

"Beyond the Turn of the Tide. Anchored in Hope"

Four years ago, I stood before this faculty with a vision, entitled "*New wind in our sails. A tide of turning, a time for hope*". I used the metaphor of a ship sailing the sea. Later, I adjusted it to a fleet. That metaphor was present in the vision text, in the policy text and recurred regularly in my speeches, even in the most recent one at our New Year's reception. It recurs in the new title of the current vision text, which will be the basis for a new policy plan: "*Beyond the turn of the tide. Anchored in hope.*"

Indeed, today, we are beyond the turning point. The tide has turned. We will sail with strong winds into open sea, with an inviting horizon of confidence and a strong anchor of hope, following our compass steadfast.

What we tried to build together, in the past four years, is real. A faculty where well-being and excellence shouldn't be opposites, where people flourish because they feel seen, supported and free to follow their own way and do their best work in their own capacities and circumstances. Where doctoral students deserve supervision teams. Where colleagues had motivating career talks and open conversations with the dean, many of them for the first time in their academic life. Where students have meeting rooms and sacred spaces, a faculty pastor, and a student guidance service staffed with professionals. Where social safety is not a slogan, but a structured policy commitment.

None of this happened by accident. It happened because we chose it, together back then, together again today. Moreover, the dream of four years ago has been tested in the fire of reality by now. We now know what to improve, how to take concrete action, to implement the RASAS-recommendations coordinated by the taskforce which we have composed, to further create the faculty in which we all can flourish: a faculty of excellence and humanity! That is what it is all about.

Today, I would add: together with the team and with all of you, I have been doing everything in my possibilities to do precisely that, for four years: with a transparent policy plan, an annual follow-up report, and a list of achievements you can read, verify, and evaluate yourself. Today, this work is not finished. Together with a new strong team, I will try to fulfill what we started, to improve what was launched, to deepen and to root what has innovatively been tried out.

In his own recent election program, colleague Van Hecke quoted Rens van Loon in describing academic leadership as "Creating and maintaining the conditions for others to develop as well as possible." And I agree entirely with that description. In my own word of gratitude after the election in 2022 as well as in the vision text, already four years ago, I expressed the same view in my own words, and I repeat them explicitly today: "I do not consider the task you have entrusted to me as one of gaining power. Rather, it is a matter, first and foremost, of assuming intrinsic responsibility, with a view to promoting and stimulating, but also to taking care of all those and everything entrusted to me in this context. In mutual respect, in openness and consultation, it is about realizing optimal possibilities for the harmonious development and flourishing of all who live in our Faculty, and about creating a fruitful environment for that purpose. That is the environment I want to try to build, not alone, but together with each of you."

Back then already, I expressed the same idea, and I do express it again in my current vision text on the basis of the monastic Benedictine tradition, as you may have read, as follows: "In the Biblical

and monastic tradition leadership is understood as service. Three aspects are central to this: openness, with empathy and attention; humility, in the consciousness that it is not the leader but the greater good that is central; and compassion, the willingness to be touched by the tasks and the people entrusted to us”.

That is what I will try again. The task I am entrusted is a major one. More than four years ago, I now know what it is all about, what it can imply, what it will ask of me. And being more aware of all that, I look at it with even more intense gratitude. That is what I am experiencing right now. The awareness that something great is happening, something beautiful, something good: because I see it as something that transcends myself: serving our cherished Faculty, together with all of you. In the vocation stories of the Old Testament prophets, it is not uncommon for them to shy away from and even resist the task at hand. Too young, or not fluent enough in language: they raise many objections. But God answers them resolutely: "Do not be afraid, I am with you". In the same spirit, I stand before you today: sustained by confidence.

Sustained and carried also by all of you. Against this background, I would like to thank you sincerely and wholeheartedly for the result of this election, which, for me, expresses the confidence you have placed in me. I want to earn and appreciate that trust. With all that I am and all that I am capable of, I want to commit myself, day after day and hour after hour, with undivided dedication. And for everything in which I will inevitably fail, I ask for your understanding, sometimes maybe even for forgiveness, but above all I ask for your support, for your co-creation, for your genuine concern for what is intrinsically important to and in our Faculty.

Today, I thank my colleague Pierre Van Hecke for the challenge to even think deeper on what I strive for and for having made the election a real possibility of choice for all of you. I thank him for the open and constructive debate we had with the students in an atmosphere of joint and common care for our faculty. It was good to feel that we head in the same direction, and that our views support each other, so that we can learn from one another. And indeed, I will take into consideration his ideas, especially the shared concern for a more active Faculty Council. I particularly thank the entire board of 2022-2026, especially the vice deans and their core teams within an innovative constellation that we will refine now, the academic librarian and the representatives, the administrative director and the whole ATP-staff on which I could rely day by day, both in the Faculty as in the library, and all of you for having gone that way with me. I thank all colleagues who have encouraged me, four years long, to keep on going all the way, and for stimulating me to take up this task again as well as supporting me during the last weeks. I look forward to heading for another journey, 2026-2030, with a carefully composed new team, after having gained your advice in open listening. Let's sail out: "beyond the turn of the tide, anchored in hope."

And finally, I thank God – in whatever diverse ways you personally understand that loving transcendent reality – for guiding my way. And I keep praying, together with Charles de Foucault, as I always do: "Quoique Tu fasses de moi, je Te remercie."

Bénédicte Lemmelijn

Leuven, 27 March 2026