it is a tremendous honor and pleasure, Your Excellency, to have our Doctorate Honoris Causa award accepted by you. Having you as one of our honorary graduates allows the University to assert that it shares commendable values with you, and to present you and your journey as an example for its students and graduates. We particularly rejoice today because, for the first time in your personal history, you are accepting a Doctorate Honoris Causa.

Another reason for rejoicing lies in the fact that our graduates from the Schools of Theology, Music, Medicine, Engineering are turning a new page in their life and moving forward, telling the world that the time has come to reap the rewards of their hard labor.

A third reason for rejoicing is that our University is steadfastly continuing its journey under the watchful eye of the Lord, our Creator

and Helper, and its mother Order, the Lebanese Maronite Order (OLM).

Your Excellency,

Far from being a mix of scattered joyful events, this three-fold reason to rejoice in your presence, our graduates, and our University creates a common space under the heading “The Efficient Journey, Moving Forward.”

2. Your Excellency, it is under this heading, “The Efficient Journey, Moving Forward”, that we perceive your journey. Lebanon was shell-shocked on February 14, 2005 when your late father, martyred Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, was assassinated, and you had to live with the horror of this event. Yet you stood fast and resolutely picked up the torch of leadership, stating loud and clear and later repeating on several occasions: “We have a journey to pursue, that of the unity of Lebanon and Lebanon’s interest first.” Your statement during your tour in the Bekaa Valley on April 21, 2018 highlights the core nature of this journey: “Our approach is that of moderation and middle ground... God willing, we shall continue this journey, the journey of good, the journey of Rafik Hariri, may the Lord have mercy on his soul, he who fought and was martyred for the sake of this country.” During this journey, you have faced many challenges, various hardships, and enough disappointments to destroy any person of little faith. Still, you were not disappointed, for your faith is strong in the Lord, in Lebanon, and in your own journey. You have moved forward efficiently, rejecting all

kinds of extremism, abiding by moderation as your approach, and working efficiently for the sake of Lebanon and all the Lebanese. In so doing, you have extended your hand to all Lebanese parties and taken bold decisions at every turn for the sake of Lebanon's unity, prosperity, and radiance.

Challenges, hardships, and disappointments often harden one's heart and allow features to be drawn by sadness. However, this was not to be in your case, as you remained – in the midst of it all and in spite of everything – a man of gentle heart, one whose gentleness is reflected in a smile that is much loved by the Lebanese. You also maintained your beautiful spontaneity, which is a magnet for selfie seekers, and remained a statesman mindful of the broad spectrum of society. Women hold a special place in your political action, as illustrated most notably by your entrusting Her Excellency Minister Raya Al-Hassan with the Ministry of Interior, making her the first Arab woman ever to hold this position, not to mention the various other women ministers and members of parliament. Moreover, you noticeably took to Twitter on May 23, 2019 to congratulate Ms. Joyce Azzam and her team on their conquering the world's highest seven peaks and to underscore the pioneering role of Lebanese women.

Through it all, you are a statesman who wishes to work and understands that growth cannot be brought about by cowering, seeking social gratification, and sectarian populism; rather, it is brought about by strenuous work and all-inclusive, catalyzing production.

In this respect, you noticeably tweeted on February 20, 2019 on the occasion of World Day of Social Justice: “Striving to liberate human beings from fear and need is the best way to achieve social justice; it is our course and action plan in the new government.” As such, you have demonstrated that all the Lebanese people are present in your heart, in your mind, and in your action in the government operating under the slogan “Let’s Get to Work!”

In a press conference held on June 11, sixteen days ago, you eloquently summarized your work ethic over the years by saying: “I have been raised on protecting the country, on dialogue and coexistence, on the culture of building, constructing, and striving for the people’s peace of mind, on a national culture that takes into consideration all the Lebanese and works with all the Lebanese.”

On this particular issue, we are deeply convinced of the need to adopt a socioeconomic approach, which does not implement the principles of traditional ideologies, but rather chooses from each socioeconomic system the elements that befit the reality of a given society for the good of every human being and the whole human being (in all his/her dimensions) – whether individually or collectively – and society. In fact, this has been the social teaching of the Catholic Church throughout the ages.

Allow me here, Your Excellency, to stress the need for preserving the freedom of higher education institutions in Lebanon so that they enjoy a development dynamic, each according to their respective traditions

and realities. Any attempt to impose certain visions and regulations upon higher education institutions is detrimental to the vitality of this sector in our beloved country Lebanon, which has long been known as the “University of the East.”

3. Beloved graduates, I look at you now and I cannot but notice your joy and the joy of your parents who have toiled with you and for you so that you get to this key moment in your personal history. This joy also forms part of the efficient journey forward, and that’s because your efficiency and productivity have brought you to where you are today and because each and every one of you represents a specific period in your parents’ journey. I can only imagine how deeply affected they are, whether here with us today, forcibly absent or looking down on us from heavens. Their reason and personal wishes no longer hold sway, as they allow their emotions to flow unchecked, looking at you with their eyes brimming with tears. We salute them in your names and in that of your University, for they are heroes rejoicing today in the progress of their life journey through your own success and journey.

On another level, your journey is efficient because you did not only acquire knowledge from USEK, but also a unique education that develops human beings through regulations, conferences, activities, and sciences. Therefore, you can now face the challenges, hardships, and disappointments and move forward. Always keep on moving forward and be moderate and open to all people. Love yourselves and love everyone else. Reject extremism, which calls for not loving others. Indeed, any kind of extremism – except for loving to the extreme – is

bound to end in failure, for God is love and is ever victorious. Loving to the extreme is all about opening up to others, loving them and making sacrifices for them, for “A man can have no greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.” (Jn 15: 13)

Be optimistic and realistic. Love Lebanon and the officials at its helm. Express your opinion in total freedom and social responsibility and contribute to the development of your society through the values upon which you were raised. There is no such thing in this world as a society devoid of hardships and worries; therefore, never despair of Lebanon. Take heed of what Prime Minister Saad Hariri says: “I might sound idealistic or optimistic sometimes because my father used to say that something good will come out of every bad situation and that there is always a future lying ahead... Nothing will be ever given to you on a silver platter and you will have to work hard for every little thing.” Now, I say to you again: “Let’s move forward joyfully, beloved graduates.” It is for this reason that I hereby name your class “Let’s Get to Work!” Class in keeping with the slogan of our current government.

We also rejoice in the joy of your University, for today marks another milestone in its efficient journey forward. Indeed, the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik does not just embody a few years of tradition; rather, it is the depositary of the very identity and mission of the OLM, an Order that is deeply rooted in history since the earliest centuries of the Christian era and the beginnings of monastic life in Church history. One of the OLM monasteries – the Monastery of Saint Anthony – Qozhaya – is home to the first printing press in the

East in 1610. The USEK Library, and the libraries of various OLM monasteries, are home to countless treasures of the Maronite, Lebanese, and Levantine heritage. The OLM is intrinsically linked to the history of Lebanon. Its various monasteries and centers are spread all over the country and the Order has accompanied the Lebanese all over the world. In fact, it may well be the only religious Order worldwide whose name encompasses that of its country of origin. As I mention Lebanon and the OLM's relation to it, I cannot but salute our head of state, His Excellency the President of the Republic General Michel Aoun, and assure him of our prayers and our full support as he leads our country's journey towards a better tomorrow; he who is made of pride, which permeates every stance he takes with a sense of national dignity. We, Mr. Prime Minister, respect your cooperation with His Excellency Mr. President of the Republic, always for the best of Lebanon and the Lebanese.

4. Dear Graduates, I have highlighted the identity of the OLM in order to underscore your University's core identity. It is no secret that USEK is efficiently moving forward, year after year. Its international dimension, its ranking ever higher in world rankings, and the accreditation of various programs in it – the latest to date being the accreditation of its School of Medicine – is clear proof of its strenuous efforts in its efficient journey forward. Our University started with theology, expanded to philosophy then music and subsequently expanded to various sciences, including medicine and engineering. The journey of USEK and the OLM, in my humble opinion, is a response

to His Holiness Pope Francis who called upon us, in his homily on December 17, 2016, to contemplate the journey of faith and look upon the past to rejoice in the graces and gifts we have received. Pope Francis takes a keen interest in the journey as a whole; as such, His Holiness prompts us to look forward and hammers home the following message: “This is the Christian life: Move forward.” Here I would like to salute His Excellency Bishop Joseph Spiteri, Apostolic Nuncio in Lebanon, as he represents our dear Pope His Holiness Pope Francis among us.

In this particular context, I would like to draw your attention to the immediate past, when I took over the presidency of USEK, exactly eight days ago to date, from our former President, Reverend Father Georges Hobeika, whom I salute and thank profoundly for his invaluable contributions and efforts to promote our University and its journey forward. I am deeply aware that being the President of the Holy Spirit University of Kaslik is both a tremendous honor and a huge responsibility bestowed upon me by the OLM. I ask for your prayers and support so that I can undertake this mission for as long as the OLM entrusts me with it. I realize that I am merely a link in the long chain of monks who have been entrusted with various responsibilities within the OLM, including the presidency of USEK, and I rejoice in witnessing the sustained growth of this chain with the grace of the Holy Spirit, the patron of our University. Allow me, Your Excellency, to add a personal comment here: I deeply rejoice as this is my first ceremony as president of USEK, not to mention that visiting you in the Grand Serail was the first official action of my presidency as I accompanied our Most

Reverend Father Abbot to invite you officially to this ceremony. Indeed, I officially started my mandate as USEK president last Wednesday at noon and you received us on that same day at 5 p.m. I cannot but consider this visit and this ceremony, both of which are linked to Your Excellency, as a good omen.

As I mention USEK and the OLM, allow me to express my filial greetings to Most Reverend Father Abbot Neemtallah Hachem, and to thank him and the esteemed OLM Council for their trust and their keen interest in the development of USEK and its efficient journey forward. I particularly thank our Reverend Father Abbot for requesting that the University Council puts the awarding of the Doctorate Honoris Causa to Prime Minister Saad Hariri on its agenda, so that the joy of our ceremony today is complete.

5. Now that I come to conclude my address, I cannot but stress, Your Excellency, that your presence here at USEK is a testimony to your deep faith in national unity. It is in keeping with the visits of your late father to USEK in 2001 to inaugurate its then Faculty of Sciences and Computer Engineering and to the OLM-affiliated *Collège Central* in Jounieh in 1994. You are undoubtedly aware of what the OLM and this University represent in the conscience of the Lebanese and Lebanon much as we are aware of what you represent in the conscience of the Lebanese and Lebanon. It is, therefore, an honor that your journey, the journey of USEK and that of the OLM be intertwined. And I take pleasure in bestowing upon you the title of Doctor Honoris Causa, addressing you for the first time as Your Excellency Dr. Saad Hariri.