

Br. Mel Anderson, F.S.C.: President Emeritus, St. Mary's College of California

Good afternoon, Your Eminence, Cardinal Mahony; Your Excellency, Bishop Curry; Rt. Rev. and Rev. members of the clergy, faculty, alumni, parents, students and guests of Thomas Aquinas College.

“Learn, and learn from the great people. Become a disciple of St. Thomas Aquinas, and he will take care of you. That’s my advice...” These sage words were uttered by the founding president of Thomas Aquinas College, the venerable Dr. Ronald McArthur, on the occasion of his 85th birthday. Dr. Ronald McArthur, Class of 1949 of Saint Mary’s College, his classmates and my Class of 1951, Peter DeLuca’s Class of 1963 were, as undergraduates, nurtured on the *Summa Theologica* of Saint Thomas.

Two exceptionally bright graduates of the Class of 1968, who also drank at the fountain of Thomistic wisdom, just missed having a copy of a rogue newspaper, *The Student*, slipped under their residence hall doors (under cover of darkness), on November 28, 1968. A lead article in that issue envisioned the possibility of Saint Mary’s becoming an *experimental college*. The author, the chairman of the Department of Education, H. O. Brown, stated that, “Experimental colleges are supposed to cater to the immediate, existential needs of individual students. Traditionally speculative education ends in itself. While it is possible that such speculation is of greater value, such a hierarchy would have to be accepted on faith or sentiment.” “(I discount,” he then said, “the argument about what is *proper* to man as nonsense.)” The experimental college “would certainly provide some welcome relief from the trivial quasi-Aristoteliansims (Thomisms?) we currently substitute for thought. “

The two alumni of 1968 who missed out on these tokens of existential angst and educationese were Thomas Dillon and Michael McLean. I must hastily add that when I assumed the office of president in 1969, I wasted no time in easing the author of that article out the door for numerous reasons and before someone dare propose him for tenure.

The then philosophy professor Ron McArthur could *not only gasp* at such secular affronts that profoundly affected Saint Mary’s and many other Catholic institutions at the time, but he became inspired, shall we say “set on fire,” to develop a bold plan that would not only provide students with an integrated liberal arts education by immersing them in dialogue with the most influential minds of humankind, but under the critical light from the great Catholic intellectual tradition. He proposed to do what the Angelic Doctor Aquinas did in the 13th century when he encountered and listened to the Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, the Muslim/Arab philosophers Avicenna and Averroes, and the Jewish philosopher Moses Maimonides. We know, too, that an impartial Aquinas was courageous in melding the awesome human insight of Aristotle with Christian wisdom, a daring project that brought him intense suspicion and criticism from the Parisian clergy.

Immersion in Aquinas will, indeed, change these students' lives and the lives of others, for knowing the thinking of Aquinas as both a theologian and philosopher is to know authentic wisdom *and the path to it*. So we pray that while these students stand on the shoulders of Aquinas that they look forward. As Eva T.H. Brann former dean of St. John's College observes: "Let us accustom ourselves and our students to reading everything we hear about, but let's keep our curriculum for the best and the hardest things we have in common." Armed with the background of the hardest texts and the common wisdom that is shared here, Thomas Aquinas students and graduates can wrestle with authors such as Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan, Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty, , Karl Barth, Michael Foucault, or Alasdair MacIntyre — and for comic relief, perhaps the delusional Richard Dawkins. A few books by such authors may in due time become great books. But for now they are the books of our time and we look for the critical eyes and analyses of Thomas Aquinas students and graduates.

Likewise, our Church, society, and the world will benefit from the insight of Thomas Aquinas College graduates engaging themselves in great conversations on the topics broached in Vatican II as noted in *Gaudium et Spes*, The Church in the Modern World. Aquinas graduates will serve humankind well by reflecting on such issues as the role of the Church among the community of nations, the fostering of a profound understanding of the dignity of the human person and its imperatives of social justice, by engaging in research on the relationship between moral theology and psychology, and providing in-depth studies on marriage and sexuality, as well as the many other "signs of our times."

It is not surprising to observe that the inherent human quest for spirituality is one sign of our times — and you are blessed. For in moments of quietude on this campus one can sense the inhabitation of the Spirit, who tells us that we are truly in God's holy presence. The late Dr. Thomas Dillon has been rightfully credited with and thanked for the beauty and centrality of this astounding chapel, one of his crowning achievements.

And I express my admiration to Interim President Peter DeLuca, a principal with Thomas Aquinas College from the very beginning who assumed the reins of leadership in a most difficult moment.

And finally, Dr. McLean, on behalf of your *alma mater*, the Christian Brothers, and Brother Ronald Gallagher, the current president, I fervently pray that you will receive abundant blessings as you carry *high* the Thomas Aquinas torch handed you by your three devoted predecessors, a wise Board of Governors and Holy Mother, the Church. May God be with you every moment so that you will gain the overflowing blessings of God and you too may soon be regarded as the *venerable* Dr. McLean. My heartfelt congratulations and prayers for your success!