Speech at the University of Córdoba

Text by Dr. Rafael Valero November 2, 2026

Distinguished authorities of the Province of Córdoba, Distinguished authorities of the National University of Córdoba, Distinguished national and international figures, ladies and gentlemen.

It is an honor for me to set foot on the soil of this noble city, cradle of Latin American humanism. Arriving here is not simply making a geographical journey; it is undertaking an intellectual pilgrimage to the very heart of the cultural thought of our America.

We arrive at the renowned “Casa de Trejo” with the utmost respect, recalling its foundation in 1613, which lit the flame of higher education in Argentina and throughout the entire southern cone of America.

Mexico and Córdoba share an invisible but unbreakable thread: the conviction that knowledge is not the privilege of a few, but a social heritage destined to emancipate our peoples.

For a Mexican academic, to speak of Córdoba is inevitably to speak of 1918. It was in this house that courageous youths proclaimed that Manifiesto Liminar (Liminal Manifesto), which resonated from La Docta to the Valley of Mexico, reminding the world that “the sorrows that remain with us are the freedoms that we lack.”

The University Reform of Córdoba not only democratized higher education in Argentina; it gave all of Latin America the model of a university owned by the State, free of charge, autonomous, open, with academic freedom and an unreserved commitment to the reality of its communities. That flame lit by the students of Córdoba more than a century ago continues to illuminate contemporary discussions on the social role of science and the humanities.

When the student revolution took place in Córdoba and the famous Manifiesto Liminar was published in 1918, José Vasconcelos, who would take office as rector of the National University of Mexico, observed with enormous admiration the impetus for change that was gathering force in the south.

And so, on assuming the rectorship in 1920, he embodied the spirit of the Córdoba Reform in his own administration. He transformed the identity of the Mexican institution by coining his famous university motto: “Por mi raza hablará el espíritu” (“The spirit will speak through my race”). And he set the map of Latin America as the logo and emblem of the University of Mexico, embracing the cultural unity of our countries, which was a central ideal of the Córdoba manifesto.

The link with the Casa de Trejo was not only intellectual, nor only at a distance. On October 5, 1922, he visited the National University of Córdoba and delivered a lecture titled “Orientaciones del pensamiento en México” (“Orientations of Thought in Mexico”), whose original text is still preserved, published in Córdoba that same year by the Faculty of Law and Social Sciences. He devoted part of his speech to expressly praising the revolutionary student body of Córdoba, describing Córdoba as “one of the main centers of that famous student university movement that has been spreading throughout southern America.” And at the end of his lecture, he addressed those young people directly to urge them, “When you win political power, do not abandon your ideals, nor leave them reduced to mere intellectual discussions. You must put them into practice and promote Latin American union, respecting the sovereignty of each country.”

Vasconcelos saw in the students of Córdoba a force capable of transforming not only the university, but also the political life of the continent. He hoped they would take on leadership responsibilities and turn their ideals into concrete reforms. He maintained, moreover, that Latin American countries had to overcome isolation, cooperate in international affairs and develop their own thought rather than limiting themselves to imitating European models, defending a continental union that did not require sacrificing national sovereignty.

That lecture, delivered barely four years after the Reform of 1918, established a clear link between the student movement and the Mexican Revolution, begun in 1917. The students of Córdoba, with their manifesto and their audacity, not only lit the flame of educational advancement in Argentina but also spread it throughout Latin America and showed that university youth could be a driving force of political and cultural transformation. That legacy remains alive and calls out to us.

Today, the challenges we face in our latitudes - social equality, scientific rigor in the face of dogma, regional integration and sustainable development - call on us, more than ever, to build solid academic bridges between north and south.

May this event be one more step in the consolidation of that great web of thought. May we, from the centuries-old history of this university and the indomitable spirit of its classrooms, continue to build a public education that is both rigorous and at the service of human dignity.

We are gathered today in La Docta at a time of profound fractures in the world, when the suffering of thousands seems reduced to the coldness of a number in the news. Yet, precisely when the horizon seems to darken, academia and philosophy have the inescapable duty of raising their voice and recalling what it means to be truly human.

Conflicts have always existed; they are a condition of the very existence of worlds. As Anaximander told us, the cosmos comes from the Apeiron with the inevitable emergence of pairs of opposites - good and evil have always existed.

That is why Immanuel Kant, in his reflection on Peace, understood that harmonious coexistence among peoples is not a natural state to be passively awaited, but a collective construction dictated by reason. Through his categorical imperative, Kant left us an irreplaceable maxim: “Act in such a way that you treat every human being always as an end in themselves and not simply as a means of obtaining something.”

Peace and the tranquility of people are not a utopia; they are a fundamental ethical requirement.

When powers make human lives pawns of geopolitics or domination, they betray the basic principle of dignity. No political victory or claim to power can justify reducing human beings to a disposable resource.

Wherever one person suffers, all of humanity suffers.

In the face of the discourse of contempt, philosophy invites us to recover the ethics of virtue. Aristotle and other classical philosophers taught us that the supreme good lies not in the accumulation of power or wealth but in “human flourishing,” the “good life” beyond a mere passing emotion. The full realization

of being within the community. Justice and civic friendship — philia — are the foundations on which the polis rests.

More than two millennia later, the words of the contemporary philosopher Emmanuel Levinas resonate with equal force: ethics is born at the moment we look into the face of the Other. The face of the vulnerable, of the suffering, imposes a responsibility on us, a responsibility prior to any ideology or border. Fraternity, therefore, is not an abstract discourse; it is the radical recognition that another's pain concerns us all.

The ethical formation of a person does not spring up spontaneously; it requires fertile ground that must be cultivated from youth. Secondary and middle education play an invaluable role in this endeavor: it is not a mere passage toward working life, but the crucial period in which young people awaken to social awareness, question prejudices, and discover the value of empathy. It is in the school classroom that one learns to listen to the voice of those who are different, to settle discrepancies through dialogue, and to cultivate a sense of belonging to a broader moral community.

For its part, the university cannot limit its mission to technical instruction or high specialization. It would serve little for the purpose of protecting the natural environment, and little for the good of human society, to train outstanding experts in specific areas of knowledge if they lacked social sensitivity and ethical commitment. The university is not merely a factory producing cogs for the market; it is, by definition, the house of critical reason and of the formation of upright citizens.

As the contemporary American philosopher Martha Nussbaum reminded us, knowledge devoid of ethics becomes a blind and, often, dangerous tool. Higher education must cultivate the capacity for compassionate imagination, which allows us to put ourselves in the place of others and understand them. Nussbaum holds that we need to feel ourselves citizens of the world; “our primary moral allegiance should be to the community of all human beings beyond national borders,” she wrote in her essay “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” published in Boston Review in 1994.

The humanist and philosophical teaching that we convey in every university where we have carried a message - whether at Oxford or Princeton, in Heidelberg

or at the Australian National University in Canberra, at the University of San Marcos in Lima and now at the Casa de Trejo - and the carrying forward of that same teaching by those who succeed us, must bear fruit in the long term, and our great-grandchildren will be able to enjoy a better world.

But right now, here and now, by thinking correctly, the world changes for us. Right thinking, good actions and acceptance of those who are different, here and now, lead us to peace of soul, tranquility and health. It is what I see in all of you who are listening to me: that love and understanding reign in your lives. The importance of the University of Córdoba, the importance of the National University of the learned city of Córdoba, is not only its great history but also its glorious present.

Thank you very much.

Córdoba, November 2026.