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*The Making
Of A President*



"I fully intend to be president of the entire University, to be a force for unity, cooperation, mutual understanding and, yes, collegiality."

Inaugural Address

By Lawrence Biondi, S.J.

No one named Biondi could stand spotlighted here at centerstage in one of our nation's premiere concert halls without becoming an Italian Walter Mitty, imagining you are all assembled in trembling expectation of hearing me sing an aria from *Il Trovatore* or, better yet, *La Traviata*. For me, a lover of opera in particular and music in general, such is the stuff that dreams are made of.

But then, so is becoming president of Saint Louis University.

Almost exactly eight years ago, when my predecessor greeted you from this same stage, he said something that deserves repeating today. "A fine university is among the most noble of human undertakings," said Father Fitzgerald. Indeed, if we consider all the achievements of humankind—in art and literature and music, the feats of science and technology, our triumphs of intellect and faith—we then *perform* begin to recognize the singular role which the university has played, and continues to play, in fostering these glorious deeds.

But of course Saint Louis University is not just *any* university. It is the oldest seat of higher learning from the banks of the Mississippi to the shores of the Pacific, from the Canadian border to the Rio Grande. In this

vast area, which constitutes over two-thirds of the continental United States, and which is more than twice the size of Western Europe, Saint Louis University has, I believe, the right to claim more "firsts" than any other university. It was the first to offer programs in business, the first to establish schools of medicine, law, philosophy, divinity, and the first to confer graduate degrees and to establish a graduate school. It was the first *Catholic* university in the entire nation to do *any* of these things.

Professors and graduates of Saint Louis University have founded more colleges and universities than the graduates of all other American Catholic universities.

To be called to lead Saint Louis University, therefore, is to be given an almost incredible honor—certainly one that I had never imagined—and to merely say that I am grateful seems woefully inadequate.

"One can never pay in gratitude," said Anne Morrow Lindbergh, "one can only pay in kind somewhere else in life!" For me, that "somewhere" will be just a few blocks to the south in DuBourg Hall, which will soon celebrate its centennial as the administrative center of Saint Louis University. But that "somewhere" will also reach a mile further to the south, to our Medical Center. It will

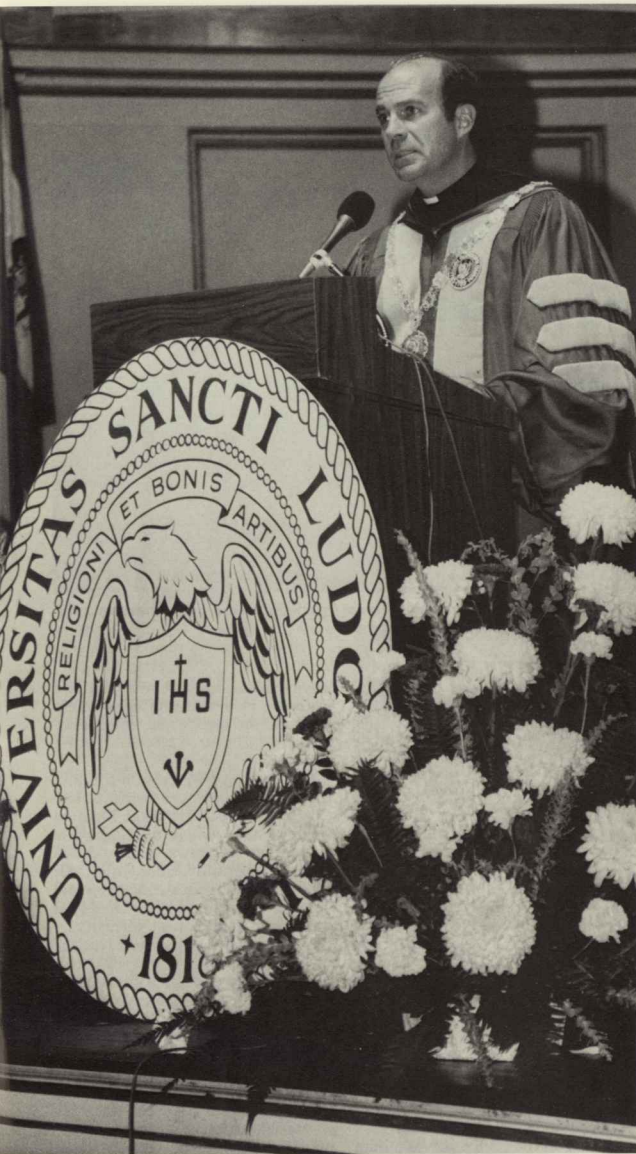
likewise include our Parks College campus in Cahokia, and it will even extend overseas, to our fourth campus in Madrid. For I fully intend to be president of the *entire* University, to be a force for unity, cooperation, mutual understanding and, yes, collegiality.

My idea of a university is fundamentally the same as John Cardinal Newman's, and I quote: "An assemblage of learned men, zealous for their own sciences, and rivals of each other, are brought, by familiar intercourse and for the sake of intellectual peace, to adjust together the claims and relations of their respective subjects of investigation. They learn to respect, to consult, to aid each other. Thus is created a pure and clear atmosphere of thought, which the student also breathes, though in his own case he only pursues a few sciences out of the multitude."

Though stilted in expression, these words are as relevant today as they were a hundred years ago. Indeed, I see my primary responsibility as one of helping to create a "pure and clear atmosphere of thought" for the company of learned men and women who teach and study at Saint Louis University.

The word "university" comes from the Latin *universitas*, meaning whole and entire. The University is more than the sum of its component schools and colleges. I am keenly aware of this because no other individual—no professor, no department head, dean or vice president—is specifically charged with overseeing this totality. Which is not to say I am alone in caring about the University as a whole—but I *am* alone in caring for it. Thus I intend to maintain an overview, to keep the "big picture" in clear focus, to bring the people and resources together so that all those who are part of this noble undertaking may work together in perfect harmony.

During his final weeks on campus, Father Fitzgerald was interviewed by a television reporter and asked to sum up his eight years in office. The interview took place in the quadrangle in front of the newly expanded Pius XII Library, one of the numerous building projects which added up to over \$100 million in capital improvements during the Fitzgerald years.



But my predecessor did not sum up his tenure in terms of bricks and mortar. "I have a feeling," he told the reporter, "that in many ways we have grown *together* and that our campuses have grown together, and that's what I find most gratifying of all!"

Today, it was *my* turn to be questioned by the reporters, but of course they wanted my thoughts about the *future*, not the past. In the few minutes remaining, allow me to share my own dreams of and for the University. I foresee a bright future indeed, for we are just completing the largest and most successful development program in our history. Substantial endowments are being established to underwrite faculty salaries and student scholarships. There have been exciting infusions of new blood for the professoriate—indeed, last year alone saw the advent of more young faculty members than at any time since the late Seventies. This fall we've seen a significant increase in enrollments at a time when the national pool of high school seniors is at a post-World War II low, which not only bodes well for the future but speaks volumes about our University's reputation.

With so much already accomplished on so many fronts, I can focus my attention on the University's academic mission of teaching, research and community service. As alluded to earlier, the building boom of the Eighties is all but concluded. Most of the major facilities are in place, and our aim now must be to *fill* them with the very best professors and the most gifted and dedicated students. This means we must complete the goal of upgrading faculty salaries and adding more endowed professorships. It also means we must continue building our scholarship funds, for the best students are not always able to afford our tuition, and we must *compete* for these students with both need and merit-based scholarships, just as we must compete for teachers with salaries commensurate with their experience and expertise.

Saint Louis University can indeed grow to new heights of academic excellence, but only if we grow *together*. And therein lies the greatest single challenge facing the University if not the entire nation. I refer to the phenomenon known as

"privatization," which can be defined as the philosophy of everyone for himself or herself—and the devil take the hindmost.

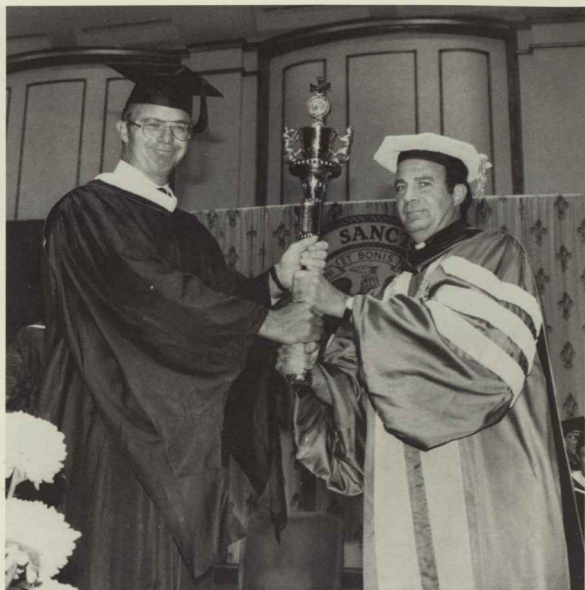
One of my Jesuit colleagues, Father William J. Byron, president of the Catholic University of America, has described this social process of the last 30 years as a gradual diminution of our capacity to care about the welfare and rights of others and a corresponding preoccupation with self. "With the rise of privatization," Father Byron states, "we have witnessed a weakening of community ties that yields a new generation of isolated individuals, lonely and alienated, who turn to fantasy and sensate distractions as substitutes for social concerns and social action. This evident cultural tendency to withdraw from public action into a cocoon of privacy poses a danger to the social order and a challenge to social policy."

In his book, *The Private Future*, Martin Pawley places this withdrawal at the top of the list of national problems—ahead of crime, violence, energy, pollution. Says Pawley, "Society is on the brink of collapse because of the withdrawal from the whole system of values and obligations that has historically been the basis of public, community and family life."

The dangers which privatization poses for Saint Louis University are the same as for society as a whole. Our community of scholars could be replaced by an academic archipelago with each student, each professor, each administrator guarding his or her piece of academic turf.

The threat of a privatized Saint Louis University is real, to be sure, but like all of our problems—both those anticipated and those yet unforeseen—it will be met and overcome if we remain faithful to the principles and values that have taken us safely through the last 17 decades.

William James once said that the highest goal which education can aspire to is this, that it should help you to know a good person when you see one. Saint Louis University's Jesuit philosophy of education might be summed up *this way*: We want our young people to realize that the best way to know a good person is to be one. According to St. Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit order, we



Fr. Biondi accepting the presidential mace from William H. T. Bush, chairman of the University's board of trustees.

should strive to educate men and women for *others*. Being of service to and for *others*, not *being served*, is the mark of genuine leadership.

As president of Saint Louis University, I therefore intend to lead by serving, both in the University family and in the larger arena of civic affairs. I have not accepted the chain of office and the presidential mace to become an institutional figurehead, someone seen only on ceremonial occasions. No, I see my role as a co-worker with administrators, faculty, staff and students, for I believe the president should possess many if not all of the qualities and skills of the collective group that he leads. That is, the president should be a teacher, researcher, counselor and, yes, a *student*, too. I can take notes with the best of them, and I believe I know how to listen. Thus I welcome all the advice and help I can

get, from inside the University and without, from our midtown neighbors and the broader St. Louis community, to our 73,000 farflung alumni.

I am a strong proponent of communication, but not the communication of edicts and dictation. Nothing short of two-way communication is appropriate in a university setting. In all our communications, in all our relationships, we must be open and sincere, motivated by the same goal of a greater Saint Louis University.

And that goal of a greater University has always carried with it the concomitant goal of a greater St. Louis metropolitan area. From the beginning, like mutually dependent gearwheels, the University and the City have driven each other along on a path of progress. One of our founding faculty members actually platted the city and laid the foundation for all subsequent surveys and developments. Even before the city had

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erected a church, our Jesuits provided the first organized religious services, offering Mass for Laclede's men under a makeshift tent. Early alumni were instrumental in the founding of such firms as Anheuser-Busch, Scullin Steel and Mercantile Trust Co. Another of our first graduates was the founding editor of the *St. Louis Republic* newspaper. Indeed, of all the city's myriad businesses and corporations and institutions, there is only one with deeper roots in this community. (I refer of course to the venerable Teutenberg's Restaurant and Bakery, founded in 1812.) The ties which bind the University and the City together are truly inextricable. Today, for example, two of every five attorneys and one in every four physicians in the St. Louis area were educated at Saint Louis University.

In the early 1970s, the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education issued a report in which it identified Saint Louis U. as "one of only a few universities in the nation which are not only in but of and for the cities where they're located." Our symbiotic relationship with the city hasn't changed since the Carnegie report, and it shall continue to obtain during my tenure as president. We share more than our name with the City; just as we shared the past, we share a common future.

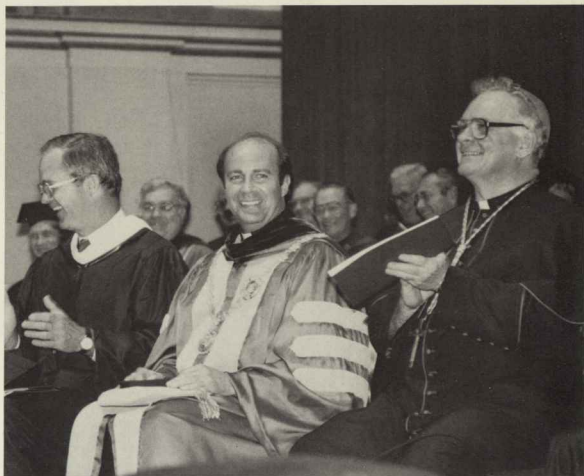
I wish to conclude by quoting the English poet and author, John Masefield, who captured the essence of a university when he said:

There are few earthly things more beautiful than a university. It is a place where those who hate ignorance may strive to know, where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see; where seekers and learners alike, banded together

in the search for knowledge, will honor thought in all its finer ways, will welcome thinkers in distress or in exile, will uphold ever the dignity of thought and learning and will exact standards in these things. They give to the young in their impressionable years, the bond of a lofty purpose shared, of a great corporate life whose links will not be loosed until they die. They give young people that close companionship for which youth longs, and that chance of the endless without which youth would seem a waste of time. There are few earthly things more splendid than a university in these days of broken frontiers and collapsing values, when the dams are down

and the floods are making misery, when every future looks somewhat grim and every ancient foothold has become something of a quagmire. Wherever a university stands, it stands and shines; wherever it exists, the free minds of men, urged on to full and fair inquiry, may still bring wisdom into human affairs.

It is a humbling thought that tonight, officially under my leadership, this great and venerable university will open a new chapter of service to God, to our fellow men and women, and to the world. Let us go forth together as brothers and sisters, in a spirit of cooperation and mutual support, for therein lies our strength and our hope. [E]



After his investiture and speech, President Biondi is welcomed with applause. Seated next to him are William Bush (left) and St. Louis Auxiliary Bishop Edward J. O'Donnell.