

**Homily for the Funeral Mass of Sister Thomas Welder, OSB,  
President of the University of Mary, 1978-2009**

**by Monsignor James P. Shea, President of the University of Mary  
29 June 2020**

**Our Lady of the Annunciation Chapel, the Benedictine Center for Servant Leadership**

Good sisters and brothers:

On behalf of the Benedictine Sisters of Annunciation Monastery and all of us here at the University of Mary, we want you to know how deeply you honor us in joining us to grieve for Sister Thomas. We know it's not just empathy but true sympathy, you grieve with us.

- A special welcome to the Welder family, to whom we are immeasurably grateful;
- To the Most Rev. David Kagan, Bishop of Bismarck and great friend of Catholic education;
- To Abbot Daniel Maloney of Assumption Abbey, long-time chaplain of Annunciation Monastery and teacher of philosophy at Mary;
- Senator Kevin & Kris Cramer, Governor Ed & Nancy Schafer, all long-time and treasured friends of Sister;
- And Mayor Steve and Wendy Bakken.
- And of all the other wonderful people here today, I should offer a word to Joann Butler. Joann, you and your husband, Matt, who died three years ago, have been the dearest of friends to Sister and the University, and without you we couldn't have grown. Thank you for coming.

In Chapter 68 of his Rule, Saint Benedict provides a teaching on impossible tasks. To say anything adequate now feels like an impossible task. Do you remember when she would come to the podium after a glowing introduction, how she would always remark, "If my mother were here, she would say: 'Yes, but Thomas can't cook and she doesn't play bridge!'"?

Well, there was much more to her than that.

When we struggle to know the words to say – and it is a struggle! – we can't go wrong by turning to the Word, to the Scriptures which offer us the whole cadence of our lives as believers and disciples.

The Scripture readings Sister Thomas chose for the Mass of Christian Burial resoundingly point us to Faith: not wishful thinking or vague platitudes but real Gospel faith ... in the invisible world, in eternal life.

From the Book of Wisdom: *The souls of the just are in the hand of God. The foolish think they're dead, but their hope is full of immortality, they shine like the sun!*

Psalm 27: *I only want one thing: to dwell in the house of the Lord forever, to see God's face!*

From Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians: *Though the outer self is wasting away, the inner self is being renewed. And this life is a small, passing affliction to prepare us for an eternal weight of glory.*

And then there is John's Gospel, words of Jesus that sum up Sister Thomas' whole life: *Unless a grain of wheat fall to the ground and die, it remains alone ... a single grain. ... Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, my true servant is there with me.*

Sister Thomas Welder, a great servant leader, was remarkable not so much for her competence, energy, or integrity, but because she marshalled all these gifts and many more under the banner of faith in a good God.

And so we are left with the burning memory of a woman of faith. Most people seek to be known by their accomplishments, to live in their accomplishments. But a woman of faith, a woman like her, lives in her loves. So let me tell you a love story in 5 short chapters.

## Chapter 1, CHILDHOOD

*Unless a grain of wheat ... fall to the ground and die, it remains alone.*

Diane Marie Welder was born from the stock of German-Russian pioneers, who landed like wheat from the hands of the sower in Emmons and Logan counties, people of the prairie. These were people who built beautiful churches to God's glory while they were living in sod homes with dirt floors. There are certain places you can leave that never quite leave you. Her childhood was happy and sad. Her faith grew like a tender shoot, taught by her family and the Church, moved by the first stirrings of love for the Lord.

About a day before she died, she told a dear, mutual friend that she was most looking forward to seeing her dad again after all this time. Sebastian Welder died when she was only 11 years old, two days before Christmas 1951, leaving a wife and three young children.

She met the Sisters growing up in the Catholic schools of Bismarck, and learning to play the piano.

## Chapter 2, ENTRANCE INTO THE MONASTERY

*Unless a grain of wheat ... fall to the ground and die, it remains alone, a single grain.*

She entered Annunciation Priory in 1959, and she forgot to bring her toothbrush. Her mother was overjoyed when she called home to ask for one, blurting out: "I knew you'd call. I'll be right out to get you and bring you home!" (Little could anyone have imagined then that her mother would also join the Monastery 9 years later and go on to live as a Sister here for 40 years!)

In that same year, 1959, Mary College was founded and John XXIII summoned the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II's central document on the Church in the modern world was *Gaudium et Spes*, "Joy and Hope." How do we find joy and hope? We find them for ourselves and are able to offer them to others only by giving ourselves away. Unless we find a way to give ourselves away in love, we are lost in this world, lost in the cosmos. But if we do, we become great signs of joy and hope for a hurting world.

She gave herself away here, in her life with her Sisters, and *here*, in this chapel, singing the psalms morning and evening, with the rising or setting sun streaming through Marcel Breuer's windows: rose and azure to the east, violet and amber to the west.

She said that she learned from her Sisters and her life as a monastic how to be fully present to God in the ordinary unfolding of life, so as to be renewed and enlivened by the extravagant love God has for each of us.

The greatest love story in the world is God's love for the human race. Within that is the beautiful love story between the Benedictine Sisters and the people of the prairie, and within that she took her place, drawing life from her community.

When she joined the Monastery, she was given the name Sister Thomas, after Thomas Aquinas, patron saint of students and universities. Was there ever such a prophecy?

### Chapter 3: THE UNIVERSITY

*Unless a grain of wheat ... fall to the ground and die, it remains alone, a single grain. But if it dies, it produces great fruit.*

She was chosen president of Mary College at the age of 38. Young and inexperienced, she knew she could not do it alone. But she believed she had been given the grace to receive this office of leadership as a call, and she believed in the dream of the Sisters for Mary College.

It was a dream, born in the heart of God, for growth.

Under her calm, confident, leadership over more than 30 years, we would expand our academic offerings, become the University of Mary, and then become the premier institution in the country for the preparation of servant leaders with moral courage.

It is a story of growth ... with grace and grit. These elements – growth, grace, and grit – mark our culture at Mary and flow through our bloodstream in large measure because they were happening in her, our leader.

And in the meantime she was cheering on the Marauders, attending concerts and recitals, giving speeches of all kinds, modeling the Benedictine values, and making apple pie on television.

She said that, at the University of Mary, we measure our success by the success of our graduates, that they should be both competent and compassionate.

And she was filled with faith. She was faithful to her monastic vocation and faithful to her office of president in good times and in bad. And that gave her not power but authority, the authority of a genuine servant leader.

When she retired, the whole world came out to greet her.

### Chapter 4: THE FINAL DECADE

*Unless a grain of wheat ... fall to the ground and die, it remains alone, a single grain. But if it dies, it Yields great fruit. Whoever serves me must follow me.*

She never really retired. As our president emerita, she continued in her fundamental call to faith and love.

In her shadow, for me, it was all light.

And she kept us all grounded in our vital connection to the Monastery and the Benedictine Wisdom Tradition. She was an ambassador of God's presence, continuing to speak and serve, attending countless funerals, greeting every alum who came back to visit.

And to everyone she offered a kind, encouraging word. St. John of the Cross once said: "They can be like the sun, words, they can do for the heart what light can do for a field." A public life is a life full of words, but when Sister Thomas spoke – about servant leadership, about education, about religious life ... when she spoke your name – you felt something stir inside you.

## Chapter 5: THE CONSUMMATION

*Unless a grain of wheat ... fall to the ground and die, it remains alone, a single grain. But if it dies, it yields great fruit. Whoever serves me must follow me and, where I am, my true servant is there with me.*

That brings us to the present moment. The great love story of her life, what she was created for, was to run while she has the light of life, going forward to meet face to face her one beloved, the One she has been following and serving all along on the road of faith.

Sister Thomas was one of those people who, because of the task given her by God, has left her permanent stamp on the communities she was part of. There will be others who have their important part to play in the monastery, the university, and North Dakota. But no one can replace Sister Thomas.

We all keep saying that she died so quickly. But you know, we're wrong:

She was dying all the time. A life of service is a life of dying. To serve is to love. To love is to die.

The only way to live is to die. With every breath, we're dying. But every breath is also a gift from a good God. For each breath we take is a participation in dying, and the rising, of Jesus.

She was dying all the time, and so she was never alone, a single grain.

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It turns out that saying something about Sister Thomas and her life is an impossible task only because it involves using a word which has vanished from our vocabulary.

That word is holiness.

Her quiet dignity, her grace and her grit, her girlish laughter ringing in your ears, her devotion to her life as a Benedictine Sister, her joy, her capacity to listen and to lead and to love: in a time when we were less bashful about God and what it's like to have a life with God, we would say that these were all just ordinary signs, glimpses, of holiness.

It's not meant to be so unusual.

And yet, the life of Sister Thomas, in its holiness, shows us that love – real love, divine, unconditional love – *really happens in human lives*. God grant that it happen in our lives, in our lives here together, today and tomorrow, for as long as we are granted to stay here.