Alumni Weekend Dinner
October 3, 2015
Keynote Address of President Tom Foley

Thank you, Jennifer. And thank you to all our staff from Development, Student and Academic Affairs who had a hand in this weekend. Special thanks to Adele Kupchella, our host at the Academy Luncheon earlier today and to Dr. Steve Pugliese and Sister Benedict Joseph, who hosted our 50-year reunion class last evening.

Let me congratulate (the about to be anointed) distinguished and honorary alums who are with us tonight. Linda DelGrosso is well known to the Mercys, in Bellwood and throughout the region. We are grateful for her support of the many charities helped by the DelGrosso family, for her volunteer work with the St. Vincent DePaul Society and her service as a past President of the Alumni Executive Board. In her “spare” time, Linda is the full-time treasurer of DelGrosso’s.

Ann Benzel is also well known to the Mercys, to Michele and me, and to the College, where she serves as an officer in her third term on our Board of Trustees. Ann previously served as chair of both the Governor’s Advisory Council on the Arts, and the PA Humanities Council—one of only two individuals ever to hold both posts. Like Linda, she is well known in her home community, having led the renaissance of the Mishler Theater, founded a state model reading program at the Altoona Library and, with her husband Bill, been extraordinarily generous to numerous causes in the region, including a number of scholarships right here at Mount Aloysius. In her “spare” time, Ann is CEO of Benzel’s Bretzels!!

Michele and I are honored to be in your company, Linda and Ann.

And special blessings on the Sisters of Mercy who are here with us again this evening—despite ever dwindling numbers, they remain the heart and soul of Mount Aloysius, helping us to stay focused on the fundamental mission, “to synthesize faith with learning, to develop competence with compassion, to put talents and gifts at the service of others, and to begin to assume leadership in the world community.” In practice, that means producing graduates who are job ready, technology ready and community ready—prepared to engage in the life of the community—wherever it is that their work and families take them.

Finally by way of introduction, special greetings to our 50th reunion class. These ladies can take credit for ushering in both the mini and the maxi-skirt, and for introducing the American palate to Cool Whip, Diet Pepsi, the Pillsbury Dough boy and the Subway Sandwich. A gallon of gas was 31 cents, a loaf of bread was 21 cents, a stamp cost a nickel, a Hershey bar was twice that and a new home cost $13,500 when they went to school here. My Fair Lady won the Oscar and Dick Van Dyke won for best comedy on TV in the year you graduated.
Mailer, Michener, McDonald, Murdoch, Vonnegut, Beckett and Plath were all writers in vogue, and you saw your friends leave for Vietnam, watched the Watts Riots on TV and celebrated the passage of the landmark Voting Rights Act—all in the year you graduated. “May you live in interesting times” is often cited as a Chinese curse. In your case, with that history, I’d say it was a blessing.

And we are blessed to have you with us this weekend, even if we can’t go back to the days of 30 cent gas and nickel stamps! Thank you for joining us.

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Yesterday, we honored a Sister of Mercy who served the college for over a decade as its chief administrative officer, Sister Ginny Bertschi. In brief remarks as we officially proclaimed the new Bertschi Center and Technology Commons, I quoted some lines from Mary C. Sullivan’s edition of The Correspondence of Catherine McAuley, the founder of the Sisters of Mercy. She opens with these four lines from Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney’s poem Sunlight:

And here is love
Like a tinsmith’s scoop
Sunk past its gleam
In the meal bin

It is more than 160 years since that love—“like a tinsmith’s scoop sunk past its gleam in the meal bin”—first showed itself in the Southern Alleghenies, at the very moment when seven Sisters of Mercy welcomed 22 young girls to Saint Aloysius Academy. It is almost 120 years since the Main Building opened its doors as Mount Aloysius here in Cresson, over a 100 years since Charles Schwab financed the construction of Alumni Hall, and over 90 years since Pittsburgh architect John Theodore Comes drew up plans for the striking, Lombardy-Romanesque Chapel. I would describe all of that activity as the first metamorphosis of Mount Aloysius College, a time for planting—planting both spiritual roots and red brick buildings.

It was 50 years ago now that the second metamorphosis took place, when the original McAuley Hall appeared as the first free standing structure on the campus, quickly followed by Ihmsen and the old original Cosgrave—all precipitated by the move from “academy” to “junior college” status.

And I feel that we are smack in the middle of the third metamorphosis at Mount Aloysius College—a free-standing, comprehensive two and four year degree granting institution of higher education.

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Jennifer asked me to give you an update of activity at the college in the midst of this third metamorphosis, and let me see if I can do that with some short videos.

- First, a quick look at some of our signature programs—the health sciences. [VIDEO]
- Second, a quick look at some of our students, your future alumni colleagues, in their own words. [VIDEO]
• Third, I thought you might like to see them on their best day—graduation 2015. [VIDEO]

• And finally, this is what the campus sounded like two weeks ago, at Convocation. [VIDEO]

You get the picture. Let me try to put it into words, with three quick observations about your alma mater.

First, Mount Aloysius is a place of action. Certainly, by the numbers alone, your alma mater is, in words familiar to your graduation year, a happening place.

• On Curriculum, programs of study have grown to over 70.

• On Faculty, 15% increase in full time faculty in the last five years, almost all holding doctorates.

• On Enrollment, up 15% in FTEs (in a period of declining enrollments nationwide) over the last decade; and a literal tripling of the residential population in the last ten years.

• On Student Life, over 100 separate programs—from Canadian comedians to serious drama—in the spring semester alone.

The most recent entering class was our highest number of applications ever, our highest number of traditional age students, and our highest number of students in residence on campus. And we just graduated the largest class in the history of the College, with 486 students walking across the stage to accept their diplomas.

That’s a lot of numbers, but they only begin to capture the highlights of all the action at the College. I hope you see what I mean when I say that Mount Aloysius is a place of action.

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Second, the sense of mission is alive and well at Mount Aloysius here. Thirty students went on out-of-state mission trips this year—to places like Guyana and New Orleans. They are in addition to the over 800 students who volunteered 15,530 hours on 315 projects with 214 different local non-profit partners in just this academic year—building shelves at food banks, organizing blood drives, collecting hats and coats and shoes through the winter—for people who live within our fifty mile radius here and some for people as far away as Haiti and Honduras.

There is an infectious energy about this place. Yes, 99% of our nursing students got good paying jobs last year and our NCLEX pass rate competes with any nursing class from here to Pittsburgh, but 100% of those students are not just job ready but they are community ready. That is the special magic of Mount Aloysius—our intent is not just to produce job-ready graduates but community-ready citizens—who understand that those to whom much is given much is expected.

So, your alma mater remains a place of action with a real sense of mission, and that’s not just our opinion.

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Finally, I want you to know that the Mount Aloysius you attended remains a place where personal stories are nurtured and encouraged and preserved—perhaps till they can be told at gatherings such as this one. Nobel Peace
Prize winner Elie Weisel likes to say that the universe is made up “not of atoms but of stories.” And in truth, it was not the “atoms” or the numbers in this case, that brought Michele and me to this part of Pennsylvania and to Mount Aloysius. It was the stories that brought us. And they happen every day here.

And we want to hear more of those stories from the Mount Aloysius of yesterday, today and tomorrow. We will need your help to tell those stories, as we prepare to embark on a new Campus Master Plan and a 10-year Strategic Plan that we call Mount Aloysius 2025.

A famous American writer likes to say that —and I am quoting “we all write poems; it is simply that poets are the ones who write in words.” I hope that this weekend has allowed each one of you to write some poems and, better yet, to remember the ones you wrote 10, 20, 30, 40 or even 50 years ago.

Poems about friendship and faith, poems about literature and landscapes, poems from the heart and poems about hope. And if by chance you wrote any of them down, send them to us. We’d love to add your own story to the Mount Aloysius collection.

Have a great night and enjoy the rest of your “perfect” weekend at your Mount Aloysius.