

TOAST TO THE COLLEGE
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North American College
Alumni Meeting
May 28, 1980
Mayflower Hotel
Washington, D.C.

☞ In his nostalgic poem "Good-Bye to the Mezzogiorno" - a work which could have been commissioned by the group gathered here tonight! - W.H. Auden reflects that "though one cannot always remember why one has been happy, there is no forgetting that one was." I think that I am perhaps clearer on some of the "whys" than the poet as I offer this toast to our College.

A year ago tonight, I was in the College Chapel. I was privileged to preach at the Farewell Liturgy for the departing Deacons and Priests. ☞ Ending a total of twelve years at the College--in the course of which I lived at least one year with eighteen consecutive classes (something of a record for the hill, I believe) - I was, needless to say, veramente commosso. Then as now, I spoke in the midst of a Community replete with memories and from a heart full of thanks.

Now, as then, I invite you to listen, to be attentive to the richness of memory this night, and to hear--right in the midst of our memories of being in Rome, of being part of the College, of being part of each other--what Paul speaking to the Elders of Ephesus calls "that gracious Word of His, which can enlarge you". (Acts 20:32)

That Word which can enlarge you! Paul captures the heart of it for me. Tonight we are called to celebrate that gracious, enlarging Word as it has been spoken to us through that rich, complex, stretching, sometimes painful, but (in the end) usually beautiful set of experiences and relationships we affectionately call "the College".

What we celebrate tonight is that call beyond our boundaries--personal, spiritual, intellectual, cultural, ministerial--which the College has voiced in every era of its existence--that call beyond our boundaries, which continues to be the genius of the North American College and its gift to the larger Church.

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A Parable and a Portrait serve to illustrate how I feel the College has and continues to serve That Word which can enlarge us:

The Parable of the young man, in the springtime of life, who takes to climb that very high hill on his horizon. With all the enthusiasm of youth, he climbs and climbs, forgetting everything but the climb, exhilarated with his own strength in conquering the mountain. Suddenly it dawns on him the hour is late; it's growing dark; he must head down.

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Running down the mountain, he loses track of time, watching his own feet fly. As he looks up at his watch, he is shocked to see it is dark--too dark even to see how far he has to go! Just then he trips and falls outward into nothingness. He reaches out desperate for something--anything! There, unbelievably in the grasp of his hands, is a limb. And there he dangles!

Hanging there, Lord knows how high, he cocks his head and utters what surely is the most heart-felt prayer of his life: "God--You up there--help me!!"
...Nothing... Again: "You up there, Help me!!"

Then a deep voice thunders out of the sky two words: LET GO!! The boy, dangling in shocked silence, looks up inquiringly, and yells, "IS ANYBODY ELSE UP THERE???"

That posture--clinging, tight, closed, merely holding on for dear life, to what you've got--is for many a way of life.

Now compare this posture of the Parable with the posture, the stance of a Roman Portrait--the Orans, the Pray-er, in the catacomb of Santa Priscilla. The posture is confident, open, expansive, vulnerable, trusting, inviting, giving, receiving, thankful-- How appropriately the posture of the priest, the Pray-er of the Eucharistic Prayer.

Can't we all locate, each in unique ways, of course -- but can't we all locate in our memory tonight how that gracious Word of God, through the College and all it means, called us to expand ourselves and our lives, to let go of that self-enclosed, clinging, closed stance, and to stand erect in the posture of the Pray-er? Can't we all remember how the College called us to be more and more Catholic--in vision, in affection, in understanding, in love?

It is this call to be enlarged, expanded, CATHOLIC, that the College voices again to us these days of our reunion. Doesn't our being together tonight remind me that St. Mary's parish down the road in Richmond is not THE Catholic Church? Doesn't being together tonight provide us a healthy reminder that we are part--thankfully part--of a much larger reality?

Join me, my Brothers, in a toast to our College: May it always be a powerful instrument of that gracious Word which can enlarge us! May it continue to live, to prosper, and to minister to the largeness, the Catholicity of our beautiful Church--
AD MULTOS ANNOS!!