

Mass of Thanksgiving for Dr. Thomas Powell

Introduction

At the end of his earthly life, after he had died on the Cross and rose from the dead, Jesus ascended into heaven and was seated in glory at the right hand of the Father. Now, as much as the Board of Trustees wanted to honor Dr. Thomas Powell at the end of his presidency, we couldn't come up with something *that* good. And, after all, Irene and the kids just got settled in a new place and I don't think they want to move again!

So instead of celebrating the exaltation of Dr. Powell, we will do something better. This evening we will celebrate and give thanks for the many ways Tom Powell, his wife, Irene, and their family have helped the university and seminary community these past twelve years to experience the risen and exalted life of Jesus. But to do this properly, let's take a moment to focus on tonight's feast the Ascension of the Lord, his exaltation at the right hand of the Father.

Heaven Is Not a Place But a Person

When I was growing up, people were just starting to go up into space. I'd look up at the night sky and wonder what it would be like to travel to a distant planet. And, of course, when I learned about the Ascension, I thought of Jesus as rocketing upward to some distant place called heaven. Truth to tell, I was always glad Jesus took off from Galilee and not Australia. If he had taken off down under, who knows where he would have ended up?

Thankfully as time went by, my ideas about the Ascension were clarified! It's really not about space travel but rather about our entering the inner life of God. God's Son

became one of us to redeem us of our sins. After he died and rose from the dead, he returned in our humanity to his Father. In Jesus, we have found our place in God. And even though he passed from earthly sight, Jesus remains with us so that we may go to him and share his life. To the extent we do this, to that extent do we go to heaven. And the Lord put us in the Church and endowed the Church with his grace so that we might help one another make our way to Christ and experience the joy of discipleship, the blessedness of his presence.

Tom and Irene's Witness to Christ

Tonight we celebrate the many ways Tom and Irene have effectively and generously served this University and in so doing, helped us all experience the joy of knowing and loving Christ. There are many tangible achievements to which we can point: a first-ever capital campaign; vast improvements in the campus; the Grotto Visitors' Center, the VERITAS program, the renewal of campus ministry, warm support for the seminary, a solar farm, a growing enrollment, the list goes on. All of this and much more have greatly strengthened our nation's second oldest university and seminary and positioned this institution for a future full of hope. Suffice it to say that they led Mount Saint Mary's in becoming a place of leadership, discovery, and community.

In addition to their very tangible accomplishments, we celebrate the gifts of mind, heart, and spirit which Tom and Irene brought to this campus, beginning with a lively, joyful faith. It is evident to anyone who knows Tom and Irene that they love the Lord and the Church and live their faith. By virtue of their own discipleship and by their leadership, they helped create a campus marked by a robust and joyful Catholicism in which faculty and students alike enjoy the freedom to follow the Lord and to be a part of his mission. Students sensed that they were truly welcome on this campus. Tom and Irene were a big part of that. I think of the Mount Family Association that Irene created so that new students and their families would feel at

home. Phone calls, emails, person-to-person contact gave families confidence that they are sending their son or daughter to the right place. On a few occasions, I walked the campus with Tom and witnessed his deep interest in each student and his knowledge of them. Tom and Irene, we thank you for all that you did. You went beyond merely fulfilling your professional responsibilities. You showed us what Pope Francis calls, “missionary discipleship.” You have helped this community discover the truth that true happiness lies in being a part of community where friendship with Christ is the norm.

An Expanding Home

As your service to the Mount began to draw to a close, nobody thought you would both pursue a life of leisure, and we were right! You both decided to expand your already wonderful family by welcoming into your home four children from East Timor - Nico, Maria, Johnny, and Anjelina. It’s just the latest instance of that generous love you have lavished upon this campus for over 12 years.

Pope Francis has made marriage and family a priority of his pontificate. He has called each Christian household to be a place of faith and love, a place that radiates love beyond its walls onto the Church and wider community. I hope that families like yours will be highlighted in the upcoming Synod. You are an inspiration not just to us but also to many couples and families. The way you fulfill your vocation inspires me, my brother priests, and our seminarians to live our vocations with generosity and self-giving love.

And Tom, I understand you are about to begin another job as the next President of St. John’s Catholic Prep in Frederick, a school community that will benefit from your knowledge and expertise as a leader and as an educator.

I Am With You Always

It would be a mistake for us to think that Jesus left us when he ascended into

heaven. Even though he was taken from our sight, the Lord promised to remain with us and so he has, generation after generation - in Mass and the Sacraments to be sure - but also in and through the example of wonderful couples like Tom and Irene. And while this is not meant to be a canonization proceeding, as that is substantially above my pay-grade, it is my way of saying how grateful we are, Tom and Irene, that the Lord sent you into our lives and into the life of this University. In giving thanks to the Risen and Exalted Lord, we thank him for you.

May the Lord bless you and your family and keep you always in his love!