Mount Aloysius College
2015 Fall Convocation
September 6, 2015
Remarks of President Tom Foley

Good afternoon to all of you and welcome to this 76th Convocation in the life of Mount Aloysius College.

Welcome to trustees, to faculty, staff, students, honored guests and friends. Thank you for this comfortable day, for the picturesque setting that is our college, thank you for all these uplifted faces in front of us.

It is over 160 years since the Sisters of Mercy first demonstrated their affection for these Southern Allegheny Mountains, when seven of their number welcomed 22 young ladies to what was then St. Aloysius Academy. It is 118 years since Old Main, the building my sons think is where Harry Potter was filmed, first opened its doors as Mt Aloysius here in Cresson.

And as you sit here—a century and a half after Sister of Mercy Francis Xavier Warde commanded a similar but smaller assembly--I am acutely aware that your ability to concentrate is inversely related to how close we come to the dinner hour. So I have four distinct functions to perform here today, and about 8 minutes left in which to do it. Let me get right to it.

First, a few words of thanks; second, a word or two about what makes this event necessary; third, a few thoughts on what makes your first year here so special; and finally, a few words on our theme this year—Voice. Let’s begin with thanks to those who make it possible.

First, to our faculty--We have an extraordinarily dedicated faculty at Mt Aloysius College. These are the people who are your academic, intellectual, professional and career guides. They will teach and test you in the classroom, in the laboratory, at your clinicals, on your fieldwork and beyond. They won’t pick up after you, but they will look after you--when you need their help on a concept in the classroom or a personal challenge outside it. Today, we acknowledge their scholarship, we appreciate their service both in the classroom and in the clinical settings at which 65% of you will find yourselves, and we applaud their commitment to the mission of this college. If you let them, they will be your greatest advocates here!!!
Second, to our staff--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.

Third, to the President’s Executive Council--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 new academic programs of study, the balance between professional and academic curricula and so much more.

Fourth, to Board of Trustees members with us today--The Trustees support, steward and strengthen Mt Aloysius. In short, they guide us through times good and bad. They all serve because they believe so strongly in the very idea of Mt Aloysius College and because they want, fiercely, to create opportunities for all of you.

A special thank you to our predecessors who stood at these very places these last 161 years. Though the Sisters of Mercy are few in number on our campus today, we salute them at this time in a special way every year--because it is they who built this institution from the ground up, and it is they whose commitment to core principles of mercy and justice, service and hospitality inspire us each and every day.

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 chairs and require you to sit in them?? In one 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 eight hundred years to the traditions of teaching and learning at the great medieval universities of Europe. 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 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 convocate, convene—from the Latin con and vocare—literally, “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—and
- to look for something that as US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan says “unites us as a world.”

So welcome to your very own Convocation, 1,000 years after the first convocation was held—5,000 miles from where we sit today.

Third assignment—so what are our goals for you as you begin your journey here?

First goal is to help you grow in appropriate ways. Globalization is testing America’s resolve in the world and even challenging our standard of living. As you begin your higher education we want to be sure that you are able to respond to these global trends.

To that end, we feel that it is our job—whether you are in a two year professional degree program or a four year Capstone curriculum—it is our job to help you develop your ability to think broadly, to speak and to write clearly, to be able to look at the world with a critical eye on occasion and be able to adapt to whatever circumstances the future brings you.

You are important to us, and so we are determined to challenge you and we are equally determined to give you all the support that you might need.

Our goal is that when you leave here, you will have all the tools to enable you to lead meaningful lives—that you will be job ready, community ready and technology ready.

Second goal, to teach you the value of asking good questions. At orientation, we told you that the first rule of higher education is that there are no dumb questions. Today I want to tell you that to succeed at lifelong learning, it is all about learning how to learn and the first step there is not being afraid to ask questions.
The second step in learning how to learn is to cultivate a *passion* for asking good questions—whether you are in Connections 101 or down in Johnstown at a clinical rotation for radiology. Trust me on this. The winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1944 grew up in an overcrowded tenement in New York City. Each day after school the mothers of his neighborhood friends asked their children, “what did you learn today?” The future Nobel Prize winner Izzi Rabi’s mother, however, inquired of him: “did you ask a good question today, Izzy?”

After he won the Nobel Prize, they asked Izzi how he became a world class scientist, and Rabi replied that his mother deserved most of the credit. He said that “asking good questions made me become a good scientist.” So I want to say to you today, again, that there is no such thing as a dumb question. And the real lesson is never stop asking *good* questions.

**Third goal, to impress on you that learning doesn't begin and end in the classroom.** Our hope is that you’ll enjoy attending a wide range of non-classroom events that enhance your learning--from Speaker’s Series lectures to community events and to theatrical, athletic and musical performances.

I encourage you to be bold and connect with the faculty and staff. Each one of them has an interesting story all their own. I encourage you to get to know their stories because they too will inspire you.

And get to know your classmates as more than class-mates. One-third of this class has already been out in the so called real world doing real jobs to earn a living. I want to challenge each of you to become a vibrant part of this campus community—we need your life skills and experience to be successful—and I ask you to do that by developing truly meaningful relationships with your classmates.

Most of you have begun already to reach out to one another; you need to continue to support and learn from each other because you really can be an important part of the success of your friends—

- as partners in study sessions, in labs, in clinicals
- at performances and in community service
- as teammates on the stage, court or athletic field
- as members of college clubs on campus or simply
- as good friends, brought together by the coincidence of dorms or dining.

**Fourth goal, to be sure you understand you are the one with the most control over your success or failure.** You play the most important role in whether you reach these first three goals. For you to succeed here, it’s crucial that you get involved—build relationships with friends and faculty, join a club or invent a new one.
For you to succeed here, it’s important that you embrace Thomas Edison’s approach to failure—when asked about his first 10,000 attempts to invent the light bulb, he insisted that he hadn’t failed, he just found 10,000 ways that didn’t work.”

And for you to succeed here, it’s essential that you understand that you are here to prepare for the rest of your life, with habits that will serve you well in all those future endeavors. I strongly encourage you to be aggressive, to be proactive in asking for help even before you feel you need it.

And for those of you who are the first in your family or in the first generation to attend college, which is 3 out of 5 of you, it’s important to understand what an inspiration you are to other members of your family. The first family member to attend college often serves as a model inspiring other family members to follow and it’s not uncommon for entire families to become educated this way. I speak on this topic from first-hand experience. None of my grandparents had the chance to finish elementary school—they went to work as soon as they were able. My parents are proud high schools graduates. I was the first in our long family history to have the chance to go away for college. 10 brothers and sisters followed me, and they have 14 degrees between them. You can do this too!!

My final assignment today—a few words on the idea of Voice. Mt Aloysius is fairly unique in the ranks of higher education institutions in that we choose a theme each year and try to coordinate orientation, the Connections courses, our Speakers Series, our faculty symposium, dorm activities—even the activities in our Little People’s Place—around that single idea. Our theme this year is a simple one, “Voice.”

Voice—it can be written or spoken, first or third person, active or passive, digital or analog, cyber or literal, mythic or spiritual. Voice is the original social medium, first expressed physically as drawings on a cave wall, today through emoticons on a text message.

Voices come to us in other mediums as well. Actors have voice. Musicians have voice. There are voices you will study in history, in politics, in science and the arts. Paintings, sculpture, digital art are often powerful expressions of voice—evoking emotions that range from rage to rapture and inspiring reflections that are at once philosophical, imaginary, even practical.

This year, you will also hear about some voices of courage.
There is Mairead. A woman loses her sister and three young children, crushed to death against a church railing when a self-anointed freedom fighter decided to engage in a gun battle on a city street on a gorgeous summer afternoon. The sister who survived had a seventh grade education and didn’t think her voice mattered. But she founded a movement of women and men who felt like she did—that violence was not the answer to the conundrum of Ireland—led marches of 100,000 people at a time in Belfast, Dublin, London and helped cut that violence by 80%. She won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1978.

Then there is Mandela. A man spends 28 years of his life unjustly imprisoned in solitary confinement in nasty, brutish, filthy conditions. He had been a leader of the major opposition group in his country, one that often resorted to violence to press its point. And his first act on his release is to invite his jailer to lunch. His name is Nelson Mandela and his voice evolved over those three decades in prison from loud, angry bursts of recrimination to a universal message of forgiveness and for peace and reconciliation. He won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 1993.

And finally there is Malala. She was 11 when she first found her voice and started to blog on the importance of education for young girls like herself in her native Pakistan. She was 12 when the BBC did a documentary about her. She was 14 when the Taliban shot her as a warning to all those who advocated for the rights of women. Though she had to leave her country, she never moderated her voice. And she was 17 when she won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2014.

Now here is a surprise about all three of these voices. Not one of them set out to win a Nobel Prize. Not one of them started out with a desire to influence anyone’s life beyond their own neighborhood. They each started out by finding their own voice and then by talking to one person about their concerns, and then another and another. But these three voices—from Northern Ireland, South Africa and Pakistan—have one other thing in common-- they found their listeners, literally millions of people--people just like all of us at this assembly here today—people who responded to the unique resonance of their particular vocal chords, their particular stories—people like us who responded to their authenticity.

This is where we all begin this academic year--with authenticity. And a big part of our job here at Mount Aloysius is to help you find and develop that authentic Voice which is yours. How are we going to do that?
It all comes back to some of the goals the faculty and I set out for you just a few minutes ago.

First, we are going to help you grow in appropriate ways, so that you are job-ready, technology-ready and community-ready. Second, we are going to impress upon you the value of asking good questions, and as you will learn from our faculty, the key antecedent to asking a good question is being a good listener. Third, we are going to implant in you the importance of lifelong learning, encouraging you to reach beyond the classroom and to embrace careful listening, critical thinking and authentic expression as lifelong pursuits.

Most of this learning will take place initially in your classrooms. But to truly find your voice, you are going to have to take some chances outside the classroom as well. What you choose to read, what opinions you dare to try out on your friends, which Ted Talks and other digital voices to whom you choose to listen—all will help in your journey to finding your own voice.

We will also offer you a ton of other opportunities through which to explore the idea of Voice and with which to begin the process of developing your own. We have 7 guest speakers who will talk to us about the idea of voice this year and probably at least that number of less official occasions where we will have some fun exploring the notion of voice.

I encourage you to be inspired by those who come to this campus, to be inspired by those who help teach and run this campus, and to be inspired by those who become your friends on this campus. I also want to challenge you to develop your voice and as you do so to remember this oft-cited prescription:

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&\text{Watch your thoughts; they become your words.} \\
&\text{Watch your words; they become your actions.} \\
&\text{Watch your actions; they become your habits.} \\
&\text{Watch your habits; they become your character.} \\
&\text{Watch your character; it becomes your destiny.”}
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Again, welcome to this 76th convocation and to our year on Voice.