

**Remarks of Father James Shea
on the conferral of the honorary doctorate upon
Sister Thomas Welder, O.S.B.,
Drs. Riff and Margaret Morgan
30 April 2010
University Hall**

At a university, all things build toward these happy days of commencement. Our efforts and our hopes come to rest here, as we witness the quiet triumph of women and men who once had set out to learn and to lead, to better themselves in order to fulfill their calling and serve their families and their communities. And now they are done. The great author of cowboy novels, North Dakota's own Louis L'Amour, once said, "There will come a time when you think that everything is finished; that will be the beginning." Our graduates and all of their accomplishments move us very deeply.

But there is yet more cause for joy in these days. Tomorrow, the University of Mary will confer honorary doctorates upon three of our dearest friends. Believe me, there are opportunities every day for a college president to be humbled, but I don't think I've ever done anything like this. When I nudge my own little life into the arena with these great souls, I find that somehow I have lost myself. How does one, how do any of us, properly admire and acknowledge those who have done so much in their lives ... for God, for the common good, for humanity? The night Bishop Zipfel came to our diocese in 1997, he preached on a small work by CS Lewis called *The Weight of Glory*. In it, Lewis reminds us that those we work with, play with, betray, hurt, and love are immortal beings. Each of us, he said, bears the weight of our neighbor's immortal glory.

Every now and then, probably more often than we deserve, along comes a person whose being and bearing remind us so convincingly that, yes, the human spirit is immortal. We are immortal beings. Who are they? They are the *magnanimous* in our midst. "Magnanimity" means greatness of soul, greatness of heart. The magnanimous person gives freely and richly of all that they have been given. They do not hold back, but pour themselves out in love. And these are the leaders and teachers in our midst whose imprint upon the world cannot be measured. There is a poem by Sister Miriam of the Holy Spirit called *The Great Giving*:

*The second giving of God is the great giving
out of the portions of the seraphim,
abundances with which the soul is laden
once it has given up all things for Him.*

*The second growth of God is the rich growing,
with fruits no constant gathering can remove,
the flourishing of those who by God's mercy
have cut themselves down to the roots for love.*

*God seeks a heart with bold and boundless hunger
that sees itself and earth as paltry stuff;
God loves a soul that casts down all He gave it
and stands and cries that it was not enough.*

Tomorrow we confer the honorary doctorate. Tonight, our gifts are more humble and more simple. To our three honorees, tonight we offer you our affection and our heartfelt appreciation. We open our ears to you, to hear what you might say to us. And we present you with a hand-crafted plate, specially designed and created for the University of Mary by Richard Bresnahan, an artist who grew up in North Dakota and now serves as artist in residence at Saint John's University in Minnesota. The stoneware clay is indigenous material from the Casselton area and the design is intended to reveal Mary's logo in colors that suggest our North Dakota landscape.

I will say a few words, as best as I can, about our honorees. Then I will invite them forward, present them with our gift, and ask them to speak to us briefly from their hearts.

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The University of Mary was built by Sisters who were brimming over with pioneer spirit. Very nearly every night as I go to sleep, I think of those first Sisters stepping off the train in frontier Bismarck in 1878. I think of them founding a school the next morning and a hospital not long after, even though Benedictine women had never, in 15 centuries, run a hospital. From the beginning the Sisters sought worthy collaborators, men and women of good will who would understand and share that great pioneer spirit. Along the way, they found such people in Drs. Riff and Margaret Morgan. The Morgans had distinguished themselves in the world of medicine before coming to North Dakota. But it was here, at the Sisters' St. Alexius Medical Center, where they gave the gift of their lives. When I met them at their home in Florida this past January, they spoke without stopping for hours of their happy years here on the wind-swept prairies. And they were happy in the midst of adversity, the sure sign of the true pioneer. Precisely upon their arrival in Bismarck in 1966, a five-day blizzard sacked the city, and they were scarcely able to leave their new home. And it was only the first of the challenges. They were the only anesthesiologists in the state, they worked with St. A's staff and the hospital administrator, Sister Joanne Graham, to establish an intensive care unit; a respiratory care program; a cardiac catheterization lab; vascular, carotid, and echocardiography labs; and a cystic fibrosis center. They founded the Heart and Lung Clinic, extended St. Alexius' services to rural North Dakota, and established a successful cardiac surgery department. My dad had a stent put into his heart at St. A's a couple of months back, and within hours he was up flirting with the nurses ... thanks to you, Riff & Margaret.

To lift the burden of human suffering, to heal and to comfort, to use the secrets of science for good and not for destruction, to do no harm, but much, much good. This is the vocation of a doctor. And so we honor you, Drs. Riff & Margaret Morgan!

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I don't know how to do this next part. The towering contributions and accomplishments of Sister Thomas Welder are well known to everyone, what is there to add? And who am I, anyway, to do it? Let me just say this. In 1959, the very year Diane Welder joined Annunciation Monastery, Pope John XXIII summoned the Second Vatican Council to Rome for the renewal of the Church. Among the documents issued by that council is the one whose title captures everything we know about our beloved Sister Thomas: *Gaudium et Spes* ... Joy and Hope! Probably the most famous line from *Gaudium et Spes* is this one: "Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself." *Man cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.* It means that the human person does not know what to do, we don't understand why we were created. In our natural state, we are lost in the cosmos, wandering pilgrims in a senseless world. But when we set aside the search for ourselves and seek God instead, by pouring our lives out for others, then suddenly it all comes clear and we leap to life. Our lives don't mean anything at all until we find a way to give ourselves away. And once we do, we have found the purpose and meaning of our existence. Do any of us know anyone who has done this so beautifully as Sister Thomas? Generations of students have learned the lesson of humble service and self gift from her, in word and in deed. She has been tireless in pouring out her life for others. Through adversity and perplexity and her own long sickness, Sister has given her all. She has poured out her life in service. In the end, do any of the biographical details matter so much as that? We all have gifts of our own, and Sister was given more than most of us. She is gracious and smart and eloquent. But the beauty of her spirit comes from what she did with all of that. She gave it for us, and in giving, she found out what she was here to do. What a life well lived! It is our pleasure, and my very deep honor, to ask Sister Thomas to come forward.

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Tomorrow the University of Mary confers degrees for the 50th time, it is our 50th commencement. Certainly we wanted to honor Sister Thomas and the Morgans for themselves, and for all of their accomplishments and contributions. But it was also a way for us to give tribute to our founding Sisters. For when they came to Dakota territory, it was to bring healing and learning, health care and education. And when they founded Mary College, our very first academic programs were nursing and teaching. We are still known everywhere in the region for the strength and vitality of those programs today. And so as the life and service of Sister Thomas captures the spirit of education at its very best, so too the enduring legacy of the Morgans quickens in our midst the spirit of healing and medicine. And all of it, from top to bottom, is the spirit of our Sisters alive and well today.

Life is worth it. It's hard but it's good; isn't that right, Sister Thomas, Riff & Margaret? Life is worth living. I think of this place many years ago: Bismarck, North Dakota. At Mary College a young choir director leads her students, and she makes music with them, and they're ever so slightly off key, but they're young, and so is she, and she has so much more to give. And there are two young doctors, the one from Egypt and the other from Canada, and they are in love,

and there is a blizzard all around them and very much work before them. And he takes her by the hand and thinks of the sandstorms of the Sahara. The only difference is that it is cold, and she is warm, and they have so much more to give.

And that is the mystery of greatness. Mary indeed is greater because of our friendship with them, and we will carry forward the gifts they have given.

God bless you, Mary loves you.