

Mount enters third century as a leader in Catholic education

Three years ago, Elizabeth Monaghan was simply enjoying her job as an English professor at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg.

She had been with the school for more than a decade when she was approached by members of the college's leadership to head up its Bicentennial Office. She took pride in working at the second-oldest Catholic college in the United States, but wasn't sure she was ready to lead its yearlong reflection on 200 years of education.

"Then," she said, "I started to think about how this was only going to happen once in my lifetime."

Mrs. Monaghan couldn't say no, and she is about to enjoy the culmination of three years of work. The university has spent the last year celebrating its history and looking toward the future, as bicentennial festivities will end with an Oct. 11 gala and an Oct. 12 Mass.

"For me, it's just an absolute joy to be president of the Mount during the bicentennial," said Dr. Thomas Powell. "What a privilege. I keep on saying, 'How was I lucky to be born during this time?' "

That feeling of right place, right time permeates the campus, which sits in the shadow of the Catoctin Mountains.

It was in 1808 - the same year Baltimore was elevated to archdiocesan status - that Father John DuBois, who had escaped religious persecution in his home country of France, planted a cross in the Emmitsburg ground to begin his mission of educating young men as leaders of the church and country.

He started what is now the second-oldest operating seminary in the U.S., behind St. Mary's Seminary, which was established in 1791 and currently operates in Roland Park.

More than 1,800 former seminarians at Mount St. Mary's went on to become priests at the still vibrant seminary. Dr. Powell said 49 former seminarians at the school went on to become bishops in the United States.

"We're often referred to in the church circles as the cradle of bishops," Dr. Powell said.

Among American Catholic colleges, only Georgetown University is older.

The campus served as a hospital during the Civil War, when the Battle of Gettysburg raged a few miles to the north.

The Mount became home to the National Shrine Grotto of Lourdes in 1875. The actual grotto was founded by Father DuBois in 1805, three years before the founding of Mount St. Mary's. The grotto features a 25-foot golden statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, installed during the 1960s, that soars above the campus.

"When you come up (U.S. Route) 15, you see that statue and you know you're at the Mount," said Jason Werder, Student Government president. "It's a beautiful sight."

While the school has done its share of self-reflection, it also has been the focus of national attention. The U.S. Postal Service created a stamp featuring the school's signature Terrace building. A DVD called "The Spirit Continues," chronicling the history of Mount St. Mary's, shows rare documents and photos.

Now a co-educational institution with more female students than male, the school features a strong liberal arts tradition.

The school recently began hosting the Remnant Trust Exhibit, which includes first editions of the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg Address and many other historical documents.

Monsignor Stuart Swetland, the school's vice president of Catholic identity, said the school remains "a robustly Catholic place," even as it continues to grow.

Dr. Powell said the school can live up to the legacy of Father DuBois by providing guidance to all students.

“Young people are hungry for virtues, hungry for places that stand firm with a set of beliefs,” Dr. Powell said. “That’s been calling us right now in our bicentennial year to have the same courage, conviction and spirit to prepare a truly Catholic institution for our nation.

“In my viewpoint, our nation has never needed a strong Catholic institution more.”