

An open door and a Catholic renaissance: Mount St. Mary's says goodbye to Dr. Thomas Powell



Dr. Thomas Powell, whose final day as president of Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg is March 9, will not be slowing down, as he and his wife, Irene, recently adopted four children from East Timor, from left, Nico, Maria, Johnny and Anjelina. (Jamie Turner | Courtesy Mount St. Mary's University)

By Erik Zygmunt

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EMMITSBURG - Historic renovations, new athletic facilities, an updated curriculum and one of the biggest solar farms in the state are just a few of the accomplishments at Mount St. Mary's University under Dr. Thomas Powell.

Powell, however, said that his biggest and most important challenge at the Mount, where he concludes 12 years as president March 9, was reasserting its Catholic identity.

"We are joyfully Catholic," Powell said. "That's what makes us distinctive."

To say the least.

The Mount began because Father John DuBois managed to escape France in 1791. Bearing an endorsement from the Marquis de Lafayette, hero of the Revolutionary War, DuBois landed in America, secured friendship and material support from Patrick Henry and James Monroe, and established the nation's second Catholic college in 1808.

"At the ripe age of 44," Powell said, DuBois came to the Mount with "the ultimate, irrational, crazy vision - to build a college, seminary and prep school to help this nation, in the wilderness of Maryland."

Powell holds DuBois as the perfect example for Mount's students, who he asks, "What dreams are you going to have that are irrational?"

A Catholic identity

At the heart of that "joyfully Catholic" university are open doors and compassionate friends, Powell said, explaining the reasoning behind a major expansion in the Mount's campus ministry.

Powell attributes its success to the support of the archdiocese, particularly Archbishop William E. Lori, who is a graduate of Mount St. Mary's Seminary, serves as its chancellor, and sits on the university's board of trustees.

On campus, Powell refers to Father Brian Nolan, the university chaplain director, as "the best campus chaplain in the galaxy." At the Mount seven years, Father Nolan has a relatively simple philosophy.

"We try to build a sense of being welcoming and approachable," he said, "to meet people wherever they are, and then encourage them to take a step forward."

Father Nolan notes several leaps in campus ministry under Powell.

"We've gone from 25-30 people in a small group Bible study to 230," he said. "We have a good number of students going to daily Mass. We're doing 40 hours of eucharistic adoration a week."

Now one of the largest student life organizations at the Mount, campus ministry holds 10 retreats annually and enlists 66 student leaders.

Powell also pointed to re-connecting what he described as an "inappropriate separation between the seminarians and the college."

He credits Monsignor Steven Rohlf, rector, and his predecessor, Fort Wayne-South Bend Bishop Kevin Rhoades, with breaking down that wall.

"We worked together to bring (the seminary and the university) closer," says Powell. Today's seminarians serve as chaplains to the Mount's NCAA Division I athletic teams, as well as club teams.

"It's a very unique program," comments Father Nolan, who as chaplain for women's basketball attends home games and practices, and cooks a preseason dinner for the team. "It's very well received by our athletes."

The next chapter

The 24th president of the Mount, Powell will be succeeded by Simon Newman March 10.

Powell will by no means give up "in loco parentis" upon his retirement. He and his wife, Irene, have adopted four children - Nico, Maria, Johnny and Anjelina - from the Topu Honis Shelter Home in East Timor, a small island country between Indonesia and Australia.

Powell says that he and Irene got to know Father Richard Daschbach, founder of Topu Honis, through their daughter. At the end of a family visit to the orphanage, Powell heard himself ask the missionary priest, now in his late 70s, a dangerous question: "What else can I do for you, Father?"

Over the four-year adoption process, Powell says, he and his wife eight times traveled to East Timor and the orphanage - a two-day flight followed by a 14-hour ferry ride and concluding with a long hike to the shelter's mountain-top location.

The ferry ride occupies a special place in Powell's heart.

“Let’s get 800 people on a 200-person ferry for 14 hours, and this guy next to you has a whole bunch of chickens,” he laughs.

A negligible price to pay.

“Every day is a joy with these kids,” says Powell. “We’ve been living as a family since September.”

Already the father of three children, he is nonplussed by the standard reaction – “Are you crazy?” – to the idea of adopting kids at his age, 61.

“Some people like to play a lot of golf,” he shrugs. “We like kids.”

As March 10, Powell’s last day, nears, the outgoing president finds his thoughts returning to Father DuBois.

“It’s been humbling to be president here,” reflects Powell. “Every day, I look at (Father DuBois’) picture, and I think, ‘What am I doing?’ “

The following occurred at Mount St. Mary’s during Dr. Thomas Powell’s 12 years as president.

- University status
- Ten percent increase in enrollment
- Catholic identity statement incorporated into governing documents
- New core curriculum, Veritas Program
- New majors, including criminal justice, sports management and human services
- New master’s degrees, including philosophical studies, health administration, and biotechnology and management
- Construction of Bicentennial Hall, a new dormitory, and Waldron Stadium, Straw Baseball Stadium and Our Lady of the Fields Softball Stadium
- Residential cottages for students and seminarians
- A walking and jogging trail
- A visitor center at the Grotto
- Three hundred new trees
- A large solar farm

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