

Bush praises volunteerism, service at Catholic college

LATROBE, Pa. – President George W. Bush praised volunteerism and service and encouraged the approximately 300 graduates of St. Vincent College to “take what you’ve learned here into the world and always live up to the high ideals that this college stands for.”

“The volunteer spirit of America makes us unique; it represents the true strength of our nation and must constantly be reinvigorated and renewed,” said the president, who cited the traditions of St. Benedict and Blessed Teresa of Calcutta in his May 11 commencement address.

He pointed out two students from the class of 2007 for giving to others: Anthony Fiumara of Walkersville, Md., who spent two breaks teaching at St. Benedict School in one of the poorest areas of New Jersey, and Kara Shirley of Saltsburg, who during a service project in Brazil visited an AIDS clinic and brought comfort to a dying man.

President Bush also praised the approximately 40 graduates who are becoming teachers and the five who are entering the military.

The president was greeted by thunderous applause as he took the stage during the Benedictine college’s 161st annual commencement ceremony. He joked with James Towey, who is completing his first year as the college’s president after serving in the Bush administration as director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.

President Bush said St. Benedict “set down a practical guide for community life” and “was the inspiration for the man who came to this country to plant these ideals in American soil and founded this college,” referring to Benedictine Father Boniface Wimmer, a German monk who founded St. Vincent in 1846 as the first Benedictine monastery in the United States.

“And Benedict was also the inspiration for the pope, who took his name in tribute to the Benedictine ideals of charity and community that he believes the world needs

now more than ever," the president added.

Noting that Alexis de Tocqueville saw the good in American volunteerism in the early 19th century, the president said he continues to see the "good heart of America" in the early 21st century.

"We see it in the volunteers who serve in our faith-based and community organizations," President Bush said. "Today more than 61 million Americans volunteer their time to serve others; more than three-quarters of our citizens give to charity."

St. Vincent graduates can step forward to serve "a cause larger than yourselves ... and soon you learn a great truth: that you always get more out of service than you give."

"You can know this joy in your own lives," President Bush said. "All you need is a warm heart and a willing pair of hands."

President Bush challenged the graduates, asking them to make service "more than a line on your resume."

"Be the face that brings a smile to the hurt and forgotten. Lead lives of purpose and character. Make a difference in someone else's life, and if you do, you will lead richer lives, you will build a more hopeful nation and you'll never be disappointed."

Benedictine Archabbot Douglas R. Nowicki, chancellor of St. Vincent College, Archabbey and Seminary, said the president's presence was a "tribute to our parents and grandparents and to those original missionaries of this land who made great sacrifices to help those in need."

"For our immigrant ancestors, the thought of the president of the United States addressing the graduates of a Catholic, Benedictine college would have been unimaginable," Archabbot Nowicki said.

The president's commencement address was his first at a college in Pennsylvania and only his second at a Catholic institution. He spoke at the commencement of the University of Notre Dame in Indiana in 2001.

Katlyn Andyjohn of Connellsville, who received a bachelor's degree in history, said she was impressed with President Bush talking "about the call to serve."

Michael D'Ambrosio of Monroeville, who earned a bachelor's degree in finance, said, "It was something special to have President Bush here."

Although President Bush's visit was preceded by several weeks of letters to the editor and guest columns in local papers that were both for and against the choice of the president as the commencement speaker, there were no protests inside the gymnasium.

Approximately 130 protesters lined the highway outside the campus entrance, which was closed that morning for security reasons. They held signs criticizing Bush and the Iraq War; however, the president never saw them as he was flown by helicopter directly from Pittsburgh International Airport to the campus.

About 40 members of a coalition group held a quiet, candlelight evening vigil along the main entrance road May 10, protesting the president and his appearance at St. Vincent, primarily because of the war in Iraq. The group began protesting on campus on a regular basis when the president's visit was announced March 26.

Therese Stokan of McKeesport, a graduate of Seton Hill University in Greensburg who took classes at St. Vincent College, said she was appalled by the choice of Bush as speaker.

"Any school that wants to represent Catholic values should not choose someone (as commencement speaker) who's started a pre-emptive war," she said.