

**A Transcript of Father Shea's
Message to the University of Mary President's Club,
gathered at the Bismarck Civic Center for the Inaugural Dinner
19 September 2009**

I'm really very grateful for Kevin Cramer's gracious introduction and to be welcomed on stage to greet you tonight. Thank you.

What a week this has been for me, a tremendous week of grace! It was deeply touching for me to join with all of you these past few minutes in remembering and celebrating all the momentous events of this inaugural week. I want you to know how deeply thrilled I am, and honored, to have been chosen as the 6th president of the University of Mary, and how eager I am to pour myself into this task as best I can. I believe that the Lord has asked me to do this, and I'm grateful for the confidence that both He and the University of Mary community have placed in me as I now begin my tenure.

And it is altogether fitting to end this festival week with you, the members of the President's Club. You're very important to the University of Mary. At 50 years old, we're a relatively young school, and so while our alumni base has grown through the years we've had to reach out to friends from the wider community, to good people who believe in our Christian, Catholic, Benedictine mission. And the members of the President's Club have been behind us all the way. I want to thank you from my heart for all the support that you've given us through the years, even while I prepare (as you might expect) to ask you to continue your support as we move forward.

You've been so good to the University of Mary, and it's partly because as the "President's Club" you've had a great president to rally around. There's really nothing that North Dakotans love more than to stand up and cheer for Sister Thomas Welder, so let's get it out of the way!

[Applause]

Sister Thomas, you're an inspiration to us all. You've been so great a gift to the University of Mary, to our whole region, and to me personally. All the fears in my heart are calmed by the knowledge that you're right here at my side. I'm grateful for that, and I'm grateful for the prayers that you've offered for me, especially in the course of this week. Every day Sister has said to me, "I'm praying for you today, Father. You're going to make it through this all right."

And I bet I'm told 12 times a day that I have big shoes to fill. And that's true; I'm not Sister Thomas. We are different. How different? Well, I'd guess at least 70 pounds! *[Laughter]*

But, you know, I've gotten annoyed at how many times people tell me about the big shoes that I've got to fill. And so in this very forum I thought it would be suitable to ask the prioress, Sister Nancy Miller, for a new policy. There are religious communities all over in the Catholic Church who call themselves "discalced". They go around without any shoes at all. I like the sound of it,

don't you?: *The Discalced Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Monastery*. Then Sister Thomas wouldn't have any shoes at all, and I don't have to worry about it! *[Laughter]*

One way or another, they always say that before you judge a person you should walk a mile in their shoes. That's tremendously good advice, because then when you do judge them you'll be a mile away ... and you'll have their shoes! *[Laughter... Applause]*

There are so many great supporters of the university here tonight. The Board of Trustees is with us tonight, and it's great to see all of them. I'm grateful for their tremendous support to me. I'm especially thankful that they let me get through my first board meeting this past week without getting fired (although I do understand that there's a quorum here tonight, so they could have an emergency meeting just after I finish!).

Among the many people who have worked so hard for the good and the progress of the University of Mary through the years is Sister Thomas' predecessor, Dr. Harry Miller, who is with us tonight. Dr. Miller has served the University of Mary for 70 of the last 50 years. *[Laughter... Applause]*

I'm also grateful to have my friends and family here from all over the country and from Europe. My mom and dad are here tonight. I've been blessed with an incredible father and mother. They brought me up on a farm just north of *Hazleton* – they taught me values and faith and my catechism. They gave me a sense of vocation from the beginning. And we went without a lot of things, but they taught us about generosity and abundance by their example, raising eight children in a small house on a little plot of land. They worked us hard, but it kept us all out of jail. *[Laughter]*

And I never think of my mom and dad for very long without thinking of the words from an old Rich Mullins song: "Never picture perfect, just a plain man and his wife, who somehow knew the value of hard work, good love and real life." Would you join me in gratitude to my mom and dad? *[Applause]*

If I could, I'd like to take just a moment to introduce you to the rest of my immediate family, even though we're pretty big. My brother Sam is here from Arizona with his beautiful wife Jen. They've been working in higher education for a long time together. In fact, Jen was on a visit to North Dakota not so long ago. I took her across campus and pointed out all the "dorms" to her. Afterwards she wrote me a very stern email, saying, "In the industry we don't call them 'dorms' anymore – they're 'residence halls'." I'm glad she's got my back! I love my brother Sam very deeply. He was closest to me in age and we grew up together. Every morning and night we'd milk the cows together. I'd work so hard, and Sam would go out to the back room and lay down in the manger ... just like the Baby Jesus. But I'm tremendously proud and happy to have them here.

My brother Steve is here tonight. We don't get to see him much. Steve's a nurse in the Air Force, and for a long time he's been away from our shores. When I was a new priest he was in

Iraq, helping to set up a hospital just north of Baghdad, and he's spent the last several years as an air evacuation nurse at *Ramstein* Air Base in Germany. He and his crew go to Afghanistan and Iraq and retrieve wounded soldiers. They stabilize them at *Ramstein* and then they fly them back – keeping them as safe and comfortable as possible – to Walter Reed Medical Center in Washington. I'm so very proud of Steve. I think of him and all of our men and women in uniform, in harm's way – how he cares for them and takes care of them – and I just think my brother Steve is an American hero. Would you join me in saluting him and all our men and women in the armed services? *[Applause]*

And how could I forget my brother Tom and his wonderful wife, Adrian? Tom & Adrian are both proud alumni of the University of Mary. Tom is a very talented mechanic and keeps the Shea name alive in my hometown. They're mom and dad to two little boys, the pride and joy of our family, Jacob and Aidan.

Then there's my brother Robert. Bob is not here with us tonight; he's a student at The North American College at the Vatican, studying for the priesthood. God-willing, Bob will be ordained to the priesthood in 2012. I'm very proud of him, and I wish with all my heart that he could join us tonight. I know he's with us in prayer.

But my brother Neal is here. I used to be taller than Neal, now he's taller than me. He's a recent college graduate; at the moment he's a big help down on the farm, and he's looking to get himself situated. I have to admit that I was a little disturbed right after the press conference announcing my presidency, though, about his job prospects. He said to me, "Father Jim, do I get to be the Marauder?" I said, "No! Get a job!" *[Laughter]*

My little sister Maria is with us tonight, too. Maria's in 8th grade; she was born in my first year of seminary. We waited such a long time for a girl, and tonight is the first time I've ever seen her with her hair up! As you might imagine, our little sister's very precious to us.

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At the beginning of J.R.R. Tolkien's epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, Bilbo Baggins the hobbit throws a great party for his eleventy-first birthday, the day he turned 111. He gave a speech at that party. In part, here it is:

"I don't know half of you half as well as I should like. And I like less than half of you half as well as you deserve." *[Laughter]*

And there was just that kind of laughter – *tentative* – because people were trying to figure out if it came out to a compliment or not. Well in the run-up to Bilbo's party, all the shops in Hobbiton and the surrounding villages were completely empty of supplies because there was such a mobilization. It's been kind of like that in Bismarck this week. I just want to tell you that there are so many tireless employees and friends of the University of Mary who have worked very hard to bring this all together, and I thank them most sincerely. I think particularly of

Elizabeth Gross and her Inauguration Committee. I was listening once to *The Thomas Jefferson Hour* with North Dakota's own Clay Jenkinson, and he quoted Jefferson to say: "Genius is the infinite capacity for taking pains." If that's true, then Elizabeth and her committee have demonstrated true genius this week in all that they've accomplished, not least of all in tonight's gala. Let's give them a hand! *[Applause]*

I also want to greet all the special guests who have joined us in the balcony, swelling our crowd well past the 1000 mark. Thanks for your presence tonight, and we're all going to enjoy some great music from the Canadian Brass as soon as I finish.

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Well, everyone is wondering what my plan is. People have heard that I'm deeply committed to Catholic identity in higher education, and you all must be thinking, "What's that going to mean?" And what about all of the non-Catholics? After all, North Dakota's full of Lutherans. What about people like Kevin Cramer? Let me tell you something: the non-Catholics don't have anything to worry about at all. It's the *Catholics* who should be concerned. The Catholics should be concerned because you never know when I might tell a story like this one:

I was a new student in Rome, and it was this very day eleven years ago. The 19th of September is the Feast of St. Januarius on the Roman calendar, and I was sitting in the dining room at The North American College, across from a classmate of mine from Baltimore. He said to me, "We should go down to Naples. St. Januarius is the patron saint of Naples and it should be a sight to see." I said, "Let's do it!" And so we got together a motley crew of classmates: a couple of guys from New Jersey, this fellow from Baltimore, someone from Indiana, and then a classmate who was from Kuwait. We jumped on a train and went down to Naples for the Feast of St. Januarius. Stepping off that train into the streets of Naples ... I remember it like it was yesterday. It was *outrageous*! The city and its buildings were filthy, and the streets were a panoply of noise and chaos. There was nightmarish traffic, punctuated by little motor scooters careening between the trucks and cars. And to the blare of horns were added the shouts of vendors, jamming the sidewalks for the feast and offering candy, designer watches, baby chickens ... mafia membership cards! *[Laughter]*

It was *outrageous*. And so we made our way to the Cathedral of Naples, where they keep a little vial of coagulated blood from St. Januarius, who had been a bishop killed in Naples during the persecutions of the bloodthirsty Roman Emperor *Diocletian*. *Every year on the feast, the Neapolitans flock to their cathedral to pray that the vial of coagulated blood will liquefy.* And when their prayers are answered, they're jubilant! But if it doesn't liquefy, they begin to panic. For this is an omen that some disaster is to befall the city. Most often, it means that Mount Vesuvius, just next door, is going to erupt. So the people start screaming even louder, and there is a group of women called the "Aunts of St. Januarius" who draw near to the altar and begin to hurl insults at the saint. I stood there in the teeming crowd and thought to myself, "Gosh, this isn't the Catholic Faith I was taught growing up in Hazelton." *[Laughter]*

James Joyce, the Irish writer and poet, was once asked to give a definition of the Catholic Church. He replied, "Here comes everybody." On that day, I sure found out he was right. And the lesson wasn't over. We boarded the return train to Rome and the exhaustion of the spectacle began to settle upon me. But then I noticed that our classmate from Kuwait had bought one of the baby chickens from a street vendor and was petting it, cooing at it. I gaped at him in bewildered horror, and he said to me, "You are farm boy. You should like chicken!"

When I remember that day – when I think back to how I felt when I got off the train in Naples – I believe I was given a glimpse into how those four Benedictine Sisters must have felt when they got off the train a few blocks from here back in 1878. What was the view from the Bismarck depot in those days? This was a rowdy frontier town, and then came the Sisters. They must have looked out into the streets of Bismarck and thought to themselves, "Here comes everybody!" But they rolled up their sleeves and brought to this place learning, culture, healing, faith. They dedicated themselves to the service and care of the people. And, looking back across the years, I think it's very hard to name any one group of people who has done so much for North Dakota as the Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Monastery. *[Applause]*

Among the many things the Sisters have done for us in the building up of the state of North Dakota – erecting here structures of wisdom and truth and medicine – among these is the foundation of Mary College, fifty years ago this year. Fifty years ago the Sisters launched a college which would be dedicated to serving the needs of the people of this region and preparing leaders, as they said, *in the service of truth*. And this mission to prepare leaders in the service of truth is as urgent in our time as it's ever been. We endeavor to prepare leaders in the service of truth, not leaders in the service of self. Note this: there's a big difference.

Very much has been said about this generation of young people, that they're selfish, that they're self-absorbed, that they're narcissistic, prone to entitlement and that they're miserable. And there's no shortage of people willing to cater to that. I don't want to say it too loudly, but I will mention it to friends of the University of Mary. You've seen the billboards for colleges up and down I-94. "YOU-niversity" "The Difference is Me." "We do everything but your homework." And I don't blame other institutions for using those techniques, because the market research must tell them that this is what appeals to the current generation of young people. But let me tell you something: I know this generation of young men and women, and it doesn't appeal to the *best* part of them.

I know them. I've been their teacher and their chaplain. I've been with them in the trenches of their hearts, fighting their battles with them. I've heard their confessions. I've been to the Third World with them, building homes with them in the slums, digging trenches, pouring concrete, teaching those city kids how to hold a hammer, how to pound a nail. I've wept with them to see the joy with which the very poor greeted their generous and sacrificial efforts.

I've been with them on pilgrimage to Europe. I've seen their eyes light up to behold the great cultural treasures of civilization. This generation of young people is capable of much more than self-absorbed, self-seeking misery, and they want more. They're thirsty for more. And the

need for institutions who are willing to step up to the plate and give them what they desire – not superficially but deep within – that need is urgent in our time. And the University of Mary, in our Catholic, Christian, and Benedictine tradition, in our heritage of preparing leaders in the service of truth – the University of Mary is well-poised to be able to do that.

Mahatma Gandhi said that there are seven things which will destroy us if we let them:

- wealth without work
- pleasure without conscience
- knowledge without character
- commerce without morality
- science without humanity
- worship without sacrifice
- politics without principle.

Gandhi was right. Those things, left to themselves, will destroy us. But the antidote is the careful, vigorous, loving formation of our young people. We have to believe that they're able to offer so much more than they're given credit for, and then they *will*. We have to hold out to them the real possibility of a life brimming over with virtue, character, self-sacrifice, truth, love ... and joy. I say "joy" because they, like all of us, seek freedom. And joy and freedom are caught up in each other.

They want to live free, but freedom in our day has been tainted by lies about its very definition. People say that freedom means being able to do whatever you want. But in our tradition we push back against such talk, we know it's not true. Authentic freedom means being able to do that which is true and beautiful and good. Freedom means having the inner strength to say no to yourself, especially when you know that doing this thing or saying that word will be destructive to you or to others. *Freedom is rooted in truth*, and truth does impose limits of a particular kind. But those limits do not take away freedom. The great English journalist G.K. *Chesterton* once told a story of children who play at the edge of a cliff because there is on that edge a fence to protect them from tumbling over. Their carefree laughter fills the air. But if we say that the boundary constricts their freedom and tear it down, then they huddle in fear, far from the edge. Just so the boundaries of truth – intellectual, moral, spiritual – these boundaries set us free for joyful service to others, to God.

Young people desire such joy and freedom, and we want the chance to offer it to them. When they come to a college campus, they might be looking for all sorts of things. But let me tell you what they really desire deep down: true friendship, community and a sense of belonging, intellectual conversation, common acts of service, meals taken together. A university should be a lively place of joy and laughter as much as serious study. For vitally important things happen not just in the minds, but in the hearts of young people at a university. There are tremors in the library and at the study desk, in the classroom and the lab, in the residence hall and the dining room and the gym and (of course) the chapel. These are all sacred spaces, because God moves within the hearts of the young in all of them. And young people today, more than ever,

need such space to think clearly about what happens in their encounters with other people, to examine the implications of their relationships, to seek after love and wholesome conversation and friendship with others who can support them in their desire to be good and true, people of integrity and honesty.

And so, too, we have to begin to think of the university as the real world. It's time to quit saying such things as, "When you go out into the real world, you'll find out how tough it is." College studies are not the golden twilight of the nursery years. Real life should begin here and the University of Mary, especially through our Harold *Schafer* Leadership Program, has been on the cutting edge in this respect. We strive to see that our students understand that real life experience, along with their studies and the principles of good ethics and servant leadership, bring them an integrated educational experience which propels them into success in life, not just in commerce, but in their personal endeavors as well.

I was given that kind of education. In my long biography (which Kevin says he has grown so weary of), there are many institutions of higher learning. And I'll tell you one thing, I was heartbroken to leave every one of them. I was given a tremendous education. You were, too, weren't you?

Think of your teachers, think of those who had the most profound impact upon your life. That's the kind of formation we should be eager to offer our young people today. This should be our driving passion, and at a Christian, Catholic, Benedictine university like our own, we're able to do it in a unique way. We're able to do it in a way which cares for the whole of the person, so that our students can come to discover both the world of all around us and the world within each human person.

And I want to assure you, members of the President's Club, that I am committed to that vision of education. I pledge to do everything I can to make great things happen at the University of Mary. I will do my best – even if Sister Nancy won't do as I ask and take the shoes away – I will do my best to fill Sister Thomas' shoes and to carry forward her legacy of love for the students of the University of Mary.

Even now, we are carrying forward that legacy with the launching of new initiatives. Let me tell you about a few of them:

In order to enhance academic excellence at the University of Mary, I'm pleased to announce that we are in the process of reorganizing our academic divisions into schools. We already have our Tharaldson School of Business, but we will add to that a School of Health Science. That's in the great tradition of the University of Mary, which was founded 50 years ago as a school for nurses, but which is now also home to the best physical and occupational therapy programs in the region. Our new School of Education and Behavioral Sciences will particularly assist us as we continue the Sisters' mission to serve the needs of this region. North Dakota, especially our rural areas, is in great need of leaders in education and the caring professions. Finally, our new School of Liberal Arts will emerge as a jewel and centerpiece of our academic programs,

housing and invigorating our core curriculum so that we can deliver an education for the well-examined life. These four schools will not only add a sense of gravity and prestige, but will also allow our different disciplines to speak to each other in a new way, such that the education that we offer is more coherent both for our professors and in the minds and experience of the students.

Before I announce a second initiative, let me tell you a brief story first. In anticipation of the Canadian Brass' performance tonight, I called a friend of mine, a seminary classmate who is a priest and journalist in Canada. He said to me, "It's great that you're getting the Canadian Brass. They're wonderful, and we're very proud of them up here." Then he said, "And that will be a great night for you, Jim, because there aren't a lot of college presidents who can lay out their initiatives for the next 40 years!" [Laughter]

He said, "You could announce, 'I pledge, by the 20th year of my tenure, to incorporate into the experience of students at the University of Mary ... regular trips to the moon.'" [Laughter]

Well, I'm not going to promise that right now. But I do have something that I would like to tell you, and I'm announcing this publicly for the first time tonight. Here's some breaking news at the University of Mary: plans are underway right now for us to be able to offer the opportunity for our students to study at a small campus of our own in Italy, just north of the city of Rome. This dream is a reflection of our long-standing commitment to international study. We already do this somewhat, but we're committed to doing it better, because we want to increase the global awareness of our students. Just imagine what this will mean for students at the University of Mary, to be able to immerse themselves in the treasures of Western Civilization, to have their eyes opened in a whole new way to art, architecture, literature, language. Our campus is situated such that our students will have easy access to the great Benedictine heritage sites: Nursia, where St. Benedict was born; *Subiaco*, where he went to pray before drawing up the Rule; and *Monte Cassino*, his first major monastery, where he and his sister *Scholastica* lie buried. The experience of these places will allow our students to explore the roots of our Benedictine tradition. And think of our students being able easily to go to Rome, to see Pope Benedict XVI in a general audience on a Wednesday morning, and then spending the afternoon at the Vatican Museums, St. Peter's, the Villa Borghese, the Colosseum, the Roman Forum. And so I'm hard at work with the Board of Trustees and some close friends in Italy to try to make this dream a reality for our students. Imagine being able to say that the University of Mary is the only institution of higher learning in North Dakota with our own campus abroad!

And finally, dear friends, we're always deeply interested in new initiatives to ensure access to the education that we're able to offer. I know you share our belief that a Christian, Catholic, Benedictine university offers an education which, in the long run, doesn't cost ... but pays. So we want to make sure that any capable student who wants to come to the University of Mary to study, to be formed and prepared to be a leader in the service of truth, is able to do so regardless of their circumstances and their means.

And so I turn to you once again, members of the President's Club, and I ask for your kind support. We're in need of your prayers, we're grateful for your generous help, and we thank you for your steadfast belief in the tremendous legacy of the Sisters and in the mission of Mary's university. I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, how personally humbled I am by the charge I have received. I shall pour the energies of my heart and the vigor of my youth into this great endeavor. And so here I stand before you as your new president, deeply grateful for your prayers and your support. I'll count on you in the years to come.

God bless you all! Mary loves you!