Mount Aloysius College
71st Academic Convocation
September 9, 2010
Remarks of President Tom Foley

Good afternoon to all of you and welcome to this 71st Convocation in the life of Mount Aloysius College.

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

It is 157 years since the Sisters of Mercy first demonstrated their affection for these Laurel Highlands, when seven of their number welcomed 22 young ladies to what was then St. Aloysius Academy. It is 113 years since the building behind me first opened its doors as Mt Aloysius here in Cresson.

And as you sit out there—a century and a half after Mother Francis Xavier Warde commanded a similar but smaller assembly--I am acutely aware that your ability to concentrate is inversely related to our proximity to your dinner hour. I have three distinct functions to perform here today, and about 8 minutes left in which to do it. Let me get right to it.

First, some thanks to those who make this event possible; second, a word or two about what makes this event necessary; and finally a few thoughts on what makes this event so special.

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

First, to our faculty--could you please stand up? We have an extraordinarily dedicated faculty at Mt Aloysius College, both full time and adjunct professors. These are the people who are your academic, intellectual and professional guides. They will teach and test you in the classroom, in the laboratory, in the field and beyond. They won’t pick up after you, but they will look after you—they will look after you when you need their help on a concept in the classroom or a personal challenge outside it. They are the heart and mind of Mt Aloysius.

Today, we acknowledge their scholarship, we appreciate their service in the classroom, and we applaud their commitment to the mission of this college. Thank you.
Second, to our staff—would you all please stand? 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 me and to our faculty—every day—in providing the best possible experience for these next few years for all of you. Special thanks to all of our staff who worked hard this summer on camps and conferences, on deferred dorm and IT maintenance, on new construction and renovation, on our fiscal audit and so many more activities that kept our college running. Thank you.

Third, to the President’s Executive Council, would they please stand, as I introduce you. Our Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty, Dr. Ron Cromwell and Senior Vice President for Administrative Services, Suzanne Campbell. Our Vice Presidents, Frank Crouse for Enrollment, Dr. Jane Grassadonia for Student Affairs, Jack Anderson for Institutional Development, Sister Dr. Helen Marie Burns for Mission Integration, and Donna Yoder our CFO. They are the institutional glue on this campus, holding us all together through the challenges of freshmen orientation, new construction, old sewers, the creation of the learning commons and so much more. Thank you.

Fourth, to Board of Trustees members with us today—please stand. The Trustees support, steward and strengthen Mt Aloysius. In short, they guide us through times good and bad. Special thanks to Chairman Dan Rullo for his thoughtful introduction. My mother Angela and wife Michele, who are in this audience today, especially appreciated it Dan—though I am not at all sure that my mother recognized that third rascal of her twelve children in your kind words. I at least am happy to take your word for all those nice things you said.

A special thank you to Sister Mary Ann Dillon and to her entire team. It is perhaps too early to assign a legacy to Sister Mary Ann (she’s too young for one thing), and the majority of you who know her well understand that she would resist any attempt to place her name in the same sentence as the word “legacy”, let alone putting her name up on the pedestal with the co-founders of the Cresson Community—Mother Mary Gertrude Cosgrave and Mother Mary DeSales Ihmsen, and the co-founders of the college—Sister deSales Farley and Sister Silverius Shields. But I suspect that is exactly where we will find her name when the history of this period is written. And I would like—on the occasion of the first convocation in 14 years not led by dear Sister President— to say thank you to her for her example of public leadership and private humility, for the model transition she effected on my behalf, and for the record she has written here at Mt Aloysius College. Thank you Sister President, Mary Ann Dillon. And thank you to her fellow Sisters of Mercy who remain in our number, who built this institution from the ground up, and whose commitment to core principles of mercy and justice, service and hospitality inspire us each and every day.
Fifth and final thanks, to Vice President Crouse and your entire staff for bringing this special and dare I say record-setting group to us this year. Freshman and first years, we are in awe of you—you the generation of iphones and imacs—in awe, for the many reasons cited by Vice President Crouse—and at least in part because we on this side of the podium understand that your cell phones actually have more brain power than the computer in the Apollo spacecraft that put a man on the moon. So yes, we certainly are in awe of you, we are all dedicated to work hard with you, and we have very high hopes for you.

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 nice white chairs in Whalley Plaza? In a sentence, we are acting out a symbolic tradition that is literally hundreds of years old.

This formal convocation ceremony has even deeper roots than Mt Aloysius College, dating back as much a thousand years to the traditions of teaching and learning at the great medieval universities of Europe—where each academic season was christened anew with the pageantry of the academic procession, the poetry of lilting language and majestic settings, and even the very formal music that survives to this day—thanks to Vox Nova. 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 Arne Duncan 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 con-vo-cate, convene—from the Latin “con” and “vocare” and the Greek “ecclesias”—to “come 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 (Dr. Kenneth Miller)—and to continue our search for something that as Arne Duncan says “unites us as a world.”
Last assignment—explain why this particular convocation is special.

Sister Helen Marie Burns will shortly read a proclamation describing the work of our guest, Dr. Kenneth Miller. She will describe his work that goes to the heart of this college’s mission—to “synthesize faith with learning.” Dr. Miller has been both brilliant and brave in creating, expanding and professing his ideas, in the classroom, in his writings and in his public advocacy and defense of them. As a result, he has been honored by some of the finest universities on the planet—Harvard in America, Cambridge in England and St. Andrews in Scotland, to name just a few—and today, he honors us with his presence. We are here to recognize Dr. Miller for his brilliance, for his example of an educated life. We honor him for a second reason as well.

Dr. Miller was the lead witness for the plaintiffs in the 2005 Dover School District case, where a federal judge in Pennsylvania was asked to decide, in essence, if God “created” the earth or as Darwin opined, the earth as we know it “evolved.” He may tell you how he parsed the differences in this seminal case. I only want to describe the manner in which he did it.

Thomas Freidman tells us that we live in an increasingly “flat” world where the technologies of texting and other 24-7 communication formats make “Beijing, Bangalore and Bethesda next door neighbors.” I happen to think we also live in an increasingly “divided” world, geographically, culturally, technologically, in terms of wealth and scarce resources, war and peace, education and illiteracy. We seem more often these days to incline to extremes rather than to common ground. Words like “compromise” and “globalization” and even “diversity” are loaded terms with pejorative meanings. And politics—once famously defined as the “art of compromise”—is among the least respected professions in America today.

The danger and the temptation is to simply stop listening—to decide on a particular viewpoint and to stay there, eschewing other views, or worse debasing them as “worthless”, “stupid”, or even “un-American.”

Dr. Miller never stops listening. His dialogue is open and frequent. He appears regularly on platforms with those who disagree with him, has even had the guts to appear on The Colbert Report not once but twice!! He makes his points not by devaluing or devouring or defaming others, but by seeking common ground and working from there. That particular genius, separate and apart from the quality of his writings and research, alone qualified him for the honor he is to receive from Mt Aloysius College today.

A famous American judge with a perfect judicial name, Learned Hand, once wrote that “liberty is never being too sure you’re right.” Having reviewed Dr. Miller’s career, we might rephrase that “liberty is never being afraid to listen to another point of view, and to do it respectfully.” That consistent approach by Dr. Miller hasn’t diminished the value of his theories at all, but I would argue that it has magnified his voice, and perhaps even won him a few converts.
Dr. Miller, we are delighted to have you here, not only because your theories are so well matched to our mission, but also because your manner of discourse is so refreshing and appropriate in an increasingly divided world.

Thank you and welcome to Mt. Aloysius.