

Parents' Association Newsletter

THOMAS AQUINAS COLLEGE

Spring 2021

An Open Letter to My Parents

"Something Worth Being Passionate About"

By Dillon Raum ('21)

Dear Mom and Dad,

I am writing to you with the greatest confidence that I've *nearly* grown up. (Mom, I know that for some time you've been afraid this would happen, and thus far we've had an unspoken agreement to ignore it, but it's time to face the facts.)

Well into high school I didn't know what I wanted to do with myself. Confronted with this kind of aimless child, it seems parents might err by embracing either of two extremes: letting their children make decisions as they come (and hoping that things will work themselves out in the end), or compelling their children simply to follow the beaten path which society associates with success.

Your prudence consisted in choosing a mean between these extremes. You gave me an environment in which — although I did not always appreciate it — I would find something worth being passionate about.

You found for me a high school which shared your belief that the true, the good, and the beautiful ought to be pursued. There I found two worthy guides for my own lifelong pursuit: Euclid's *Elements* and a TAC alumnus. These two teachers — a fourth-century-BC Greek mathematician and a terrifying bald man — somehow inspired in me a passion for the life of the mind and a desire for moral self-improvement. These, in turn, inspired a yearning to apply to Thomas Aquinas College.

I will always be grateful for your encouragement of my interest in TAC, despite the unconventional nature of liberal education and the Discussion Method. You helped us organize a trip to the College — not only for ourselves but for 20 other high school kids — and once we saw what it was really like, you trusted my decision to apply only to TAC and nowhere else.

My time here has taught me that the truth is something not only to be pursued but also to be seized. I am most grateful when I think of my friends who visited and also found something to love at TAC, but whose parents didn't understand the benefits of a truly liberal education. Some have benefited from their experience of campus life at a public university — above all by seeing the moral effects of a philosophically agnostic culture — but the less fortunate among them are still embroiled in the bitter struggle for self-knowledge, in which modern education has proved no ally.

My conviction about the intelligibility of our world, and therefore the intelligence of its cause, has been so formed by my college experience that I cannot keep from sharing it with others. I hope to do just that at a high school next year — perhaps the very one where I first enjoyed the faintest notions of the good and beautiful truth. Most of all, though, I hope that God will use the education that my fiancée and I have received here to bless our marriage and, with it, the founding of another community of those who love the truth.

I will always thank you for the time I've spent at Thomas Aquinas College.



“Your prudence consisted in choosing a mean between these extremes.”

From the bottom of my heart,
Dillon

Looking Forward with Gratitude

Dear Fellow TAC Parents and Grandparents,

I hope you are well and at peace in the Lord, our faithful savior! You have all been in our prayers, and we thank you for your support and prayers for Thomas Aquinas College and its students, especially during the challenging times we have faced since last March and continue to face in the months ahead.

To strengthen our mutual bonds with each other and with the College and its students, President Michael F. McLean asked me in July to become the Director of Alumni and Parent Relations. In this new position I work with TAC parents and grandparents to bolster our community and efforts as members of the Thomas Aquinas College Parents' Association.

At the end of the fall, 11 parents of current TAC students and alumni agreed to become members of the new Parents' Association Board. Paula Cummings, the mother of a son and daughter on the California campus, graciously accepted Dr. McLean's request to serve as the board's president. (See interview, page 3.) Paula's fellow board members are Vice President Nick Cammarota ('84), Laura Berquist ('75), Joanne Dowdy, Andrew Emrich ('93), Kara Guinee, Anne Heekin-Canedy, Kimberly McCarthy, Laura Ristoff, Greg Simia, and Ray Walshe.

Please join me in thanking Paula and the Board for their willingness to serve our TAC parent community. Our new board will begin its work soon, and its members look forward to connecting with many of you. They appreciate your prayers and commitment to helping our students thrive, both during their time at the College and after.



“Please join me in thanking Paula and the Board for their willingness to serve our TAC Parent community.”

May God bless you and your family richly in 2021,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Robert Bagdazian".

Robert Bagdazian
Father of Daniel ('13), Gabriel ('14), and Samuel ('20)
Director of Alumni and Parent Relations

Save the Dates ... and Pray!

Alumni & Parents Days 2021

Although it's difficult to schedule anything with certainty these days, we are tentatively moving forward with Alumni & Parents Days on both campuses. Please pray for their success!



New England
September 11, 2021



California
September 25, 2021



“The Timing is Perfect”

An Interview with Parents’ Association President Paula Cummings

In late 2020, Paula Cummings — mother of Ian ('22) and Sophie ('23) — agreed to serve as president of the newly revamped Thomas Aquinas College Parents’ Association. A graduate of Middlebury College, who for many years volunteered in numerous capacities there, Mrs. Cummings has extensive experience in building college communities, experience she is now eager to put to use for the College.

How did you come to get involved with the College, and what led you to take on the role of Parents’ Association president?

Soon after our son, Ian, enrolled in 2018, we immediately got involved and shared our enthusiasm — and our ideas. I remember after my first Alumni & Parent Day, I told Robert Bagdazian, “This is great. Here are some suggestions on what else you can do next time!” Then my husband and I hosted an information session at our home. It just started to happen naturally. This is a small school, full of friendly people, so that makes it easier to get involved.

I was happy just to be sharing ideas, but then they asked me to take a leadership role, and it seemed like the right time to say yes. I love the College, and I have the time now to help it become even better. The timing is perfect to add more heft to the Parents’ Association, considering that the College is about to celebrate its first 50 years, and about to start on the next 50.

How has your experience volunteering for your own alma mater helped prepare you for this role?

I bring to this position what I have gained from volunteering at a college that was really good at alumni and parent relations. I did lots for Middlebury College, starting from the day I gradu-

ated. Over the years I served as a career representative, president of the New York alumni chapter, an alumni admissions representative, a member and president of the alumni board, and an alumni trustee. I also ran a couple of class reunions. I saw what worked and what didn’t work, and I can bring some of that experience to Thomas Aquinas College.

You and your husband both went to secular colleges. Was that a big shift for you, to send your children to a different kind of school?

It was a big-time shift. It took a while to figure out. We were impressed by the spiritual life at the various faithfully Catholic colleges, but we had a hard time determining how they compared academically to the secular colleges. We would ask people, “Where does your Catholic school rank in comparison to such-and-such?” Nobody was ever really able to answer that question; we finally realized these schools are a totally different animal. So we eventually made the faith leap and said, “It’s better to get our kids into Heaven than Harvard.” We also came to understand the excellent intellectual education offered by TAC.

How has your opinion of the College changed since your children have enrolled?

We now have walking, living proof that this program works! It’s so amazing to listen to Ian and Sophie talk about their classes. When I ask them to describe a situation, I can see their minds thinking things through, then presenting their thoughts clearly. It’s fascinating.

They are our kids, and we know them well, but we can see that they have changed. They can think even better than when they left home. They were smart kids already, so it’s not unfamiliar to us



Paula and Alexander Cummings

“This is a small school, full of friendly people, so that makes it easier to get involved.”

to hear them say intelligent things, but their minds are so tight now — which is a funny word — but, to me, there’s an elegance about it.

Then there is the spirituality. Our kids are growing in their faith and becoming a better version of the people they are meant to be. They seem more virtuous. That spiritual life counters any arrogance or attitude that could come along with intellectual growth. Further, our kids are socializing with great kids from great families, who know how to grow in those areas, too.

What role did other parents play in helping you come to learn about the College?

It was really helpful to talk to parents whose kids had already been through the program, graduated, and entered the real world with success. My homeschooling consultant at Mother of Divine Grace

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Campus Life

Having been tested for COVID-19 before the start of the academic year, and then shortly after, the students of Thomas Aquinas College were able to enjoy a relatively normal fall semester with in-person instruction. Despite the requisite safety protocols and strict limits on off-campus trips, they were delighted to be learning, praying, and working together once more. Please pray for the successful resumption of classes this semester!



Mount Monadnock



In the early fall, students hiked New Hampshire's Mount Monadnock, an hour away from the Massachusetts campus, triumphantly singing the National Anthem upon reaching its peak.



Donuts & Cider Party



To make the most of the autumn foliage, East Coast students held their second annual Donuts & Cider party after the last day's classes before Don Rags. Admission was free; scarves were mandatory.

Left to right: Anne Berquist ('23), Mary-Catherine Froula ('19), Paul Dinan ('23), Tanner Sheffield ('23), and Rebecca Scheurer ('23)



California Volleyball Tournament

With construction of the Pope St. John Paul II Athletic Center rendering the athletic fields temporarily unavailable, the annual volleyball tournament was relocated to the lower section of campus, just outside the Hacienda. Participation was high, and the juniors emerged triumphant.





Rosary Procession

On September 13 Chaplain Rev. Greg Markey organized a Rosary Procession “in reparation for our sins and the sins of our nation,” and with the intention of an end to the spread of the coronavirus and the protection of the College.



Schubertiade

From the October 25 Schubertiade in St. Cecilia Hall:

Right: Ryanne Young ('24) performs Mozart's “Vedrai Carino,” accompanied by Allanna Donnelly ('23).

Below: Domenic Richard ('22) performs Debussy's “La Cathédrale Engloutie.”



Continued from page 3

School was one of those. She could answer questions and show me that the program worked.

My advice to TAC parents is: Keep informed about the College, so that you can answer questions whenever they may come up. That's especially important where we live, in suburban New York, because where you send your kids to school is a kind of status symbol around here. When I'm asked where our kids go, I'll usually answer with an explanation of the school before I give them the name. People — even people who have no interest in sending their kids here — when they hear anecdotes, details, and stories about the school, want to know more.

What are your goals for the Parents' Association?

To reach more parents, to ensure that those parents are more connected to the College on a more regular basis, to have them feel more engaged and informed. The idea is to create a sense of community for our parents that lasts well beyond those four short years.

I would also like to help create more opportunities for parents to volunteer for the College. It can be something simple, such as answering career questions about their industry over the phone, or it can be something as big as hosting an event at their home.

When we talk of "TAC parents," we are really speaking of two distinct groups: parents of current students and parents of alumni. How do we keep those two groups united?

Love for the College will keep them united. The parents who currently have enrolled students are certainly easier to engage, because they have a reason to be on campus and reason

to ask the school questions. It's the parents of graduated students whom we need to engage more, so that they don't feel as though it's all done as soon as their student graduates. We need to encourage them and tell them, "We want you to be a part of the community, and you are still a part of it. You are a part of the College, and you can help. Don't feel funny about going to a TAC Christmas party in your town. You are completely welcome. We want you; we need you!"

How can parents get more involved?

The first thing is to help spread the word. Engage the communities that you're a part of so that you can let people know about the College and what a great place it is. That way we can send more students here and help them when they graduate. We can make the TAC community broader across the country and the world.

Beyond that, I would contact Robert Bagdazian, the director of alumni and parent relations. There is so much parents can do. They can help people understand, appreciate, and want to send either students or money to the College. Then they can help on the other end: When kids graduate, they can help them find a community in any city where they may work. TAC is not a huge college, but there are graduates all over the place. It doesn't take much to help newcomers feel welcome. When you add the parents, alumni, and friends, you really can start to create communities around the country.

The timing is perfect for parents to get more involved, because the College is putting a concerted effort into making the Parents' Association more robust and extending its outreach. If there's a specific thing we need, and you want to be one of the people we go to, let us know.

“We can make the TAC community broader across the country and the world.”



The Cummings family: Alexander, Ian ('22), Sophie ('23), and Paula

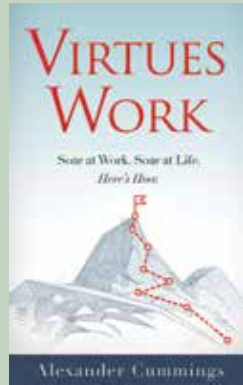
Publishing Parents

Recent Reads from TAC Moms & Dads

Alexander Cummings

Father of Ian ('22) and Sophie ('23)

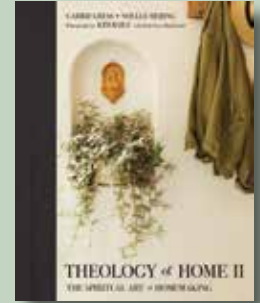
Alexander Cummings, who holds an MBA from Yale and has worked on corporate values programs for some of the world's best-known corporations, has published his first book, *Virtues Work: Soar at Work. Soar at Life. Here's How*. A how-to guide for readers who want to become their best selves, the book presents the virtues in a practical way, offering tips on how to incorporate their practice into everyday life. Although focusing on the application of the virtues in the workplace, *Virtues Work* contends that virtuous conduct in the office will spill into — and enrich — all other aspects of life as well.



Noelle Mering

Mother of Abigail ('22)

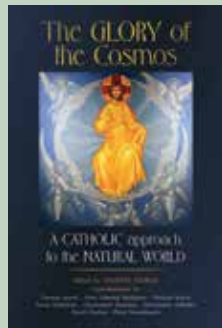
Writing with Dr. Carrie Gress, Noelle Mering has published two books in the last two years about making the family home a sacred space, *Theology of Home: Finding the Eternal in the Everyday* and *Theology of Home II: The Spiritual Art of Homemaking*. Whereas the first installment focuses on design, the second considers the art of homemaking and its relationship to some of the deepest truths of the Faith. Both are filled with large, beautiful photographs that not only complement the text but inspire the reader. Mrs. Mering's next book, *Awake Not Woke*, is due to be released this spring.



Dr. Susan (Burnham '78) Waldstein

Mother of Johannes ('02), Maria-Theresia (Braden '05), Pater Edmund, O.Cist. ('06), Benedict ('11), and Andreas ('19)

What are the Christian's responsibilities toward the environment? A new book sets out to answer this question, decoupling it from the snares of ideology and partisanship by turning to the intellectual tradition of the Church. In *The Glory of the Cosmos*, prominent Catholic scholars consider environmentalism from the vantage of Catholic philosophy and theology, particularly the works of St. Thomas Aquinas. Among the book's essays are "Hierarchy in a New Natural Science," by Dr. Susan (Burnham '78) Waldstein, professor of philosophy at Franciscan University of Steubenville. (Another of its notable contributors is Dr. Waldstein's second son, Pater Edmund, O.Cist. '06).



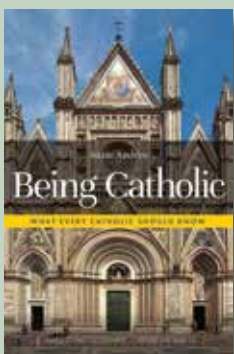
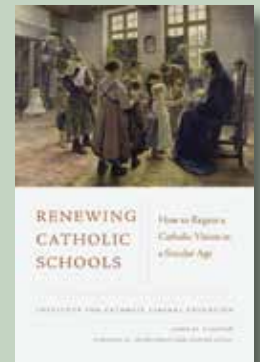
Dr. Andrew Seeley ('87)

Father of Luke ('12), Felicity ('14), Edward ('16), Elisabeth ('19), and Richard ('22)

Michael Van Hecke ('86)

Father of Nick ('17)

For those lamenting the persistent decline of Catholic schools, or those seeking ways to bring about their revival, Dr. Andrew Seeley ('87) and Michael Van Hecke ('86) have a book for you. Published by the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education, for which Mr. Van Hecke serves as president, *Renewing Catholic Schools* acknowledges the crisis in Catholic schooling, considers possible avenues for reform, and offers concrete suggestions for how parents, teachers, and administrators can bring about renewal on their own campuses. *Renewing Catholic Schools* consists of 11 essays, three of which are written by Dr. Seeley, and one by Mr. Van Hecke.



Suzie Andres ('87)

Mother of Joseph ('12) and Dominic ('24)

Fresh off of her recent books about St. Thérèse, author Suzie Andres ('87) has added a new title to her oeuvre: *Being Catholic: What Every Catholic Should Know*. Co-published by Ignatius Press and the Augustine Institute, *Being Catholic* is the latest in a series of *What Every Catholic Should Know* volumes. Whereas previous editions covered God, literature, and salvation, Mrs. Andres' entry looks at some of the essential customs, traditions, and practices of living the Faith. Topics include the sacraments, the layout of a church, and basic information about the Mass, angels and saints, the hierarchy, and the liturgical calendar.



Parent's Corner

Small Miracles

By Shanda Stypa

Growing up, our oldest son, George — or “G,” as we call him — loved being outdoors in the mountains of Arizona. We are an active family, and G’s skills would really shine if he was working on his bike, helping his father prepare for a hunting or camping trip, or working construction.

His schoolwork, however, was another story.

We homeschool our kids, which didn’t always allow for the kind of structure G needed. High school was challenging, and it was difficult for him to stay on top of the large volume of reading. Although he is intelligent, and especially gifted in math and science, G never seemed all that interested in his studies.

As parents and primary educators, that was a difficult time. We held to the ideal of sparking in our son a flame of intellectual curiosity and love of learning, but we never seemed able to keep that flame burning.

After his junior year, G attended the Thomas Aquinas College High School Summer Program, and that was a pivotal point in his life. For the first time, he seemed to take a real interest in something academic. Over the course of his senior year of high school, many of his friends from the Summer Program were admitted to the College, and that inspired G to take charge. He completed his TAC application, all on his own, over the course of one week-end. And after being admitted, he was fully committed.

G’s newfound academic independence couldn’t have come at a better moment.

Around that time, our family was rocked by the news that the swollen lymph node in our son Thaddeus’ neck was actually metastatic thyroid cancer, which had already spread into his lungs. We were overwhelmed by the world of hospitals, surgeries, and frequent doctor visits to multiple specialists. We no longer had the time to push and prod G to stay on top of his studies. Our family enjoyed a blissful break from the medical world when we brought G to TAC, California, for his freshman year — but then we were gone, and he was largely on his own.

Except he wasn’t. G found great support in his tutors; in Fr. Sebastian, his spiritual advisor; and in the robust and wholesome campus community. During this time, the blessings of Thomas Aquinas College became overwhelmingly apparent to us.

Over these last four years, we have seen some remarkable developments in our son. We like to describe them as “small



miracles.” G has become an avid reader, even in summers, and frequently peruses our home library. He likes to discuss philosophy and books with his siblings at dinner and while doing dishes. He is intellectually engaged in his studies and is genuinely excited about his classes and his Senior Thesis. He

has gradually taken on leadership roles at the school as a prefect for the Summer Program and by working as an athletics coordinator.

We have also noticed other, even more heartening changes.

When G is living at home, he is very helpful and much more aware of what needs to be done. He takes on projects without being asked, such as when he cleaned out our storage room. He takes his brothers biking, and on short notice is available to help siblings with schoolwork. We see in him a concern for others and a willingness to serve. And, through the life of faith that he is experiencing at Thomas Aquinas College, he is genuinely happy.

Still, in some ways, G’s time at the College hasn’t been all that we had hoped. We had imagined that we would come visit often and be more involved as TAC parents, but that hasn’t worked out for us. We are planning to come for Commencement this spring, but that depends, of course, on what medical restrictions may still be in effect. At home, Thaddeus is doing well but still has some small nodules of cancer in his lungs.

It has been a consolation and an incredible blessing to know that, during this tumultuous time, G has been quietly working hard at TAC, receiving the kind of formation we want for him, and becoming this young man of God who brings such joy to our family.