May I say a few words in defense of the beleaguered 1960s? Sometimes castigated as an age of cultural dissolution, psychedelia, and the beginning of the end of Norman Rockwell’s America—for those of us who came of age in that era—it was something quite different. No era is ever perfect—but for me it was a glorious time to be alive. The memories I choose to cherish are of a warm-hearted, roly-poly pope named John—Il Papa Buono as the Italians still call him—who opened the windows of my sometimes stuffy church and let in the air of the sweet Holy Ghost. Of the Kennedy brothers—whose youth and “vigah”—uplifted a generation—especially Bobby whose hand I shook at a Sacramento campaign rally two days before he was shot in a Los Angeles hotel kitchen. Of Dr. King whose soaring eloquence I heard watching TV in a hotel room in late August 1963 when my family took a late summer vacation to Disneyland.

It was an era of wonderful music—some of the best to ever grace the Top 40 charts. Then there were the movies that went “to the edge.” Before I departed for the monastic enclosure of the Salvatorian novitiate my dear and innocent parents took me to see “The Graduate”—thinking that it would be nice movie for someone who had just graduated from high school. You can imagine the images I brought into the cloister.

I surely know the story of this decade’s pain and tragedy—of the assassinations, riots, the unending war, the protests, the frustration. But it was “an age of great dreams”—and I still cherish the idealism that it bred in my heart—a gift, like the eternal flame on JFK’s grave, which was never extinguished in my heart. This decade gave birth to my twin callings to the Catholic priesthood and to the classroom.

I am grateful to Marquette, to my department, to my wonderful colleagues for this
honor—but I am especially grateful for that time that in my life that seems sweeter and sweeter as the “mystic chords of memory” summons it up for moments like this. I still hear President Kennedy calling out on that cold January morning in 1961: “ask what can you do for your country” and it was no sound-byte to be endlessly replayed on a cable station--but a call to action. I recall so vividly John XXIII’s buoyant enthusiasm on the October day in 1962 when Vatican II opened. His opening words—words of joy and hope—even as the world was preparing for a potential nuclear Armageddon over missiles in Cuba—was the Spirit of that Council. “History,” he said on that momentous day, is the teacher of life.” Don Quixote’s story, re-told in the musical Man of La Mancha was about a man who dreamed an impossible dream—who saw good in what was broken—and who triumphed in the end even over his “realistic” relatives. I believed those things then, and I believe them now. And that is why I teach and never give up. This year at Marquette, especially the visit of the courageous students of Central High in Little Rock, renewed that idealism and zeal in my heart.

It has been great fun to teach—and so much has changed. This history of presidents, laws and wars has been amplified by the teaching of social and cultural history. How expectations of teachers have changed—I still teach presidents and laws and diplomacy—but I must also force myself to watch American Idol, Dancing with the Stars and that little vulgarian Eric Cartmann. I once even tried to show students how to use the hula hoop—fancy that.

It is customary to pay tribute to those who have brought me to this wonderful moment. First to God from whom all good things come. To my fellow priests of the Archdiocese of Milwaukee represented here by Fr. Melvin Michalski a renowned scholar of the works of Karl Rahner. To the archbishops of our See, Archbishop Rembert Weakland who assigned me here and Archbishop Dolan, a fellow historian. Marquette was in part the brainchild of the first
Catholic bishop of Milwaukee, John Martin Henni.

Thanks to my senior colleagues: Thomas Hachey who hired me, Paul Prucha, Ralph Weber and Ron Zupko who mentored me. To superb senior scholars Athan Theoharis and our chair Jim Marten who have pioneered new fields in American history while teaching, advising and administrating. To Tim McMahon, Tom Jablonsky and Phil Naylor whom students love. But most of all tonight to Dr. Robert Hay—a teacher of extraordinary gifts—embodifying the qualities of teaching that I admired most—a keen mind, the Socratic gift of asking the right questions, and the art of story telling which can make history the most humane of the humanities. Listening to him speak about Jefferson or Jackson is a gift that our students have no more—but one I was privileged to experience.

But, I conclude with a sincere thanks to my younger colleagues—whose passion and enthusiasm stoke to life the embers of idealism. A marvelous ability to engage students in genuine dialogue is Kristen Foster’s gift—as is her genuine goodness and kindness. The passionate zeal for research of Irene Guenther is simply amazing to me as is her integrity and sense of priorities. The offbeat humor of Michael Donoghue, the graceful manner of Dan Meissner in a large class, the scholarly zeal of Alison Efford, the role model that Michael Wert is already to our students—these junior members of our department continually inspire me. Ezechiel-like they often call to life my sometimes dry academical bones. And so I end with another evocation of those troubled yet dynamic 1960s and quote the greatest philosophers of the era—recently affirmed by no less a source than the Vatican— I refer to the Beatles. They had it right then and now: all you need is love.

Thank you.