MLK Celebration  
Mount Aloysius College  
January 21, 2014  
Opening Remarks—President Tom Foley

I have three quick assignments here today, so let me get right to it—first, a word of thanks, second, some context for this celebration, and finally some words of introduction for our guest speaker.

First, thank you to all of you for joining in this celebration of the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Thank you to my colleagues on the Speaker Series Committee for helping to arrange this event, to Jack Coyle and his team for helping to publicize and film it, to Sister Helen Marie Burns whose Mercy sisters work to fulfill Dr. King’s highest hopes every day, to Tom Fleming who helped with so many of the details, to Howard Ferguson who will MC the Q & A today, to all Faculty and staff who helped arrange the nine other stops on Tony’s Mount Aloysius whirlwind appearance, and to Elaine Grant who arranged the singing service for this evening. This is my 19th Dr. Martin Luther King Commemoration and my third here at Mount Aloysius College. I am grateful that all these good people came together and carried out this important project. Thank you.

Second assignment, some context. A couple of thoughts in this regard.

I think we all understand by now that Dr. King’s message is universal, it is timeless and it is global. Dr. King is best known for his non-violent campaign against racial injustice in America, but his message resonated far beyond our borders. While his I Have a Dream speech was a wake-up call for a generation here in America, it has served as a clarion call for peoples all over the globe in the fifty-one years since he delivered it on the Mall in Washington, D.C., standing at the feet of the Lincoln Memorial, looking out at the Reflecting Pool. Since that day, it has been translated into more than 60 languages, it has been shown on the airwaves in over 120 countries, it has played thousands of times on radio stations all over the globe and it has been reprinted millions of times—aired, played and reprinted in places he never imagined.

When Nelson Mandela endured three decades inside a South African prison, he spent them with Martin Luther King as personal inspiration. When Mairead Corrigan Maguire marched in Belfast streets to end to the legacy of bombs and bullets that was Ireland’s history, she did so with Martin Luther King’s journey as her roadmap. When Aung San Suu Kyi fought her decades long non-violent battle for rights in Burma, she did it with the example of Dr. King as her companion. All three of these extraordinary people followed Dr. King in one other way—they each won the Nobel Peace Prize.
In 1979, 35 years ago, I took a leave of absence from Yale Law School, determined to spend the next two years as a volunteer with the Peace People in Belfast, Northern Ireland. The first day that I showed up at their door, armed with two-thirds of a law degree, a backpack and not much else, one of the first things these people did was hand me a copy of their little newspaper—which they suggested I read while I waited to explain to them how I might be helpful to their work. On the front page of their newspaper, *Peace by Peace*, was a photograph not of an Northern Irish civil rights leader, not of a survivor of their famous underground railroad, not a person who had been unjustly imprisoned in Long Kesh, not a political hero from Derry or Belfast, not Robert Emmet or James Connolly or Michael Davitt or Padraig Pearce or Mairead Corrigan Maguire.

No, when I arrived at the Headquarters of the Peace People in September of 1979, I discovered that the front page of their newspaper was devoted to a photo of Dr. Martin Luther King, and inside was a reprint of his *I Have a Dream* speech, one of the thousand or so places I have since come to learn that it was reprinted.

Imagine my surprise—flying 3,000 miles to Belfast, leaving the America that had nurtured and educated me, going back to the country where my grandparents left poverty, pogrom and penal laws behind and, landing there in the heat of the Troubles (as its virtual Civil War was then called), settling on an island where in three years I met one black man, and in that country, among those men and women of peace, I find on my very first day there, that their hero, the front page of the first edition of their little newspaper, was an African American man from my country.

Imagine my surprise—and this was long before we had a national holiday devoted to the man, and long before his legacy was so openly embraced here in our own country. So when I tell you today that Dr. King’s message is universal and global and timeless, I mean that in a very personal way for me.

**Dr. King’s message is also very personal to you**—he speaks to each one of you at this college founded by Sisters of Mercy, whose leader Catherine McAuley devoted her life to caring for the least among us—the homeless, the sick, the distraught and the dispossessed. Dr. King speaks directly to you, at this institution where core values of mercy and justice, service and hospitality reign.

And as we contemplate the example and the exhortations of Dr. King, we also mindful on this day of all the people in our own country and indeed from all over the world—people for whom his message was intended—some of whom have fulfilled the dream, but many of whom have yet to reach the mountaintop.

Dr. King once said that “the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are promissory notes.” And we all know that there are still whole parts of our own country, and even our own region, where those “promissory notes” have yet to be delivered on. And our long term response, not just our commemoration this day, is the real challenge ahead for all who believe in the fundamental message of Dr. King—that “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Catherine McAuley felt that way, and her passion for justice in a very real way is the rock on which this college was founded.
I want to thank the 579 of our students who lived out Dr. King’s legacy just this fall—those are our Mount Aloysius students who worked on 222 community service projects with 164 different community partners during the semester just past. Because of you, Dr. King’s words don’t just live on today in this commemoration ceremony once every year. His words come to life every day, every time one of our students...

  works at the local food bank, or  
  helps out at the homeless shelter, or  
  prepares another person’s tax form, or  
  tutors someone else’s son or daughter, or  
  collects coats or shoes for children, or  
  grants the wishes of an angel from our Christmas tree, or  
  rebuilds homes in New Orleans, or  
  travels to mission work in Honduras or Guyana.

Every time one of our students reaches out to give someone a hand up, every time one of our community reaches into another person’s life, every time one of our team stands up for another person’s rights, every time you do those things, you are living out Dr. King’s mission and helping to fulfill his dream.

I am proud to be at this College for many reasons, but perhaps none more than this reason. Thank you all for living out Dr. King’s legacy so well and so often.

**Last assignment, a few words about our guest speaker, Mr. Anthony L. Ross.** You have a substantial biography of Mr. Ross on the inside page of today’s program. Let me highlight three pieces of that bio.

One, Tony Ross is a leader in our state. Though he is still a young man, Tony has been President of the largest network of social service agencies in this Commonwealth, the United Way of Pennsylvania. For most of a decade, he worked directly with that network of 65 local United Ways and with two Governors, helping formulate and fund policies designed to lift up the least among us. Tony’s work at the UW addressed the same needs that Dr. King and Catherine McAuley helped address in their lives.

Two, Tony is a leader in our country. Tony was recently appointed President of OIC America, founded by Rev. Leon Sullivan, which touches the lives of 2.5m people through 44 programs in 20 states with an action agenda focused on job training and education. He follows in the footsteps of Rev. Sullivan, the Lion of Zion Baptist Church, who was himself a supporter and a friend of both Dr. King and Nelson Mandela.

Three, Tony started out in the same place as so many in this room. Tony is the first in his family to earn a college degree, the first to win academic honors at any level, the first to be named President of anything, let alone a nationally respected organization. He grew up in a single parent home where he experienced all the challenges of eking out a life and a living in a tough urban environment. I think Tony would tell you there were three keys to his success—one, he has a great mother; two, education came first in his home; and three, he is 110%er—whatever he does, he does it with passion and with compassion.

Tony Ross, we thank you for bringing your passion and your compassion to Mount Aloysius, to help us mark this important day in our nation’s history. Welcome.