

**Address by Father James Patrick Shea, Ph.B., S.T.B., Ph.L.
on the occasion of his inauguration as 6th president of The University of Mary
19 September 2009
The Chapel of Our Lady of the Annunciation – Bismarck, North Dakota (U.S.A.)**

“May the tender mercy of the Lord our God be upon us!
O prosper the work of our hands, prosper the work of our hands.” (Ps. 90)

During the many years when this place served as the chapel of prayer for the Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Monastery, the words of this psalm - the words of all the psalms - echoed daily from these walls of prairie rock. The daughters of Saint Benedict know well the first page of his Rule, which says: “When you set out to do some good work, first beg God with most insistent prayer to bring it to completion” (RB Prol.). And so through all the seasons, as the early light of dawn lit with radiance this eastward window, the Sisters would sing out together: “May the tender mercy of the Lord our God be upon us! O prosper the work of our hands, prosper the work of our hands.”

The echoes of that ancient prayer fill our hearts too on this solemn and joyful morning. For as we today mark new beginnings at the University of Mary, as we renew our commitment to the university’s mission, we heed the Rule of Benedict: before all else, we bring a humble but insistent prayer to the Lord our God. For we know well that every new beginning, each bright dawn, holds such promise only because His mercies are new every morning. “May the tender mercy of the Lord our God be upon us! O prosper the work of our hands, prosper the work of our hands.”

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I am deeply honored and humbled to have been chosen to serve as the sixth president of the University of Mary. To Sister Nancy Miller and the Sisters of Annunciation Monastery, your courage and faith from the very beginning are an inspiration to me, to us all. Thank you for your steadfast support, both now and in the years to come. I am grateful to Martin White and the Board of Trustees for the confidence they have placed in me, and I thank all of you for gathering in these festival rites.

Bishop Zipfel, you have been a good father to me, and I am grateful to have you at my side this morning. As I embark on this new apostolate, I sincerely ask you and all my brother priests to remember me at the altar.

Sister Thomas Welder, my beloved predecessor: you are so beautiful in spirit, and your living witness of servant leadership and Benedictine values as president for more than 30 years have left a deep and precious imprint upon this university and, indeed, upon our whole region. I was three years old, Sister, when you assumed the presidency of Mary College, and since that day you’ve poured your very life into this community of learning. What a gift the Lord has given us in you!

As a farm boy from North Dakota, how can I express what it means to have the Governor of our great state here this morning, and by his side the most gracious and beautiful First Lady of the nation? Governor Hoeven, Mikey, thanks for being so good to us. To Congressman Pomeroy and his new wife Mary, thank you for your kind presence today and your illustrious service to us in Washington. Our beloved state is well represented this morning! I'm likewise very gladdened by the presence of Dr. John Warford, the honorable mayor of Bismarck, and his lovely wife Jennifer, dear friends to me. To these good souls and to all here who represent North Dakota and its towns and cities in public service, thanks for coming.

There are here today many good friends and benefactors of the University of Mary, and many who have worked tirelessly for its growth through the years. Among those is Dr. Harold Miller, past president of the university and Chairman Emeritus of the Board. I likewise welcome and salute our many visitors from other universities, colleges, and learned societies, and I am touched by the kind greetings offered on behalf of faculty, students, staff, alumni, and the people of the dioceses of Fargo and Bismarck.

How strange and wonderful to see in one place the teacher who taught me to read and the teachers who taught me to read Shakespeare and Aristotle. To all my teachers from grade school through graduate school and seminary, and to all my schoolmates through those many years, thank you for being a part of one of life's best gifts: a good education.

Finally, I greet with great personal affection my mom and dad, my brothers and their wives and children, my little sister, and the rest of my large and raucous family. I welcome with heartfelt gratitude those who have been my students or parishioners in these happy years of priesthood, along with so many dear friends from every chapter of my life. I don't know anybody I'd rather be, and that's because of you. When I consider for a moment all the joy I have been granted in this valley of tears, when I take stock but briefly of the personal riches of my life, all those Ivy League endowments look very small.

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Well, what an occasion! It's been many years since we've had an inauguration here, and these festival rites jostle our eyes and ears for their splendor and their medieval pageantry. But what does this all mean? The University of Mary, even by American standards, is a young school, and I am a young man. If we have come here just to celebrate ourselves, then this is disproportionate; it's too much.

But then again, it's not about us. Indeed, we do bring to mind our own past with grateful wonder, even as we look to our future with much, much hope. But this is about more than us, for as a Christian, Catholic, Benedictine institution, our heritage spans the centuries back to the very first universities - Bologna, Paris, Oxford - and yet further back to the monastic life of learning from which they took their inspiration. So for all the magnificence of this moment, we know that it is only but a tiny part in a far greater drama which stretches behind us and before

us and above us, just beyond our vision. And along the way, as is the case for all those who live by faith and trust, we are often given only just enough light to see what it is that we should do next. To borrow from the English novelist Evelyn Waugh, sometimes the work of builders and the motions of tragedians result in something quite remote from anything they may have intended at the time.

And so it was for our founders and sponsors. In 1878, more than 130 years ago, four Benedictine sisters stepped off a westward train into the streets of Bismarck, North Dakota. They brought with them nothing but faith in God and the conviction that He wanted them to come here, to this place, to do something great for Him. The very next morning they opened a school, and soon after that they opened the only major hospital between Minneapolis and Seattle. And so it began for them, here upon our prairie. Lewis and Clark had passed by this way not so very long before - just at the foot of this hill - and it had been only two years since General George Custer had ridden out from Fort Abraham Lincoln - visible from our campus, just beyond the river - to the Battle of the Little Bighorn. Bismarck in those days was a rowdy frontier town, where poor, immigrant families lived in one-room shanties on dirt streets. The Sisters had come to bring with them learning, healing, culture, religion.

Their foundation steadily grew here, beside the chokecherry, the prairie rose, and the wild grasses, and they received permission to form an independent motherhouse in 1947, on the eve of Mary's Feast of the Annunciation. And then, 50 years ago, once again in response to a stirring they felt in the heart of God, these Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Monastery opened the doors to a college, a university with foundations now sunk deep into the earth upon this wind-swept prairie bluff. And in everything the Sisters accomplished for the people here, especially in the foundation of our college, it wasn't about them, it never was. The odds were against them each time, and from the beginning. And they gave up a lot to make it all happen. But the Sisters did what they did because the Lord wanted it, because it needed to be done.

When they founded Mary College, the Sisters said that our mission would be to serve the needs of the people of our region and to prepare leaders in the service of truth ... leaders in the service of truth. We would be Christian. We would be Catholic. We would be Benedictine.

This is an aspiration of tremendous beauty: "to prepare leaders in the service of truth." I remember once listening to Sister Thomas tell the story of our founding, and those words struck me to the heart. In our time there is much talk about leadership, but leadership at the University of Mary has always been understood to be something distinctive. Sister Thomas has envisioned us as the nation's premier institution in the formation of servant leaders, leaders according to the spirit of Jesus, who humbly washed the feet of His disciples, who willingly gave His life so that others might live. But this conviction and desire was with us from the beginning, built into the foundations of our school. For us, servant leadership in the pursuit of truth is not an academic fashion statement or a marketing gimmick. It was the dream of the Sisters, it is fundamental to our mission, it is why we exist.

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And we are not alone. Just last year at my alma mater, the Catholic University of America, Pope Benedict XVI spoke to leaders in higher education about - no kidding - "the diakonia of truth", the service of truth. He went on to say, "Set against personal struggles, moral confusion, and fragmentation of knowledge, the noble goals of scholarship and education, founded on the unity of truth and in service of the person and the community, become an especially powerful instrument of hope."

If this is true, if an education founded upon the service of truth can offer genuine hope in the midst of intellectual, moral, and personal confusion, if the fruit of scholarship can equip a person to push back against tides of despair or hopelessness, then those of us who dedicate ourselves in large part to the care and formation of the young had better take notice. As an educator and as a priest, I spent the last seven years of my life deeply immersed in the concerns and struggles of this generation of young people. I can tell you firsthand that there is in them a deep confusion but also a tremendous yearning to find and savor that which is true, beautiful, and good. I have been with them in the trenches of their hearts, fighting their battles with them, seeking truth with them. And I have seen what the search for truth can mean to them, can do for them. I know what it has done for me.

Our students stand upon the doorstep of life, and we aim too low if we see our work as an elaborate kind of career preparation. Even as we rightly devote energy and resources to help our students acquire and sharpen certain specialized skills, we should also stand convinced that a good university education can impart something more: the capacity to live a full and well-examined life. Specialized information and technical skill are taught most fruitfully in the midst of an education which aims at the formation of the whole person, an education which actively fosters the development of character and virtue for a good life and the benefit of the wider community.

This is true because within every person who seeks to learn, within every student who desires growth in wisdom or the discovery of truth, there is an inner life. Signing up for classes for the first time, a college freshman senses a wondrous eagerness and excitement, the pangs of yearning for something which could give order and purpose deep within. The nourishment of this inner life is the authentic motive behind a student's fascination with history or literature, science, music, philosophy, drama, architecture, or art. And so those who seek to teach are not simply conveyors of data but real stewards of the tremendous treasures of nature, culture, and grace.

A university like our own, founded upon and renewed in fidelity to our Christian, Catholic, and Benedictine identity, is uniquely suited to this comprehensive vision of education. Our tradition proposes an integrated spiritual and philosophical approach to the most enduring questions of human life. From the writings of the earliest Christians to the astonishing eloquence of Saint Augustine, from the overture of the Benedictine wisdom tradition to the first great universities of the Middle Ages, from Cardinal Newman's *Idea of a University* and down to our present day,

our rich cultural and theological heritage has proven fertile ground through the centuries for both the education of the mind and the formation of the soul.

One of the central projects of our tradition, the harmonious synthesis of faith and reason, is as urgent in our time as it ever was. Our students and graduates will have to grapple with a world which is both increasingly secular and more radically religious. The notion that faith and reason have nothing to say to each other is at the root of some of the most complex and volatile challenges which face our society. When faith is conceived of as a private emotion, an isolated and purely personal experience, or even a child's blanket needed by some to cope with a threatening world, then it is easily dismissed as irrelevant and unneeded, shoved onto a museum shelf with other cultural artifacts. And when reason is conceived of as something extrinsic to faith, something which necessarily interferes with religious fervor or practice, then it becomes increasingly difficult for persons with different beliefs to speak reasonably with each other. All that remains for the spreading of faith and the resolution of disputes is force, violence. And the inevitable clash between the tendency to relegate faith and the tendency to isolate reason has caused us no end of misery and pain in this young millennium. Yet the two are born from the very same premise: the flawed conviction that faith and reason have nothing to do with each other.

But our students and graduates should find that the instinct of a Christian, Catholic, Benedictine institution is to resist this fragmentation of knowledge. We stand convinced that there can be a deep harmony between faith and reason, for truth is one. Faith and reason are not locked in conflict with each other, but rather they form together the basis for an education which is set free to explore both the natural world around us and the world within each human person. Moreover, the gift of faith is itself an act of the intellect moved by the will, moved by grace. It only truly happens when our inmost thoughts are inspired with trust. So faith is not simply an emotion, it involves the use of reason. And this kind of insistence upon the unity of truth does not somehow render us inadequate scholars or second-rate academics. Thinking Christians have made tremendous contributions to the good of civilization, and the intellectual legacy of Catholic scholarship speaks for itself. At a place like the University of Mary, reason is at home in a culture of faith.

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And the Sisters believed that's the kind of culture where real leaders in the service of truth are born and flourish. A student who comes to us should be able to expect a formative educational experience which nourishes them intellectually, morally, and spiritually. Being clever is not the same as being wise, and Cardinal Newman reminds us that time spent at a university may well result in a person who has a lot of knowledge, but who is no match for the turbulent world without or within.

Here my mind rests a bit upon that great figure of Saint Benedict, who was himself around the age of our average undergraduate when he abandoned his studies in Rome and fled to the countryside to seek God. He had before him the bright future of a Roman noble, he had ready

access to the finer things of life, and it seems that he had been deeply affected by the love of a woman. But young Benedict had come to understand that he and his companions were really not a community of learners, but a mob of egoists. They were not preparing for leadership in the service of truth, but leadership in the service of self. And so he walked away.

Then, as he sought for truth and in the intimacy of prayer, Benedict discovered the beauty of some deep and enduring values: true community, hospitality, stability, service, obedience, discipline, humility, moderation, stewardship, love. That is a remarkable legacy for a college drop-out! And there's something more, because I believe that these formative values from the Benedictine wisdom tradition are as relevant and helpful today as they have ever been. Benedict appeared upon this earth in a time strangely like unto our own, an age shaken by violence, greed, widespread hopelessness, and the rumors of war. But by God's grace and the special insight which he had been given, Benedict and his spiritual children set about transforming the culture of the Western world - renewing the Church, preserving learning, fostering worship and prayer, and opening the eyes of many to the irresistible beauty of justice and peace. That can happen again, and we can be a part of it.

It will happen when we, like Benedict before us, seek and serve truth. *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* instructs us that "it is the honor and responsibility of a Catholic university to consecrate itself without reserve to the cause of truth." Truth is the goal of a Christian, Catholic, Benedictine school. It can always be found, although often with difficulty, and sometimes not completely. But the very seeking of it brings a wholesome joy to life, a joy which I feel deep in my soul, a joy which I have seen come alive in the young people I have come to know and love. And truth brings joy even when it challenges us, when it reveals to us that we are wrong, when it brings into focus our moral and personal failures, when it dispels illusions and rebukes false pleasures. Let me speak now in the voice of this new generation: "Give us the hard splendor of truth, no matter what the cost, over the velvet ravages of our own egos. Hold out to us the chance for self-sacrifice so that we might escape the quiet desperation of a meaningless life. Sing us the songs of the heroes of old, and then we shall ourselves clamor like champions; we have the spittle for it. Shape us, form us, prepare us to be leaders in the service of truth."

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Our founding Sisters and the very stones of this chapel are dedicated to and named for a surprising episode from a page in the Gospels. When I think of our students, when I pray for those who will arrive here in the years to come - all their lives before them - I think of a young girl to whom an angel came. She was no one at all, a teenaged pauper in the forgotten corner of a vast and sprawling empire. If someone had drawn up a list of the least important people living in her town, her name would not even have been there; she was just too insignificant to be noticed at all. And the town was Nazareth, although it may just as well have been Richardton, Hague, Regent, or Steele. And the angel did not say, "I will help you to achieve your dreams." The angel, in very few words, told her the truth ... the truth about herself, the purpose of her life, the world in which she lived, the God who had set His heart upon her. And just then, when no one was looking, the whole world started over again.

There is, my dear friends, a secret history of the world, which is the real history of the world. And its chapters are not written in places like imperial Rome or Cambridge, Massachusetts, but places like Nazareth, and Bismarck, North Dakota. That young girl, who has granted us her name these 50 years, she was swept up into this secret history, and now the whole world and all of heaven knows who she is. Saint Benedict was swept up into the secret history. When he left his companions behind and his books on a pile in his room, he walked into the countryside so as to vanish forever, but he was actually walking onto the center stage of the drama of our civilization. The Sisters, I think, were swept up too, planting seeds not only in this life but in eternity. For what they planted has flourished in unlooked-for ways. And if we now have the courage to renew ourselves in fidelity to the mission they were given - to serve the people of this region and to prepare leaders in the service of truth - then the University of Mary will endure, we will continue to touch lives, and the Lord will prosper the work of our hands. For me, there is no question: I am astonished with gratitude that I would be given the opportunity to stand here, to pour the vigor of my youth and the energies of my heart into the great mission of Mary's university.

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