CONSTITUTION DAY PANEL
MT ALOYSIUS COLLEGE
SEPTEMBER 18, 2012
REMARKS OF PRESIDENT TOM FOLEY

Good afternoon. This event has its origins in three separate ideas—the notion of civil discourse, this year’s college theme of “hospitality” and finally, the national event that we celebrated yesterday, Constitution Day. Just a word about each of them.

First, civil discourse. Last year, Mt Aloysius College received national attention for our year-long focus on that notion, the idea that democracy at its best is a conversation—a civil conversation (or discourse) about the laws that govern and the values that define us. We engaged in that dialogue in the course of fifteen events on our campus, beginning with a symposium led by a Pulitzer Prize winner on “The University’s Role in Civil Discourse” and concluding with our commencement address by a Federal Circuit Court of Appeals Judge on perhaps the single most one critical aspect of civil discourse—the ability to listen.

I believe there is a role that we in education play in the march to a more civil society. Critical thinking, the ability to listen, to analyze, to form ideas and to communicate them—these are all skills fundamental to education and to democracy. For many, the university is where we learn these skills,

- By providing a safe, respectful environment that allows for opinions to be shared
- By creating an atmosphere where the holder of an opinion can feel safe
- By teaching critical thinking skills
- By encouraging the dispassionate consideration of issues
- By, in effect, giving students a nurturing environment to test their democratic skills.

We want Mt Aloysius College to be an incubator for democracy where all the skills are taught, all the behaviors are modeled so that when students become fully empowered “citizens,” they will have the tools needed to make democracy work. That is one purpose of this event.

Second purpose. We have asked our panelists to address one question in their presentation and that is this: Is there a home for young people in politics today?
This year at Mt Aloysius, we have focused many of our public events on the notion of home and hospitality, one of the four core Mercy values. Specifically, our theme this year is “Hospitality: Creating Home in a Changing World.” Our convocation speaker chose to look at this topic through the prism of the Hunger Games trilogy and the Harry Potter series, whose heroes/heroines were on a mission as John Granger put it “to find home in an often inhospitable world.”

I’m not sure anyone would ever confuse the maelstrom of politics with the comforts of home, but we do have a genuine and not just metaphorical interest in the question and in the theme. Is there a reason that young people—our students—should look to politics as a place to find home, to find themselves, to become practicing citizens or as simply a way to grow into themselves. We look forward to a bracing and hopefully entertaining dissection of that question.

**Finally,** we celebrate Constitution Day this week. My first year here, we marked the occasion with a lecture by one of the prosecutors in the Oklahoma City bombings case, who helped us to understand the fundamental role the US Constitution played in bringing the murderers to justice. Last year, we marked the occasion with public readings of the Constitution, led by Dr. Smith, Dr. Jones and Dr. D’Emilio. It was important and meaningful.

This year, we celebrate Constitution Day—in a national election year--with four representatives of the political process, people who have the courage and the stamina for four very different roles in politics in America—a PA State Senator, a former political party executive director, a national Presidential campaign organizer and a regional activist whose campaigns are non-partisan and focused on the importance of your vote.

Let me welcome them and--on your behalf--let me thank them

- for the role you each play today in creating and nurturing this incubator for civil discourse
- for helping us today to teach and exemplify these democratic skills
- for providing this opportunity in the Q&A session for our students to use and model these skills—

Because these are truly skills as essential to education as they are to democracy and to civil society.

Now let me introduce Dr. Michael Jones, moderator of this conversation on the question, *Is There a Home for Young People in Politics Today?*