Alumni Hall Re-Dedication: 1902-2011
Mt Aloysius College
April 18, 2011
Remarks of President Tom Foley

Thank you for that welcome, Chairman Rullo. I have three quick assignments here, so let me get right to them. First, a word about the history of this place, drawn from the archives of the college. Second, a couple of stories about the original financier of this place, US Steel magnate Charles Schwab, again from the archives of the Sisters of Mercy. And third, a word about the stories that have played out here over the years, some of them courtesy of Sister Benedict Joseph, who has herself lived on these grounds for most of her life.

First, the history. You are looking down at the original Pennsylvania hardwood floor and up at the original oaken balustrades, and outside through the original stained glass. That is genuine plaster on the walls over there, and the wainscoting is over 100 years old. Let me just read Sister Mary Silverius Shields account of Alumnae Hall, as it was originally called, when she wrote her history of the College in 1976:

“This building was put up in 1902. It was designed to be a music hall. And all need to do to authenticate that statement is to look at these beautiful curved windows and see the names of the composers: Bach, Mozart, Wagner and even David, the Psalmist, who sang to his own harp accompaniment. Now they have a grating over the windows to protect them because part of this is stained glass too. And also important because it is now used as a gymnasium as you can see from the floor. There are all the markings for a basketball court. The stage which had been originally hung in great red draperies that gathered up on either side in graceful loops is now hung practically in black, much more suited to modern plays or performances which are given from the stage at times. One thing I would like to mention here, since this was designed to be a music hall, again you have the high vaulted roof. And since it was originally a school for girls, there is nothing match a beautiful soprano voice; the acoustics are exactly right for it, or a violin. We've had some violinists here who pick a certain spot out on the stage where they find the melodies they make resonating through this room in a way that they like to hear them. We had at one time on the great arch above the stage, again the motto: THEY THAT TRUST IN THE LORD ARE AS MOUNT ZION. But somebody seemed to think it was a good idea to paint over that, and it no longer is emblazoned there.”
Second, Charles Schwab. He really did write a big check to finance the original construction of Alumni Hall. The future Chairman of US Steel truly took both music and oratory lessons from the Sisters of Mercy in Cresson as a boy. Charles Schwab also really did remark that his gift was the least he could do for “all the apples he stole from the nuns’ orchard.” And he really was standing right here at the very spot I am standing now when he made that remark, as he helped to dedicate this building in 1902.

Of his early tutorials, Sister Silverius commented that

“Charlie Schwab was a neighborhood boy who manifested a musical talent, came to the Sisters for musical lessons and mother Gertrude was his teacher. He was very apt and got on well with his lessons. One afternoon when he presented himself for his lesson, Mother Gertrude thought he was not suitably dressed for the occasion; after all, a lesson in the arts demanded some decorum. So they sent Charlie back to make himself more in harmony with the Victorian age and he returned for the instruction. Apparently it did not in any way change the relationship between pupil and teacher for years later Mr. Schwab the steel magnate, was to remember his teacher in a beautiful tribute…”

Of the formal dedication in 1902, Sister Silverius wrote

“When this building was dedicated in June 1902, Mr. Schwab came to make the speech of donation and he brought with him Governor Stone, who was governor of Pennsylvania at the time. Mr. Stone made the speech in which he accepted for the Alumnae; it was named Alumnae Hall. Both men had talked prior to the ceremonies about how long, drawn out these could be and Mr. Schwab said you may be sure mine’s going to be short and the speech was short because we have a record of that. And Governor Stone’s was just a little longer, not much. So the occasion wasn’t bogged down with over-extensive oratory.”

Of the apples in the orchard, after that story made the rounds, the Mt Aloysius school yearbook (at the time The Aloysian) “in commenting on Charles M. Schwab’s gift of $25,000 to the Mount Aloysius academy, at Cresson, as a partial restoration for the apples the steel magnate stole as a boy from the trees on the academy grounds,” the student writers humorously cited a wag in the Pittsburgh Evening World:

“Apple merchants who glean the idea that this steel magnate is a pomophile because he now pays $25,000 for a hatful of apples consumed long ago had better not back their wagons up at his door and expect to sell their crops to him at such fancy figures, because they will find that he not only knows apples is apples but that he also knows how they sell at the corner grocery and just how many of them should be to a quart.”

Finally, just a word or two about the stories in this Hall.

In his 1964 novel The Gates of the Forest, Elie Wiesel wrote that “God made man because he loves stories.” Today, in this 109th year of Alumni Hall, at its grand re-opening, we might put it a just a little bit differently.
The Sisters of Mercy built the original Alumnae Hall not only because they loved stories, but because they wanted to **see, hear, touch and feel** those stories right here on stage at Mt Aloysius College.

They wanted to **see** those stories performed in one act student-written monologues and acted out in full blown three act plays by American, European, Asian and African authors. And they wanted to **see** those stories as they were danced by New York professionals, by local ballerinas and even by Gaelic high steppers.

They wanted to **touch** those stories when they were performed by their own students at open recitals, or by jazz giants visiting the area, or by a real live Cossack Chorus that Sister BJ remembers well. And they wanted to **touch** the stories of the hundreds of violinists and piano players—from amateurs to prodigies, who played here.

They wanted to **hear** the stories from public lectures delivered in stentorian tones by noted public figures and by local community and political leaders. And they wanted to **hear** the stories at Mt Aloysius talent shows, with sonnets crafted in the best Elizabethan iambic pentameter and original songs sung in keys not heretofore recognized on any scale Eric Marie ever taught.

They wanted to **get the feel** of real life stories being imagined and then acted out at a hundred different Academy, Junior College and College proms, dances, soirees and other social events.

I think the Sisters of Mercy built this hall

—because they loved music

—because they wanted their students to be able to write and perform plays and to be entertained themselves

—because they wanted a place where their students could entertain their guests at grand balls and small dances and also

—because they thought that their students should be able to play badminton and volleyball, basketball and even dodge ball.

And all of those things happened here, to be sure.

But most of all, I think they built Alumni Hall because they loved stories.

When The King’s Speech won the Oscar a few weeks ago, I thought it was all a bit overdone. In the end, Michele convinced me that it was worthy, that it was not so much a story about a British monarch as it was a story about someone finding his voice—in this case almost literally, and at a critical moment in the history of his country. Well, I suspect a lot of “voices” were “found’ right here in Alumni Hall. I hope you hear some of them today and many more of them in the years to come.
And as you walk around this Hall today, and you marvel at the original stained glass and the recently discovered sconces on the walls, as you trod on the Pennsylvania hardwoods on these floors and look up at the balustrade woodwork above us, and as you admire the glazed bricks on the walls outside and the original Spanish clay roof on top—I hope you will take a moment to imagine the thousands of stories that started in this hall since US Steel Chairman Charles Schwab, Governor Stone, Mother Gertrude Cosgrave and Mother M. DeSales Ihmsen christened it 109 years ago.

Thank you for joining us on this historic occasion and now let’s cut the ribbon!!