

Father James Burns New Student Dinner - Transcript

One of, I would say, my most favorite times that I have as a university president is to be here when we're welcoming in our new students, first-year students, or any new students to the university, especially here on our Winona Campus. It's such a pleasure to be able to join in the welcome and help you to call this place home. There is a reading of a letter of Saint James in Scripture; we hear this line, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights."

I would say that perfectly describes moments like this, for each of you is truly a blessing. Each of you, I would say, is a good gift from heaven sent to us. And because of that, we are so grateful and thankful to your families, and your friends, for bringing you here to us, and you for choosing us. So, as you begin your transformational journey over the next four years, know how exciting it is for us to be with you here tonight.

As we come together tonight, perhaps many of us are strangers to one another. You will find yourself in shorter order becoming friends, close friends. And I can assure you that's the case, based on the many stories I've heard from our alums — how they came to this campus not knowing anyone or very few people, and after four years they leave, having made friends that they're still in contact with 10, 20, 30 years later.

You will also very likely grow in your connections with our faculty and our staff, our coaches, who care about your success, not only in your careers, but most especially in who you are, in your lives. We are known here at Saint Mary's, over and over again, people say, for our strong and supportive community, which we find examples of in many and varied ways. Two just recent examples: As Ann mentioned, most of you when you came in, and even as I'm talking to my table here tonight, already, they mentioned it. When you came to us, you had a welcome from members of our community, from students, from athletes, from a welcome committee, from our faculty and staff.

And as you put it, it was so easy — How you hardly had to do anything, especially if you had heavy things and you had hockey players around. But our students, athletes, and staff are not just like this on move-in day. They're like this every day. They want to be here for you to help you truly call this your new home. I got to meet a number of you and your parents while you

were moving in. And I love seeing how our current student leaders, our resident hall assistants our peer ministers, our student-athletes, and so many other volunteers, lent you a hand, offered that water (It was kind of muggy.), answered questions, or provided directions — all in all, just wanting to give you all a really warm welcome.

Another example was just this week. [Distinguished] Professor [Dick] Kowles was a geneticist, a biologist here at Saint Mary's campus many, many years ago. He recently passed away, and we had a dedication of the genetics lab this week in our beautiful and constantly evolving Aquinas Hall, where many of you I am sure will spend many hours learning, studying, and connecting with faculty and fellow students. But I bring that story up because there were so many alums who came together to honor Dr. Kowles because he transformed their lives. He not only initiated them in their careers in biology and medicine and healthcare and in so many other areas, but he became a lifelong mentor and friend. Some of them, who graduated from Saint Mary's, more than 45 years ago, came back, in tears, telling the story of how important and meaningful their relationship was with Professor Kowles.

But I want to tell you, that's not a unique story here at Saint Mary's, it's actually more the norm than not, and that these are examples of this caring and special community. The examples that we embody, that embody us, it's the spirit of Saint Mary's, and I say it's why we are so special. And that's why I know you have all chosen very well. As Ann mentioned, we are Lasallian and we are Catholic. And when we talk about our heritage, we know that it predates us by hundreds of years, more than 300 years to be exact. We are a university that educates in the Lasallian Catholic tradition. And that is the root and the core of who we are.

Saint John Baptist de La Salle, the founder of the Brothers of the Christian Schools, whose charism animates us even to this day — the legacy with these Brothers that continues with us in our own school. He's known as a patron saint of teachers because he was committed to transforming the lives of the young to the capacity that education offers us all, two particular goals that Saint John Baptist himself had in mind as he began this unknown journey through the world of education that he really wasn't planning on, but took it up nonetheless — two goals: that a Christian education would be for the young a way to touch the meaningful relationship with a good and loving God, and that a practical education would be afforded to everyone whom the Brothers taught, that they might finally have a chance in the world. This follows who we are,

our Catholic heritage and identity forms who we are; it's the basis of our being, put simply, in two phrases that you probably all know very well: to love God, and to love our neighbor.

And that's whether you're Catholic or not, we are inspired by that idea of love, to love God and to love you as our neighbor, all of you, everyone. We welcome you with open and warm hearts, regardless of any person's race or creed, or religion, or gender, or culture, or sexuality, or identity, you are welcome here. This is a place you can call home. You all will get a strong grounding in character education and virtue formation, which was at the heart of what the Brothers also taught. In fact, they had 12 virtues that they believe every teacher should exemplify in teaching young people, and that by being virtuous themselves, they would be living examples, that words wouldn't be necessary, you can simply watch the Brothers and know how to be in the world. We are quickly becoming, actually at this university, nationally known for this initiative. Because it's an initiative that will prepare you not only for work, but a life well lived. We're seeing a lot of support actually made to us from other benefactors and interested parties. And especially, this is very important, especially employers who seek the types of students Saint Mary's graduates. Also, an important part of our initiative is to recognize that we live right now in a world of great divides. And so, as part of this initiative too, we focus on inclusion and human dignity, that's especially pertinent and helpful in building a life of openness, love, truth, and beauty. Who doesn't want those things? Who in the world doesn't want love and openness and truth and beauty?

We believe that the dignity of the human person is central and foundational to developing the whole person to an authentic integral human development. In this way, all of us are lifted up. So our mission, character, virtue, inclusion, and human dignity, integrated, and when done well, will bring forth rich dialogue, learning and the pursuit of truth, and that even when we disagree, we choose to respect each other and dialogue, rather than fight. Build up, rather than tear down, and show civility to one another. Your educational experiences, informed by our mission, aren't just in the classroom. All of you will be participating in clubs and sports, the arts community, volunteering, building your faith, interning, working, socializing — all part of the transformative experience we expect you will have as you prepare for a great career and a great life.

So the transformation I'm speaking about aligns with a deep need for ethical leaders. Our world is better when we are open to developing good habits of character and virtue. In fact, I would say good habits and virtuous behaviors are what led to many great scientists and inventors. For

instance, Samuel Morse to develop the Morse code in 1842, or Thomas Edison, lighted a container in 1878, or Billy Durant's belief in 1908, that cars would take over the road someday, when all you saw was horse and buggy. But what do each of these young inventors have in common? Each one of them was laughed at when they expressed their ideas. They were ridiculed as young people by others who didn't fully comprehend what they were saying. These ideas remained though, because the investors knew to care for them with a life of a strong work ethic and a strong belief in the goodness of helping others.

So tonight, I ask you, as you're looking around at your fellow students, you are all the reasons that we here at Saint Mary's are confident in a bright future. You are the next generation of entrepreneurs, inventors, business and community leaders, church leaders, healthcare providers, educators, scientists, policymakers, public servants, just to name a few of the fields you and your classmates will enter for the betterment of the world. Taking care of our creation of our lives, mind, body, and spirit. That is what we are about at Saint Mary's. And so what I wish for you, I wish for you what we call the supernatural virtues, that they will form the basis of your lives. And that's my hope for you, that you'll be inspired by faith, rely on hope to see you through and to trust in love, God's love for you and your love for one another. Trust God from the bottom of your heart. Don't try to figure out everything on your own. Listen for God's voice in everything you do, everywhere you go. He's the one who will keep you on track as the proverb says. And as we journey together, remember that the greatest kindness one can render to anyone consists in leading a person from error to truth, and finally from a great poet, slightly reworded for tonight, to know that we are all pilgrims living in the present moment here and now. So the place to be joyful is here. The time to be joyful is now. The way to be joyful is to bring others joy. So let's be joyful together. God bless you, and have a good night.