Mount Aloysius College  
2013 Convocation  
September 6, 2013  
Remarks of Tom Foley

Good afternoon to all of you and welcome to this 74th Convocation in the life of Mount Aloysius College.

Welcome to trustees, to faculty, staff, students, honored guests and friends. Thank you for this comfortable day, for this picturesque setting, for all these uplifted faces.

It is 160 years since the Sisters of Mercy first demonstrated their affection for these Southern Allegheny Mountains, when seven of their number welcomed 22 young ladies to what was then St. Aloysius Academy. It is 116 years since the building behind you first opened its doors as Mount Aloysius here in Cresson.

And as you sit out there—a century and a half after Sister of Mercy Frances Xavier Warde commanded a similar but smaller assembly—I am acutely aware that your ability to concentrate is inversely related to how close we come to the dinner hour. So I have three distinct functions to perform here today, and about eight minutes left in which to do it. Let me get right to it.

First, a few words of thanks; second, a word or two about what makes this event necessary; and third, a few thoughts on what makes your first year here so special.

Let’s begin with thanks to those who make it possible.

**First, to our faculty**—We have an extraordinarily dedicated faculty at Mount Aloysius College. These are the people who are your academic, intellectual and professional guides. They will teach and test you in the classroom, in the laboratory, out in the field and beyond. They won’t pick up after you, but they will look after you—when you need their help on a concept in the classroom or a personal challenge outside it. Today, we acknowledge their scholarship, we appreciate their service in the classroom, and we applaud their commitment to the mission of this college.

**Second, to our staff**—These too are guides and teachers to you. Some of them recruited you to come here, some helped you figure out how to pay for it, some of them will keep you warm and well fed, some will work with you on campus activities, campus ministry and intercollegiate sports. All of them will work together to keep you safe, healthy and involved. They are true partners to our trustees, to our faculty and to me—every day—in providing the best possible experience for these next few years for all of you.
Third, to the President’s Executive Council—They are the institutional glue on this campus, holding us all together through the challenges of freshmen orientation, of new construction, of old sewers, of new programs of study, the challenge of keeping our hearts and minds focused on the mission of Mercy and so much more.

Fourth, to Board of Trustees members with us today—The Trustees support, steward and strengthen Mount Aloysius. In short, they guide us through times good and bad. They all serve because they believe so strongly in the very idea of Mount Aloysius College and because they want so fiercely to create opportunities for all of you.

A special thank you to our predecessors who stood at these very places these last 160 years, especially to my immediate predecessor Sister Mary Ann Dillon and to her team. Though the Sisters of Mercy are few in number on our campus today, we salute them at this time in a special way every year—because it is they who built this institution from the ground up, and it is they whose commitment to core principles of mercy and justice, service and hospitality inspire us each and every day.

So, thank you trustees, faculty, students, staff and all who conspired and inspired us to this day.

Second assignment, explain why a formal convocation is necessary. Why did we bother to set up all these chairs and require you to sit in them? In one sentence—we are acting out a symbolic tradition that is literally hundreds of years old.

This formal convocation ceremony has even deeper roots than Mount Aloysius College, dating back as much eight hundred years to the traditions of teaching and learning at the great medieval universities of Europe. This afternoon, we properly carry on a tradition that began in Bologna in Italy and at the Sorbonne in France, at Heidelberg in Germany and Edinburgh in Scotland, at Valencia in Spain, Vilnius in Lithuania, Basel in Switzerland and Oxford and Cambridge in England.

Nearly a thousand years after the very first convocation, an American Secretary of Education spoke directly to the importance of what we begin here today. He said:

“...In an interconnected, competitive global economy, the only way to secure our common future is through education. It is the one true path out of poverty, the great equalizer that overcomes differences in background, culture and privilege. In the 21st century, a quality education system is the centerpiece of a country’s economic development, and it can be the one thing that unites us as a world.”

The message of Convocation is very simple—we are engaged, all of us—in the education of citizens for the betterment of themselves and the world in which they live. We convocate, convene—from the Latin con and vocare—“to call together”...

...to begin our serious endeavors of a new academic year, in this case by opening our minds to the ideas of a prominent thinker of our time—and

...to look for something that as US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan says “unites us as a world.”
Last assignment—explain why this particular convocation is special.

Mount Aloysius is fairly unique in the ranks of higher education institutions in that we choose a theme each year and try to coordinate orientation, CLS (now called “Connections”) the Speakers Series, and other events around that single idea. Our theme this year is “21st Century Citizenship: The Common Good.” The phrase presents us with at least three separate sub-themes—about the value of citizenship, about the idea of a common good, and about the special challenges of the times in which we live, the 21st century. I want to say just a few words about the connection of this theme to our larger purpose of education.

More than 20 centuries ago, Greek thinkers grappled with the first two of these ideas, citizenship and common good. They argued about the notion of a communal life in the polis, the Greek city-state, and about the conflicts inherent between the wants of the individual and the needs of the community. Plato and Aristotle led the early debates, taken up in later centuries

- by Christian theologians like Augustine and Aquinas, Luther and Calvin
- by political theorists like Locke and Rousseau and
- by early American practitioners like Ben Franklin and Paul Revere.

The principle author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson, saw a direct link between education and citizenship, believing that for full citizenship, all our citizens had to be educated. He went further, opining that in addition to moral education, students should receive academic training, which Jefferson hoped, in the words of one biographer, “would prepare their critical reasoning skills to meet the challenges posed by democracy.”

In an early draft of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson smudged out a word and replaced it with the word “citizens.” For more than two centuries, historians wondered what word he had removed in favor of “citizens.” Just three years ago, using modern spectral imaging technology developed for military use, the Library of Congress revealed that the word he obliterated in his early text was “subjects.” Not subjects. Citizens. Not “tell me what to do,” but “let me participate”—perhaps the very essence of our American Revolution.

So citizenship, participating in democracy, is the higher calling, and apparently the founders who endorsed his document felt the same. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis observed two centuries later that “the most important office in our democracy is that of private citizen,” and thus drew a line direct to Jefferson’s distinction between a mere “subject” and a vaunted “citizen.”

One last thought on the connection between citizenship and education. In 1930 Eleanor Roosevelt penned an essay on “Good Citizenship: The Purpose of Education,” in a magazine called Pictorial Review. In it, she argued that “the true purpose of education is to produce citizens” and she outlined all the ways that an educational system does that—from the simple “acquisition of knowledge” that may help one day to critically analyze an economic issue to the “development of powers of concentration and accuracy which...help analyze a difficult situation.” She also saw a
connection to citizenship from “social activities and athletics” that are part of one’s education—she argued that these activities “develop team play, cooperation and thought and consideration for others”—something to do with the common good, one might say.

As we begin this semester, we applaud the key role played by education in the promotion of the cognitive and moral qualities of citizenship, and we recognize that this connection—between education and citizenship—is not something just discovered when we chose this theme. This debate goes back a couple thousand years, at least to Plato, and was a vigorous part of the debate at the founding of our own citizen state. At Mount Aloysius, we invite all to participate in this debate during our academic year and we hope to advance the conversation a bit with the speakers who have already agreed to join us on campus:

- A Pennsylvania Judge (and trustee) whom Dr. Fulop will introduce in just a minute
- A long-time counsel to the Vice President of the US who will join us for Constitution Day
- A state Supreme Court Justice who will deliver the Fall Honors Lecture
- A four-time European Ambassador who will deliver the Spring Honors Lecture
- A former President of this College who will deliver the Moral Choices Lecture
- And our nation’s Librarian of Congress who will also join us in the Spring semester

We have a special treat today, as the first speaker on our yearlong theme is someone with a very personal connection to the topic and to the college. Judge David Klementik is a trustee of Mount Aloysius, to be sure. But more than that, he represents in multiple ways the ideals of citizenship—as a community leader, as a veteran, as a philanthropist, and as a citizen servant in this Commonwealth.

Judge Klementik also understands the very idea of Mount Aloysius—he gets it, as many of you might say—and has brought his very personal commitment to every meeting of our board for over a decade now. And Judge, I have to warn you—these are very educated consumers (on the topic of citizenship) sitting in front of you. They began their orientation at Mount Aloysius two weeks ago with a reading and small group discussions on the notion of “the common good” and they began their Connections classes last week with a book that explores the connection between education and full citizenship. Welcome Judge Klementik, our maiden speaker on the topic.

And welcome to all of our students, to our faculty, to our staff, to our trustees and to all friends of this College.

Welcome to Mount Aloysius in this its 161st year.

Welcome to this academic convocation, where you participate in a ceremony that has been in use now over a thousand years.

And welcome to this year of citizenship, where you will wrestle with themes with which the ancient Greeks first grappled over 2000 years ago.
Students, we thank you most especially for being here with us. We are grateful for the energy and the youthful fervor with which you imbue these ancient rituals of the academic season. And we look forward with anticipation to the personal insights and to the spirit of community that we are confident you will bring to these endeavors.

Bless you and good luck to you.