Opening Address by

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I acknowledge the traditional owners of this land. I also acknowledge the Dominican Sisters and the spiritual tradition and scholarly tradition of the Dominican family.

Words, images and voices are very powerful tools. The images of the disasters in Samoa, the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and the voices of mothers burying their children have challenged us to think beyond ourselves and to be one with these people while the headline words keep before us the loss of Australian lives in these areas.

I am still seeking information about people I met in the Philippines in September – they are so much at risk from such disasters – how can I be best engaged with them at this time. Some of you could be thinking of people you know whether it be in Kiribas, Samoa, Solomon Islands, the Philippines. Others could be thinking of the power of nature and the effects of our having an abusive rather than a right relationship with nature. We wait for the music, song, and literature which will emerge from these events expressing for us all the people’s hope and meaning in the midst of crisis.

For us today the yardstick is that the words, images and voices speak of justice, that is they speak of right relationships between people, their worlds, their environments and their god. So what literature, novel, poem, play, music or song has spoken most to you of social justice and how did it speak to you? In what way has it been a very powerful tool
to take you beyond yourself into the lives of other people, into a bigger and truthful understanding of the world?

Let me reflect upon three focus points or challenges which Azar Nafisi raised for me in her novel "Reading Lolita in Tehran". I share these reflections with you as we enter the sacred spaces opened to us by these authors through their lives, novels, and songs and the privileged space and time offered us here by Santa Sabina College and each other.

The challenges are to name the reality, be empathic, and speak the truth.

From Azar Nafisi:
“The victims of this mass execution were murdered twice, the second time by the silence and anonymity surrounding their executions, which robbed them of a meaningful and acknowledged death, and thus,..., set a seal on the fact that they had never really existed.” P.289.

From her reflections with her students upon courage through James novel “The Ambassadors”
“the most courageous characters here are those with imagination, those who, through their imaginative faculty, can empathize with others. When you lack this kind of courage, you remain ignorant of others’ feelings and needs.” P 301.

“Sometimes we told these stories to one another to convince ourselves that they had really happened. Because only then did they become true.” P291.

I offer you reality, empathy and truth as lenses for our engagement in the world of literature and social justice. From our engagement today I hope all of us grow in our realisation that we need to be always open to new perspectives if we are to see the realities honestly, express our empathy appropriately, and proclaim the truth with integrity.

I thank you the authors and composer for inviting us into your worlds and I ask Daniel Nelson, a young person with a passion for justice, great capacity for community engagement, and a love of literature, to take us into his world of literature and social justice.

Thank you