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Remarks on King's College's 75th Anniversary

Presentation to the Congregation of the Holy Cross History Conference

1. As many of you may know, we have recently marked the 75th anniversary of King's College's founding. King's was founded in 1946 by the Congregation of the Holy Cross with the special mission of educating the sons of coal miners and mill workers—a subject that I'll return to.

The story that Fr. James Connerton started the college with a train ticket from Notre Dame, where he had been the registrar, and a typewriter is an overstatement, but there's an element of truth. There were of course no students, no faculty, no buildings, no college when he showed up just after the end of World War II. But the bigger truth is that the college won substantial support from the Diocese of Scranton, under the leadership of Bishop William Hafey, and, as so many other colleges did at the time, from the GI Bill, which paid for college for millions of young men and women.

2. Now, 75 years is both a long time and not very long at all. It depends on which side of the telescope you look through. You can make 75 years seem small enough. The world's oldest university, the University of Bologna, is approaching 1,000 years old... 75 years is only slightly less than the current average American life span--which has tragically declined in the last few years-- In that time there have been only nine King's college presidents—Fr. Tom is the 10th—even fewer than the 14 American presidents who have occupied the White House since 1946, when Harry S. Truman was in office.

But 75 years is also very big. The college has provided sustenance to the careers of hundreds of scholars, such as myself, thousands of employees, and thousands and thousands of children of these faculty and staff... King's has shaped the lives of some 30,000 graduates. The children and grandchildren of those graduates must now number in the hundreds of

thousands. And the professional relationships of those graduates—their clients, their colleagues, their students, their patients, and their friends—must be counted in the millions. The college’s service mission to its community in Northeastern Pennsylvania, radiating outward from its home here in Wilkes-Barre—has likewise touched the lives several generations in a metropolitan area of 560,000 inhabitants. It is a vital institution to our region....

So we see that the Kings College story is both small and also very big. As I said, it depends on which side of the telescope through which you look.

3. Historians get to look through both sides. As part of our efforts to mark its 75th anniversary, I was able to build a class to research the college’s history—with the support of the good people at our Corgan Library, where the college archives are housed. It was a very small class. Four students undertook research projects of their choosing, with some guidance from me, on topics related to the college’s history. One student researched the college’s first years, with a particular focus on the GI Bill. He found, in short, that the great majority of the college’s first crop of student were veterans—90% in fact. A second student analyzed some of the episodes of the Cold War as they were experienced and talked about on campus. A third student produced a fascinating paper, involving oral history, considering the controversy over the Vietnam War and the protest movement against it, as that played out on campus. Finally, a student, again using oral histories, recounted and analyzed the period in the early 1970s when young women came to a college that had been, to that point, all male.

The students’ work in this class was very special for me as an instructor. The class actually met in the college archive. It was the most intimate and fascinating venue I think I’ve ever had for a class.

4. The King’s College archive is found on the second floor of the library. It is an interesting, *sui generis* sort of place. We have two major archival collections. These are the papers of two Congressmen from the area—most notably those of Dan Flood, a long-serving Democrat. Then there are the materials related to the college. Some of this one would expect to find—yearbooks, school papers, course listings, and the like. That part has been

well-organized. But the archive extends backwards from this area through three more locked doors. In these back rooms are vast troves of more or less unorganized material—syllabi, faculty council minutes, recordings of different sorts, and all sorts of artifacts. Most of these artifacts have something to do with the college, but some of them have no clear, direct connection, other than that they were things

Some of these items appear to be things that someone at some point simply gave to the library, probably in the hopes that they would be preserved. For example, above a sink in this backroom I found some old mining artifacts.

5. Next to these artifacts I found an unlabeled microfilm reel. There was no information on it whatsoever, not even on the reel's first images. It turned out, however, to be the diary of an Irish immigrant, named Patrick Glennon, from 1870 and 1871. I asked our present and recently retired librarians—no one had any idea of its provenance. It just so happens that I am in touch with the leading scholar of Irish emigration to America, Kerby Miller, at the University of Missouri. With the permission of our library director, David Schappert, I digitized and sent the reel to Miller. Miller has assembled the largest body of diaries and letters from Irish immigrants to America, which he has housed at the National University of Ireland in Galway. Patrick Glennon's diary, found in King's College archive, is in the process of joining that archive.

The story does not end there. Because of this find, I was invited to speak at the National University of Galway Irish immigration to northeastern Pennsylvania, and in Donegal, where, it so happens, many of the Irish coal miners in these parts came from. That happened just this month, in early May.

Nor does the story end there. We presently have a large group of students in Ireland. The trip had been planned for many months, but problems emerged this spring with the firm that King's had used in the past to arrange student travel and educational opportunities. Our new contact at the National University of Galway, Breandan Sweeney, was able to step in and help to draw up what looks like, on paper, a very impressive educational program, together with Dr. Nicole Mares of History and Dr. Jennifer McClinton

Temple of English, our faculty leaders. All because of a find in the college archive. Go figure.

6. Before we leave the archive behind, I should note that it played a role in the way we, as a whole college, marked our 75th anniversary. A group of faculty members began to discuss this in the spring of 2019. This spring, much-delayed by Covid, we created a museum exhibit—the effort was led by our incoming faculty council chair Ron Supkowski in chemistry, but a number of professors, myself included, played a role. Using material from the archive, we created an exhibit in our art exhibition area in the college campus center. It would be helpful to my presentation if.... It was very nicely done, with the special assistance of Lalane Little, an art exhibition specialist who so happens to be married to Mike Little of our English Department.
7. So the COVID pandemic constrained our ability to really celebrate 75 years. When we began to speak about and plan for the anniversary in the spring of 2020, the college had suspended operations. It was pretty clear that this was going to make observation very challenging, as the college was straining every nerve to keep our community both safe and together, goals that, as we all learned, worked at cross-purposes under a pandemic.
8. But COVID made it clear that a major theme of the anniversary of our college would be perseverance. It so happens that King's had only just observed its 25th anniversary in 1971 when in 1972 another sort of natural disaster struck: Hurricane Agnes. Agnes buried much of Wilkes-Barre, surrounding communities, and King's in water. It was the most costly natural disaster in American history to that point. It devastated the college, depleting enrollment and causing major physical damages. But there was never any question mark, at least not that I've seen, over the college's survival.
9. In 75 years the college has faced other difficulties, of course. But there is a toughness about the place and the people here. This may go back to the founding mission of educating the sons of coal miners. The first generation of college students here, all young men, knew hard times. They grew up during the Great Depression. Unemployment in some parts of our region

was roughly 50% in those years. The coal industry had drawn their fathers and grandfathers from countries all over Europe—Ireland, Wales, England, and Germany, and then Italy, Poland, Lithuania, Russia, Ukraine, Ruthenia, Slovakia, and many more. Their fathers and grandfathers worked in the toughest of jobs, in total darkness, with the mortal threat of cave-ins and the cumulative lifetimes effects of Black Lung; many of their mothers worked, too, in the region's silk and textile mills. The great majority of these young men served in World War II. They came to college on the GI Bill. They certainly had hopes and dreams—one dream was never, ever to go back. But their dreams were undergirded by real toughness. We need that toughness now.

10. The other aspect of the college's perseverance has been its mission... Let me offer a metaphor from coal mining. In tunneling deep under the earth, no matter how rich the coal deposits might be, miners have to leave pillars to hold up the earth above them. It is tempting to get at that coal. It's there, it's easy, it can be turned into money. Taking that easy-to-get coal is called robbing the pillars. Like the coal mine, our college also has pillars that, so to speak, hold the earth up above us. These have been Holy Cross education, liberal arts education, excellence in teaching and learning, and service to the community. Some parts of the college are dedicated to one or another pillar more than others, but collectively, as a college, we're dedicated to them all. It may be tempting, when times are difficult, to rob from the pillars. By way of example, understand that St. Mary's in Minnesota has just gotten rid of all of its liberal arts majors. I am not in a position to judge that decision. But the foresight from Kings' from the beginning has been to preserve and uphold that which distinguishes it.