

The Life of the Artificial Mind

**LIBERAL EDUCATION
IN THE AGE OF AI**



The Virtues of a TAC Student

Excerpts from Dr. O'Reilly's Matriculation Address
to the Class of 2029

Let me start with a few words about the moral virtues that typify a Thomas Aquinas College graduate: love of the intellectual life, confidence that one can come to know the truth, humility to recognize that you need help along the path to wisdom, and love for the common good.

You must cultivate a love of the intellectual life — a love born from wonder. Plato says philosophy begins in wonder, and here, in a world filled with noise and distraction, you are invited to wonder about the highest things: truth in all its various aspects.

You will need confidence: confidence that the truth can be known. This is not naïve optimism. It's a conviction grounded in the reality that we are made for truth and that, especially under the light of the teaching Church and in the company of your fellow students, you can make real progress toward it.

You will need humility to admit what you don't yet know, to accept correction — to ask for help — humility to learn from the great thinkers with reverence, and above all, humility to let reality, not opinion, be your measure.

And finally, you must come to love the common good. This means not just studying for yourself but living and learning for others — for your family, your country, and your Church. Your education is not for private self-improvement but for generous service.

Now, alongside these moral habits, you will cultivate intellectual virtues, the habits of mind that help you seek and understand what is true.

You will begin to see the distinctions among the disciplines: the difference between mathematics and natural science, between history and poetry, and between philosophy and theology. Each subject has its proper mode, its principles, its kind of precision.

But you will also discover the unity of the disciplines — how all the disciplines illuminate one another and how theology, because it proceeds from divine revelation, rightly stands as the Queen of the Sciences.

Also, you will come to understand that the order of the disciplines reflects the profound order of the world: that there is a relationship between the non-living and the various kinds of natural living beings; further, that there is a kind of life that transcends the material world.

And as you gain these intellectual virtues, you will develop the ability to converse fruitfully and charitably with others. You will practice this every day in class. Discussion is not just a method here — it is part of the goal. Learning to speak clearly, to listen carefully, to disagree honorably is essential to liberal education.

Now, all of this — this pursuit of truth — requires discipline, effort, and perseverance. As the College's founders observed, "Men do not create truth; they discover it. Nature loves to hide." She reveals herself not to the arrogant or the passive, but to those who are docile and industrious: those willing to meet her on her terms.

Take heart. You are beginning something noble and difficult, and in the end, you will receive an education for a lifetime. With wonder, humility, confidence, and charity, you will grow into the kind of person who seeks truth, loves what is good, and is capable of giving to others what has been received.

May God bless you. ❖



"You are beginning something noble and difficult, and in the end, you will receive an education for a lifetime."

—President Paul J. O'Reilly

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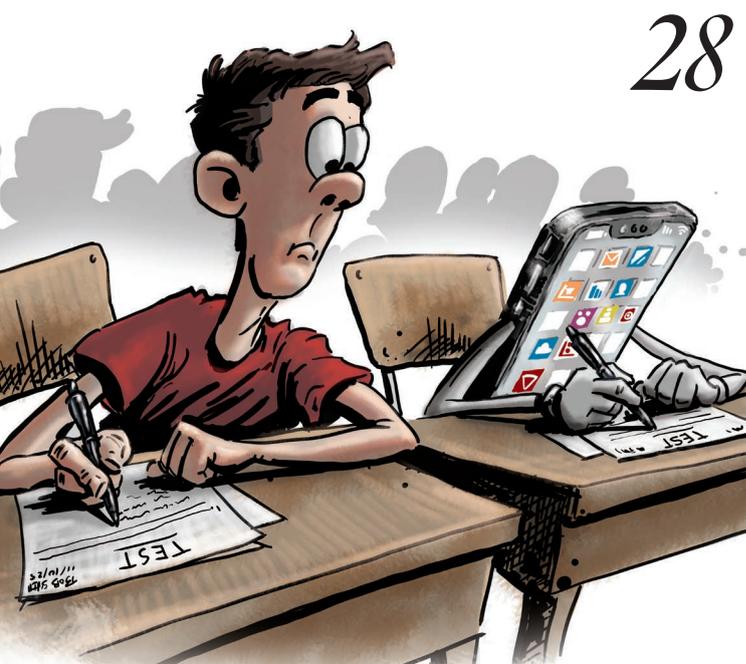
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One Program Two Coasts

TAC Matriculates Class of 2029

At its 2025 Convocation exercises in August, Thomas Aquinas College formally welcomed 155 new freshmen to its ranks, thus opening its 55th academic year. Between the California and New England campuses, the newest students hail from over 30 states and 7 countries, including Brazil, Scotland, Canada, Mexico, Ireland, and Lithuania.

The seventh academic year on the College's New England campus began on the morning of August 23 with a Mass of the Holy Spirit in Our Mother of Perpetual Help Chapel. Serving as the principal celebrant and homilist was Rev. Wojciech Giertych, O.P., theologian of the papal household. "Being moved with the Holy Spirit, we need to live out our lives being chosen in the face of God, living life with a trustful, childlike open love," Fr. Giertych told the incoming freshmen. "And at the same time, we need to be adults, responsible in the face of the challenges of the world."

Two days later, in California, Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel was filled with 100 freshmen, their families, and faculty for their own Mass of the Holy Spirit, with the Most Rev. Sławomir Szkrędek, Auxiliary Bishop of Los Angeles, serving as the principal celebrant. "In the midst of study and discussion, argument building and defending, true education opens a space for interior silence," His Excellency said in his homily. "The seed of the Word must first rest in the dark-

ness of the soil, wrapped in quiet, or else it will be snatched away by birds."

At the conclusion of the ensuing Matriculation ceremonies on both campuses, Dr. O'Reilly proclaimed the start of the College's 55th academic year, to which students responded with loud applause. Members of the faculty and Board of Governors then processed out as all sang "Immaculate Mary" in joyful anticipation of the new year, now at hand. ❖



Eve Fitzpatrick (NE'29) officially enrolls as a student at TAC-New England with the assistance of Dr. Patrick Gardner, registrar.

ST. VINCENT DE PAUL Lecture and Concert Series **Highlights from the Last Semester***

CALIFORNIA

Opening Lecture
Dr. Sean Collins
Tutor, Thomas Aquinas College
"Why Do We Need Questions?"



September Lecture
Dr. Tomás Bogardus
Pepperdine University
"The Neo-Aristotelian Nature of the Sexes"



October Concert
Ilya Yakushev
Pianist
Compositions by Bach, Beethoven, Liszt, and others

November Lecture
Dr. Matthew Walz
University of Dallas
"At the Heart of Sexual Ethics: Reflections on Aquinas and Wojtyła"



Fall Choir Concert
Thomas Aquinas College Choir & Orchestra
Handel's *Messiah*

*Text and/or audio from select lectures is available at thomasaquinas.edu

The Economist: “Delighted” by Visit to TAC

The
Economist

In August, a correspondent from *The Economist* came to Thomas Aquinas College, California, curious to see a school where students still take books seriously. He offered the following account

in the magazine’s review of Christopher Scalia’s *Thirteen Novels Conservatives Will Love (but Probably Haven’t Read)*.

On a rainy summer’s morning, eight students and a professor sat around a table at Thomas Aquinas College, a Catholic institution north-west of Los Angeles. They were formally dressed—the men wore ties—and they addressed each other as “Mr” and “Ms”. For hours the group debated “The Bear”, William Faulkner’s tale of a young hunter disillusioned with mankind’s efforts to subdue the land and its creatures. The scene would have delighted anyone who despairs that university students do not, will not and cannot read.

The discussion would have pleased right-leaning Americans in particular, and not just because Thomas Aquinas has America’s most conservative student body. For this was not a conversation about identity politics dressed up as literary theory: instead, students kept close to the text of the story and talked of fear, courage, goodness and other virtues.

As Mr. Scalia’s experience affirms, the College’s commitment to learning from the Great Books through discussion remains a powerful antidote to modern academic trends, forming students who read deeply and think effectively. ❖



Campus Welcomes Relics of St. Thérèse of Lisieux

The relics of St. Thérèse of Lisieux visited Thomas Aquinas College’s California campus in October as part of their 2025 national tour, drawing in pilgrims from all over the West to venerate the beloved saint.

Students, faculty, and guests welcomed the relics as they arrived on campus, encased in a magnificent reliquary, in a solemn yet joyful procession into Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel. Inside, the faithful queued up to venerate the saintly remains, reverently touching their hands, Rosaries, and prayer cards to the reliquary’s surrounding glass.

Perpetual veneration continued throughout the next day. Although the reliquary was on campus for a short 23 hours, the College hosted numerous visitors from near and far, all eager to encounter the relics of the Little Flower. “I’ve been a fan of St. Thérèse since I was a little girl. I think that’s where I started my devotion to her,” one visitor shared. “I loved the fact that she sends roses from heaven; and she’s the patron saint of little things done with love.” ❖

Endowed by Barbara and Paul Henkels

NEW ENGLAND

Opening Lecture

Dr. Sean Cunningham
Tutor, Thomas Aquinas College
“Liberal Education and its Rivals”



September Lecture

Dr. Amy Fahey
Thomas More College
“‘be best boke of romaunce’: Form and Meaning in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*”



November Lecture

Rev. Patrick Carter, OSB (’05)
Secretary of the Benedictine Confederation Curia, Collegio Sant’Anselmo
“The Noble Due: Aquinas and Debitum Morale”



Fall Concert

Joyous Fire String Quartet
Selections from Mozart and Haydn



November Lecture

Dr. Daniel McInerny
Christendom College
“Art as Imitation: An Aristotelian Re-Activation”

ONE PROGRAM TWO COASTS

Scholars Consider Role of Thomism at Fourth Thomistic Summer Conference

Held in June to commemorate the 15th anniversary of the death of famed Thomist Dr. Ralph McInerny, Thomas Aquinas College's fourth annual Thomistic Summer Conference brought scholars from across the nation to consider the role St. Thomas Aquinas plays in the modern day.

For three days, attendees gathered on the California campus, considering the question, "What, in our age, is the role of Thomas Aquinas?" This query first appeared in Dr. McInerny's book, *Thomism in an Age of Renewal*, which served as the theme of this year's conference.

The conference featured 20 lectures, including TAC-California tutor Dr. Anthony Andres ('87) on "Aquinas, Boethius, and the Art of Commentary" and Loyola Marymount University professor Dr. Christopher Kaczor on "A Thomism for Today: Learning from McCormick, MacIntyre, and McInerny." Dr. John O'Callaghan of the University of Notre Dame spoke on "The Aristotelianism of the *Tertia Viae*," Dr. Patrick Gardner of the College's New England campus delivered a paper entitled "On the Definition of Person," and Dr. Thomas Hibbs of Baylor



Dr. Thomas Hibbs of Baylor University delivers the keynote address at the 2025 Thomistic Summer Conference.

University gave the final keynote address, "Literature and the Renewal of Moral Philosophy," at the banquet dinner on the St. Gladys Patio.

"Thomas Aquinas College is a special place to be," Dr. Michael Iachetta, friend of the College and parent of a New England freshman, shared. "We got everything we had hoped for and more: a jump start in our study of the works of St. Thomas and connections and great conversations with other students of the Angelic Doctor." ❖

Alumni Dinner Celebrates First 50th Anniversary Reunion

It was an evening of reliving memories from Thomas Aquinas College's earliest years — and looking forward to a promising future — when friends old and new gathered on June 20 for the Alumni Association Dinner on the California campus. From members of the College's first graduating class to those who received their diplomas just one month beforehand, all joined on the academic quadrangle, joyfully celebrating the College's enduring legacy.

The Alumni Association used the evening to celebrate four graduating classes that were marking milestone reunions: the



Members of the Class of 1975 celebrate their 50th reunion at the Alumni Association Dinner.

"It has been a privilege to be part of the startup of a college that has been extremely successful."

— Dr. Thomas J. Kaiser ('75)

Class of 2020, the Class of 2015, the Class of 2005, and, most notably, the Class of 1975, the College's first graduating class, marking the 50th anniversary of its graduation.

After dinner, Dr. Tom Kaiser ('75), a longtime faculty member and representative of the founding class, gave an address, regaling attendees with stories from the College's infancy. He highlighted the decline in orthodoxy in Catholic institutions that caused him and his classmates to choose Thomas Aquinas College before it had even opened, the profound impact the first class had on shaping the College's curriculum and culture, and the staying power TAC has to this day.

"How many people have the opportunity to be in the first graduating class of a college?" Dr. Kaiser asked. "It is not normally one of the features you look for in choosing a college. It might even seem a bit foolish to commit to a new college, given the many risks involved. However, it has been a privilege to be part of the startup of a college that has been extremely successful." ❖

COLLEGE GUIDES 2025

TAC Proclaimed America's "Most Conservative College"

"The most conservative college in the US is a short drive from lefty LA — and has just 372 students," blares a summer headline from the *New York Post*.

Citing a survey of college students nationwide in the Princeton Review's



The Best 390 Colleges: 2025 Edition, the *Post* observes that "the school with the most conservative students is Thomas Aquinas College." The article goes on to describe the College as "friendly, faith-centered and intellectually driven," a place where students "are motivated by their Catholic beliefs and are seen as studious, kind and eager to help others."

"Contemporary politics are absent from our classical, Great Books curriculum, so that ranking is likely a reflection of our students' deep faith and how radicalized most conventional schools have become," says Executive Director of College Relations Chris Weinkopf. "Thomas Aquinas College aims to uphold the Church's intellectual tradition and moral teachings, which is conservative in the truest sense of the word."

Among the other notable honorifics in this year's Princeton Review guide, the College achieves rankings of No. 4 for "Professors Get High Marks," No. 5 for "Happiest Students" and "Most Religious Students," and No. 7 for "Great Financial Aid." The guide further includes Thomas Aquinas College on its "Best Value Colleges" list of schools that offer superior academics, a reasonable cost of attendance, and strong career prospects for its graduates. ❖

Without Trying, TAC Ranks #1 on U.S. News Social Mobility Index

In its annual review of American colleges and universities, *U.S. News & World Report* has ranked Thomas Aquinas College No. 1 in the United States for social mobility.



"This honor is greatly appreciated — but also ironic," says John Goyette, the College's vice president for advancement. "While many schools build their entire academic program around trying to help students improve their socioeconomic status, Thomas Aquinas College is not one of them." The College's integrated classical curriculum includes no business classes, professional training programs, or even majors and minors.

"Our founders figured that, having honed the powers of comprehension, analysis, and reasoned discourse, our alumni would excel in their future work, but that was never the point," adds Dr. Goyette. "Students pursue this education not to climb some societal ladder, but for its own sake. And yet, according to the nation's most popular college guide, this

education better prepares them to get ahead than countless other curricula dedicated to that very purpose."

To determine its Social Mobility Index, *U.S. News* considers the percentage of students at a given school who qualify for Pell Grants — an indicator of economic need — and looks at their graduation rates relative to the overall student body.

Of the more than 4,000 American institutions included in the *U.S. News* annual survey, Thomas Aquinas College once again ranks among the top 100 national liberal arts colleges, climbing eight spots from last year to No. 55 overall and No. 63 among "Best Value Schools." ❖

"According to the nation's most popular college guide, this education better prepares students to get ahead than countless other curricula dedicated to that very purpose."

Money Ranks TAC Among "Best Colleges in America"

The 2025 edition of Money's "Best Colleges in America" list, which rates schools for affordability and ROI, features Thomas Aquinas College among "the country's top values, based on graduation rates, cost of attendance, financial aid, alumni salaries, and more." Money's scoring metrics emphasize cost, quality of education, and alumni professional success.



The Money.com list gives Thomas Aquinas College a 4.5-star value rating, alongside older schools with much larger endowments, such as Tufts University, Johns Hopkins University, and Georgetown University. "It's worth noting that the College earns the same marks for value as some of the country's most established colleges and universities, despite having been founded only 50 years ago," says Chris Weinkopf, executive director of college relations. "That's a testament to our benefactors' generosity, which keeps tuition down; the success of our alumni, which boosts the College's reputation; and the timelessness of our unique program of Catholic liberal education, which thrives in an educational landscape marked by mediocrity and ideological indoctrination."

Thomas Aquinas College has long earned praise from numerous guides for its excellent academics and robust financial aid program. "Our founders were committed not only to establishing a program of Catholic liberal education that is unmatched in its rigor," says Mr. Weinkopf, "but also to ensuring that it would be available to all qualified students, irrespective of financial need." ❖

“What I Did Over Summer Vacation”

Students Share the Fruits of Catholic Liberal Education

Tomas Diaz-Bonilla (CA'26)



With an eye toward future employment and gaining valuable work experience, Tomas Diaz-Bonilla (CA'26) accepted an internship this summer with

memoryBlue, a leading tech sales and consulting firm in Silicon Valley.

In addition to completing the company's six-week sales-training program, Tomas made hundreds of cold calls, set up meetings, conversed with clients, and networked with supervisors and peers. “We had to do the exact same things the full-time employees were doing,” he says. “It was pretty intense.”

“My manager told me I had the most unique background and education out of anyone at this company.”

At the summer's conclusion, Tomas gave a presentation detailing his accomplishments over the course of the 10-week internship, in which he ranked first among his 20 fellow interns. “My manager told me I had the most unique background and education out of anyone at this company,” he says. “I think my success was a real testament to TAC and the way it taught me how to think and discuss well.” ❖

Josefine Sedler (CA'26)

For the last five years, Josefine Sedler (CA'26) has worked various internships at Naval Base Ventura County in Port Hueneme, California, but this summer's opportunity was arguably the most exciting yet: assessing the efficacy of cutting-edge marine-security technologies through a program called ANTX Coastal Trident.

As the assistant to the principal investigator for the ANTX program, Josefine participated in round-table discussions, helped run field experiments with new technology, and attended demonstra-



tion events, where private companies displayed their latest technologies for potential investors. These events, which took place at varied locations from California

to Maine, proved to be the highlight of her summer. “I like seeing how all these different people, in different parts of the country, are all working together on one thing,” she explains. Josefine plans to pursue a full-time position with ANTX after she graduates next spring. ❖

Aidan Cooper (CA'27)

Inspired by years of watching his cousin with Down syndrome flourish at PALS summer camps, Aidan Cooper (CA'27) decided to join in on the fun himself this year. He took part in two camps, helping to create a positive experience for the campers. At the end of the sessions, participants wrote letters to expectant mothers who received Down syndrome



diagnoses for their unborn children, congratulating them on bringing another life into the world.

“My good friend Cole, who has Down syndrome, burst into tears while composing his letter,” Aidan recalls. “Upon asking him what was wrong, he responded saying, ‘It's all just so beautiful.’ In that moment, I saw this initiative working in real time, reminding all of us of the intrinsic beauty and worth of human life. I am returning to TAC with more friends, lifelong memories, and lots more love in my heart!” ❖

Gabriel Livingston (NE'28)



“I was a little reluctant to take this job at first, given some of the ethical questions surrounding AI,” says Gabriel Livingston (NE'28), who worked this

summer for a Nebraska start-up that's developing an application to monitor live video footage from stoplight cameras and notify first responders in the event of an emergency. “But my boss emphasized that that this was a good use of the technology: The goal is to save lives and be beneficial to society, rather than, say,

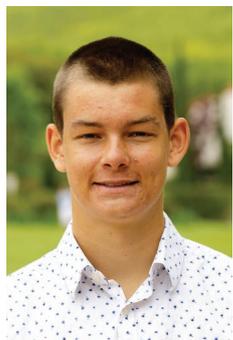
help you cheat on a paper.”

Gabriel contributed to training the AI model, reviewing footage and helping to identify the factors that could indicate an accident. “There were specific criteria that we considered, such as high-risk

“Ultimately, the work I was doing will help crash victims get to the hospital much faster than they might otherwise.”

environments or inclement weather, or when you see a certain number of brake lights,” he explains. “Ultimately, the work I was doing will help crash victims get to the hospital much faster than they might otherwise. I was grateful for the opportunity.” ❖

Basil Gutch (CA’28)



Hoping to launch his own business one day, Basil Gutch (CA’28) worked on developing the requisite skills this summer at an internship with

Northwestern Mutual, a wealth-management organization. He spent his time learning about finances and insurance, collaborating with the sales team, and meeting with clients.

“Most of what I did required me to understand what other people were saying and clearly communicate with them,” he says. “It was like a continuation of what we do in the classroom, except instead of studying a text, I was studying people’s opinions and finances.”

By the end of the summer, Basil ranked No. 8 for production and No. 9 for activity among 46 interns, an achievement he attributes both to his own perseverance and to his TAC education. “I don’t think

A Sainly Pilgrimage

In anticipation of St. Pier Giorgio Frassati’s canonization, Sophie Schindler (NE’28) went on a pilgrimage to Italy this summer, walking in the footsteps of the new saint.

Her first stop was Rome, where she visited all four Jubilee Holy Doors and the Sacred Steps. Then, it was off to Turin and surrounding cities, where the group visited St. Frassati’s old

stomping grounds: his churches, his family’s summer home, and his favorite mountains. “We got to climb the Via Ferrata with carabiners,” Sophie says. “I proved to myself I could actually do this!”

Though her days were busy with traveling and sightseeing, Sophie’s favorite times were those spent before Our Lord. “We had quite a few quiet moments of prayer during the trip,” she says. “I spent much of the time meditating on what it means to pursue success not in the world’s eyes, but in the eyes of God.” ❖



“I spent much of the time meditating on what it means to pursue success not in the world’s eyes, but in the eyes of God.”

I would have had as much success,” he says, “had I not known the proper value of Socratic dialogue.” ❖

Elizabeth Kolesar (CA’27)



Over the course of three weeks in Pamplona, Spain, at the University of Navarra’s summer academic intensive, Elizabeth Kolesar (CA’27) immersed herself

in Spanish language and culture. In the mornings, she and her classmates took academic classes, speaking only Spanish

in the classrooms. They then spent the afternoons exploring the city, kayaking, dancing, hiking a portion of the Camino de Santiago, and more.

“I became very comfortable with using ‘practical’ Spanish in the city and was challenged to use it to complete necessary, everyday tasks,” Elizabeth says.

By the program’s end, she had become far more adept at using the language and confident in her ability to develop even greater fluency. “I realized that I can’t be afraid to speak up and possibly make mistakes,” she explains. “Making mistakes and being corrected is a major part of learning; in fact, as I spoke more Spanish, I became much



less nervous, and I could formulate my sentences ever more quickly and ever more fluidly.” ❖

George Powell (CA'27)



When he was 12 years old, George Powell (CA'27) joined the Civil Air Patrol cadet program in his hometown of Alpharetta, Georgia. Over the years, he

worked his way through the ranks, recently achieving the top position of cadet colonel and winner of the Carl A. Spaatz Award. As a result, he was invited to serve as cadet commander and organizer of this summer's Civil Air Patrol Georgia Wing Encampment, a youth program for cadets ages 12-21, which builds leadership skills, provides aerospace education, and offers military career opportunities.

As cadet commander, George had many responsibilities, from interviewing staff members and coordinating logistics to overseeing activities. Encampment

“Learning through leadership is trial by fire, but it really makes you grow as a person.”

days were long, with an early wake-up and extensive physical activity. “Learning through leadership is trial by fire, but it really makes you grow as a person,” he reflects. “It was really satisfying to have the opportunity to serve in this role as a capstone of my time in the Civil Air Patrol.” ❖

Capitol Ideas

Two young women with political aspirations took steps toward their future careers through internships this summer in the nation's capital.

Isabel Garcia (CA'27) interned with *The Daily Wire* through the National Journalism Center, working as a breaking-news reporter. Though she had no prior experience in journalism,

“Because of my classes at TAC – and being used to asking hard questions – it was really easy to jump in.”



she dove into the job without hesitation, monitoring the day's events for ideas, which she would pitch to her editor, then turn those ideas into stories. “One of my favorite pieces was an exclusive interview I got to do with Curtis Sliwa, the Republican candidate for mayor of New York,” she says. “That

could easily have intimidated me, but because of my classes at TAC – and being used to asking hard questions – it was really easy to jump in.”

After a summer in the center of politics, Isabel is considering journalism more seriously as a future career. “It's such a fun, exciting environment to work in because politics and the news are always changing,” Isabel says. “Journalists as a class are the most hardcore, intelligent, and hilarious people I've met, and I really enjoyed being a part of their world for a summer.”

Also in the capital city, Mara Cloutier (NE'27) served as an intern at the Conservative Partnership Institute. There, she helped to put on events, summarized news items for political leaders, and researched various policy matters. “One day a week I also worked in the office of Arizona Representative Paul Gosar,” she adds.



In particular, Mara was pleased to find many fellow Catholics in D.C., both in the political field and in the city at large. “We hear a lot about corruption in politics,

“We hear a lot about corruption in politics, but seeing all the wonderful Catholics and other Christians who are working for our country right now gave me hope for the future.”

but seeing all the wonderful Catholics and other Christians who are working for our country right now gave me hope for the future,” she says. “As someone who wants to work in this field, in this city, someday, it was very inspiring.” ❖

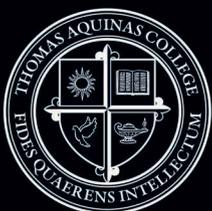





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THOMAS AQUINAS COLLEGE

thomasaquinas.edu/summerprograms

New Faces

College Welcomes New Tutors & Chaplains

Rev. Brendan Kelly ('85)

In high school, Rev. Brendan Kelly ('85) had a choice to make: study engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), or take a chance on Thomas Aquinas College, then just over 10 years old. “Herbert Ratner, who taught my dad in medical school and was on the original Board of



“You can go to MIT and become an engineer, or you can go to TAC, then MIT, and become an educated engineer.”

Visitors, told us about the College. He said, ‘You can go to MIT and become an engineer, or you can go to TAC, then MIT, and become an *educated* engineer,’” Fr. Kelly recalls. “I was pretty quickly convinced.”

By the time he graduated, however, he decided to forego engineering in favor of a doctorate in philosophy at the University of Notre Dame, where he studied under famed Thomist Dr. Ralph McInerny. In 1993, while attending World Youth Day in Denver, the parting words of Pope St. John Paul II — “I have been telling you these things, but now it is for you to put them into practice!” — inspired him to discern the priesthood.

After briefly considering various religious communities, he determined that his calling was to the diocesan priesthood. At the suggestion of a fellow TAC graduate, Rev. Ramon Decaen ('96), he looked into the Diocese of Lincoln, Nebraska, for which he was ordained in 2005.

Two years ago, the College’s Commencement Speaker, the Most Rev. James D. Conley, Bishop of Lincoln, promised to let Fr. Kelly return to TAC in 2025. Right on schedule, the chaplain arrived in California this summer. “I hope,” he says, “to spend many years living with this community once more.” ❖

Dr. Dale Parker

A high school trip to Greece sparked new tutor Dr. Dale Parker’s interest in antiquity, especially the Greek language. “That trip was a powerful motivator,” he says. “I was blown away by the whole experience.”

He received his undergraduate degree in the classics at the

University of Notre Dame, graduating in 2013. He then moved back to his native Southern California to earn his doctorate at the University of California, Los Angeles.

The newly dubbed “Dr. Parker” next moved to Rome to study theology at the Pontificia Università della Santa Croce, after which he returned to Notre Dame as a professor. “I found myself in the business school, of all places,” he laughs. “There I was, teaching philosophy and business ethics to students aspiring to work in investment banking, private equity, and trading. I had a bit to learn!”

Interested in teaching at a school he had always admired, Dr. Parker interviewed for a faculty position at Thomas Aquinas College California. “After teaching my test class, I remember walking away, saying, ‘This is the best class I have ever taught,’” he recalls.

“The students took the lead and were so responsible in the discussion. I knew it would be enriching for me academically, and now that I am here, I am looking forward to experiencing the College’s curriculum for myself.”



“You actively have to want this method and education for it to work.”

This year, Dr. Parker takes on the Sophomore Philosophy and Freshman Natural Science tutorials, as well as Sophomore Seminar. He especially looks forward to leading the College’s Socratic seminars. “It’s an achievement of the TAC students that they learn this way, because it takes a lot of initiative,” he says. “You actively have to want this method and education for it to work. I am happy to take on this challenge.” ❖

Mr. Philip Knuffke ('12)

“It’s like a homecoming, but to a different house,” says Philip Knuffke ('12), who is returning to teach at his alma mater ... albeit on a different campus. Mr. Knuffke grew up in Fresno, California, and watched his older brother, Peter ('04), graduate from Thomas Aquinas College. Initially skeptical about following in his brother’s footsteps, he had an unexpected change of heart when a pot of boiling water left him with a scalded foot and a



“I read the College’s founding document and Plato’s Republic. And I thought, maybe I should study this after all!”

summer bereft of any plans. “I had all kinds of time to sit down,” he relates. “So, I read the College’s founding document (the Blue Book) and Plato’s *Republic*. And I thought, maybe I should study this after all!” He would go on to enroll at Thomas Aquinas College as a member of the Class of 2012.

After his graduation, Mr. Knuffke headed to Argentina, where he spent two years teaching at Sedes Sapientiae, a Catholic high school with a classical curriculum founded by TAC alumnus Roberto Helguera ('91). Infused with a love for teaching, he spent some time preparing for graduate school and was accepted to The Catholic University of America’s philosophy doctoral program. He expects to complete and defend his dissertation next spring.

This summer, Mr. Knuffke moved to Massachusetts with his wife, Bridget, and son, Philip, to become a tutor on the New England campus. He is teaching Sophomore Seminar plus the Junior Natural Science and Freshman Language tutorials.

“Coming back as a tutor, I have a better sense of the holistic nature of the curriculum,” he says. “Even though I am focused on my particular classes, I still have an idea of what else the students are going through intellectually and am aware of how what I am teaching connects to everything else.” ❖



“It is commendable that the College puts such great emphasis on the development and nurture of Catholic life.”

Rev. Francisco Nahoe, OFMConv.

An ethnic Rapa Nui, Rev. Francisco Nahoe, OFMConv., was the first of his father’s four children born in the United States. He began discerning a vocation to the priesthood at the University of Arizona, then transferred to Pomona College to finish a bachelor’s in philosophy.

“In college, under the spiritual direction of Dominicans, I was surrounded by young Catholics who were on fire for their faith,” Fr. Francisco says. “A Dominican brother took me to visit the Conventual Franciscans. There, my experience of the presence of

God with the friars at prayer led me to a deeper encounter with the spirituality of Saint Francis.” He entered the Friars Minor Conventual in 1984.

Fr. Francisco studied at the Jesuit School of Theology but finished his STB at the Pontifical Seraphicum. In 1994, he was ordained at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Hermosa Beach. For eight years, he taught AP English at Bishop Montgomery High School in Los Angeles, then returned to his high school alma mater, Phillips Academy in Andover, Massachusetts, as its Catholic chaplain and English instructor. While in New England, he earned master’s degrees in comparative literature at Dartmouth College and biblical studies at Harvard Divinity School.

In 2006, he was called back to California to serve as the director of Franciscan postulants, then in 2010, served as rector of St. Thomas Aquinas Cathedral in Reno, during which time he earned a doctorate in Renaissance literature at the University of Nevada. Starting in 2017, he taught rhetoric and philosophy at Zaytuna College until coming to TAC’s California campus in August.

“The beauty of the liturgy here is beyond remarkable,” he says. “It is commendable that the College puts such great emphasis on the development and nurture of Catholic life. I thank the Lord and my minister provincial every day for sending me here.” ❖



“The math and science courses require us to begin with observing and wondering at the world around us.”

Miss Claire Murphy ('20)

Three years into her time as a student at Thomas Aquinas College, new California tutor Claire Murphy ('20) had an epiphany. “My junior year, it hit me that I wasn’t going to be a college student for much longer and I had to figure out what to do next,” she recalls. “I loved being in class, participating in discussions with others, and figuring things out in the text with the class. I figured, if I have the temperament and abilities that suit this environment, I should probably teach.”

Unfortunately, Miss Murphy’s stay at the College was cut short during her senior year due to the Covid-19 shutdowns. Nevertheless, she forged ahead and found her niche, heading to the University of Notre Dame to pursue a doctorate in history and philosophy of science, which she expects to complete in 2026. “I am very interested in the relationship between our experience in the natural world and philosophy,” she says, “especially in how scientific theories develop over time.”

INTRODUCTIONS

Her doctoral dissertation contemplates the role that models and representations play in scientific thought. Born from her love of Newton's *Principia* — which itself took root during her time at the College — it considers what kind of entities models are and how they help us engage with the world through imaginative activity. She plans to continue pondering these questions as she teaches the Sophomore Mathematics and Freshman Natural Science tutorials this fall, alongside Freshman Seminar.

“The math and science courses require us to begin with observing and wondering at the world around us,” she explains. “And, in different ways, our observation and experience become the foundation for the much more complex questions we get into. I am excited to find the parallels between the courses.” ❖



“I discovered something completely different: the kind of theology that is done on one’s knees and one that responds to existential questions.”

Dr. Dominic Spiekermann

“I had never imagined theology as a possibility,” says Dr. Dominic Spiekermann. “My father had studied it in Germany and didn’t speak highly of it because he had experienced a theology that was dry and soulless.”

Still, Dr. Spiekermann attended the International Theological Institute (ITI) in Gaming, Austria, for a *Studium Generale* in 2011 after graduating from his New Zealand high school, intending to pursue this one-year degree as he discerned what to do next. “To my surprise, at the ITI, I discovered something completely different: the kind of theology that is done on one’s knees and one that responds to existential questions.”

Enamored with the discipline’s richness, Dr. Spiekermann decided to pursue a five-year master’s degree in sacred theology at the ITI. While there, he met his wife, Cecilia, whom he married in 2018. The couple now has three children.

When he completed his master’s degree in 2016, Dr. Spiekermann moved to Switzerland to pursue his licentiate and doctoral studies in theology at the University of Fribourg. During this time, he became enthralled with the works of Swiss theologian Charles Journet, spending several years translating Volume 3 of Journet’s *The Church of the Word Incarnate* into English. “Journet has this unique ability to integrate scholastic theology with the experience of the saints and the mystical tradition of the Church,” he says. “It makes his theology particularly edifying.”

A new tutor on the California campus, Dr. Spiekermann is teaching Freshman Theology, Mathematics, and Seminar. He delights in the opportunity to lead his students in their discussions of the great works. “The Discussion Method has a very special place in my heart. It’s my preferred manner of both learning and teaching,” he reflects. “The tutor is pursuing the truth in common with the students.” ❖

Mr. Andreas Waldstein ('19)

“I always dreamed of being a tutor,” says Andreas Waldstein ('19). The child of alumni academics Susie (Burnham '78) and Michael Waldstein ('77) — and also an alumnus himself — it is no wonder Mr. Waldstein was drawn to the Thomas Aquinas College teaching faculty. “Even as a student, I knew I would love to teach here.”

Born in Austria, Mr. Waldstein grew up touring Europe with his family. Surrounded by exquisite art, beautiful music, and rich culture, he developed a love for classical literature and languages. Reading Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* during his junior year at the College piqued his fascination with philosophy.

“I found it so bizarre, but also so enthralling,” he observes. “Here was a magnificent edifice of thought that was so deeply wrong, but also so serious and great. That was when I decided to do graduate work in philosophy.”



“This is a place where beauty is obviously being lived as a concrete ideal. Being able to contribute to that is a true blessing.”

After graduating from the College in 2019, Mr. Waldstein went on to earn a master’s degree in philosophy at the University of Notre Dame. For his doctoral dissertation, which he anticipates defending this winter, he chose to write on the metaphysics of beauty according to Sts. Thomas and Bonaventure. “In our culture, we tend to think that beauty is merely relative, completely in the eye of the beholder. I wanted to understand the older and truer view that beauty is an objective property of being.”

Now, Mr. Waldstein is excited to fulfill his dream as he returns to the California campus as a tutor. This fall, he teaches Sophomore Seminar, Freshman Language, and Freshman Philosophy. “This is a place where beauty is obviously being lived as a concrete ideal,” he says. “Being able to contribute to that is a true blessing.” ❖

100 Alumni Priests!

College Celebrates Four Summer Ordinations



ARCHDIOCESE OF LOS ANGELES

The Most Rev. José H. Gomez, Archbishop of Los Angeles, with members of his newest class of ordained priests, including two Thomas Aquinas College alumni: Rev. Jorge Moncada ('18, second from left), and Rev. Paul Collins ('14, second from right)

At three Ordination Masses this summer, four young men became the latest Thomas Aquinas College alumni to enter the sacred priesthood of Jesus Christ, bringing the total to 100 since the College's founding.

"We give thanks to God for blessing us with so many students who have heard His call, and for their families, who have nurtured these vocations," says President Paul J. O'Reilly. "We are deeply honored to have played some small part in these men's formation, and we pray for their ministry and witness as they serve Christ's people throughout the world."

The nature of their vocations varies greatly, from lives of contemplation in quiet monasteries to diocesan appointments

in major metropolitan areas, with alumni priests serving numerous roles, including as pastors, canon lawyers, seminary instructors, and heads of religious communities. They include 11 Benedictines, 9 Dominicans, 8 Norbertines, and 40 diocesan priests, among others, with still more discerning the priesthood in seminaries or religious orders.

The four newest alumni priests are testament to this diversity: Two have entered the religious life, and two are secular priests; one is committed to offering the Traditional Latin Mass, another is slated to become a chaplain in the U.S. Navy. What follows are their stories, how they discovered their vocations, and how they now serve the Church and world.

Rev. John Peter Anderson, O.P. ('17)

With two parents who graduated from the Dominican School of Philosophy and Theology in Berkeley, California, Rev. John Peter Anderson, O.P. ('17) was raised with an appreciation for the life and teachings of the order. So, when a high school friend started urging him to check out Thomas Aquinas College, he was intrigued. But, hoping to pursue a more conventional career path, he continued to look at other colleges.

Everything changed, though, when he started reading Aristotle — and enjoyed it. “I figured if I’m already enjoying this kind of reading, I might as well go to TAC and study the things I actually want to study,” he explains.

Early in his sophomore year, Fr. John Peter began to hear a calling to join a religious order and enter the priesthood. “It was becoming habitual for me to think about deeper things, the mysteries of our world and the Faith,” he says. “At that point, my life was devoted to prayer, study, and community, which itself was quasi-monastic. I knew I was being drawn to something more.”

His desire to follow God’s call only grew as he received spiritual direction with then-College chaplain Rev. Paul Raftery, O.P., who helped him confirm his desire to enter the Order of Preachers. When he graduated in 2017, he joined the Western Dominican Province of North America, seeking the life of serious study and devotion to Christ that he had found in part at Thomas Aquinas College.

During his time in the order’s seminary, Fr. John Peter had the opportunity to study abroad at Blackfri-

“It was becoming habitual for me to think about deeper things, the mysteries of our world and the Faith.”



ars Hall in Oxford, England. “I found the culture and fraternity in the Dominican community there very similar to the Western Province in America,” he says. “I felt very much at home.”

On May 30, the Most Rev. Steven Maekawa, O.P., Bishop of Fairbanks, conferred the Sacrament of Holy Orders on Fr. John Peter at St. Dominic Church in San Francisco. As he navigates the duties that come with his new role, Fr. John Peter — now the parochial vicar at Blessed Sacrament Church in Seattle — is grateful for the formation he received at Thomas Aquinas College.

“TAC takes so much care, especially with the communal elements, to ensure that everyone is trying to engage in community with others in sharing a higher thing,” he says. “Having those points of mutual encouragement was very impactful for me, to the point where I now see that operative in myself when I meet with fellow friars and parishioners.” ❖

Rev. Ronald McCann, FSSP ('18)

“I felt like I had come back and received a hero’s welcome,” says Rev. Ronald McCann, FSSP ('18), describing his experience of returning to Thomas Aquinas College this summer to offer one of his first Masses as a newly ordained priest.

When Fr. McCann was 13 years old, his family began attending the Mass in the extraordinary form at a Priestly Fraternity of St. Peter (FSSP) parish, St. John the Baptist Latin Mass Community at St. Patrick’s Church in Cabot, Arkansas. “I learned how to serve both the most recent form and the traditional Masses,” he says. “The priests there were very supportive and encouraging in their guidance.”

Through serving Mass almost every Sunday, listening to his pastor’s kind counsel, and praying the Rosary with his family daily, Fr. McCann soon began thinking about the priesthood. In his senior year of high school, he attended an FSSP ordination in Omaha. “It was at that Mass that I felt a very strong calling to the priesthood,” he reflects. “I wanted to find the newly ordained priests afterwards and ask them what I had to do to get where they were.”

Knowing that the Fraternity recommends work experience or pursuing a degree before entering seminary, Fr. McCann enrolled in the Thomas Aquinas College Class of 2018. While a student, his calling to the priesthood never ceased and, as he participated in the rich spiritual life on campus, grew even stronger. “The Catholic atmosphere of Thomas Aquinas College supported and encouraged my vocation through its beauty and campus-wide devotion to the Faith.”

In his senior year, he applied to the FSSP’s Our Lady of Guadalupe Seminary in Denton, Nebraska, entering immediately after graduation. Throughout his time at seminary, he noticed that he had a deepened respect for what he was learning in his theology and philosophy courses. “We had worked so hard for the truth at TAC,” he notes. “I was able to better realize all the good that was set before me in the lectures, where the truth is laid out so plainly.”

The Most Rev. Robert Reed, Auxiliary Bishop of Boston, ordained Fr. McCann this May 28 at St. Peter’s Church in Lincoln, Nebraska. The new priest soon thereafter began his first assignment — at St. Lawrence Chapel in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania — but first he returned to his alma mater to offer a Mass of Thanksgiving in Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel.

“I was so happy for the opportunity to see so many of my former teachers and tutors and give them a first blessing,” he says. ❖



Rev. Paul Collins ('14)

“The Navy has the most need for chaplains out of any of the military branches,” says Rev. Paul Collins ('14), a newly ordained priest now preparing for military chaplaincy. This ministry seems like the natural next step in a journey that began at a young age, when he first hoped one day to become a missionary priest.

The son of Thomas Aquinas College tutor Dr. Sean Collins, he entered the Class of 2014, praying that God would show him how to fulfill his desire to become a missionary. “I told God in prayer, ‘I want to serve you in this way, but I don’t know how to do it, so please send me an opportunity to spend a year or so doing missionary work with a religious order while still discerning.’” His prayers were answered almost immediately his freshman year, when some missionary priests gave a presentation in the campus coffee shop.

Fr. Collins spent another two years discerning a call to this mission and finally, during



“The Navy, especially the Marines, go through so much, and I want to bring the Word of God and His grace to them as they navigate extreme situations.”

Christmas break his junior year, booked a flight to Peru. He spent the next year learning Spanish, living with the order, and caring for a group of young boys from broken homes. “I was like a father figure to them,” he says. “I was way out of my depth and prayed very hard that whole year to do right by them. It was an amazing, powerful experience.”

After his time in Peru, Fr. Collins expected to come back to California and resume his old life. However, as soon as he returned, he felt unfulfilled. “I had been doing something so important and meaningful, so to come back to ‘normal life’ didn’t compare at all,” he remembers. “At that point, I realized I had to become a priest, because I had tasted something I couldn’t walk away from.”

Hoping to study psychology, he enrolled at California State University, Northridge, completing his degree in 2017. He then entered St. John’s Seminary, co-sponsored by the Archdiocese of the Military Services and the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. This past May 31, the Most Rev. José Gomez ordained him a priest at L.A.’s Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels. In his first assignment, Fr. Collins serves at St. Mary of the Assumption Church in Whittier, California.

In three years, he will transition to a full-time, active-duty Navy chaplain, serving sailors, Marines, and the Coast Guard. “When people are having more serious moments in life, they have a greater awareness of their need for God and His salvation,” he says. “The

Navy, especially the Marines, go through so much, and I want to bring the Word of God and His grace to them as they navigate extreme situations.” ❖

Rev. Jorge Moncada ('18)

Although baptized a Catholic, when Rev. Jorge Moncada ('18) was a boy, he and his family attended Mass only a few times per year. Still, even then, he sensed God’s calling to the priesthood, dressing up in his father’s dress shirts to play “priest” and blessing neighbors with flowers. He and his mother moved to the United States from Mexico in 2008 and, as they settled into their new life in Oxnard, California, a school friend invited Fr. Moncada to join him in becoming an altar server. As he came to understand the Mass and became more involved in parish life, he began to take his faith — and his calling — much more seriously.

While a junior in high school, he applied to Juan Diego House, a formative center for undergraduate students discerning seminary, intending to enter after graduation. Then, one of his teachers introduced him to Thomas Aquinas College and took him to visit. “I was impressed by the Catholic life and how well educated the students were,” he recalls. “One thing that really impacted me was seeing someone drop a mug of coffee in the campus coffee shop: He came back and cleaned it up himself, instead of leaving it for someone else to deal with. That quiet, considerate act really stuck with me.”

That visit, and two weeks at the High School Summer Program, convinced him to attend the College before seminary. “I wanted more life experience, and I knew I would get that at TAC.”

His zeal for the priesthood only grew during his time on campus and, after his 2018 graduation, he entered St. John’s Seminary for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. On May 31, the Most Rev. José H. Gomez, ordained him to the sacred priesthood. “My ordination was a blur,” Fr. Moncada says. “But I still felt the love and support of all the people walking with me. It was really beautiful.”

His first assignment is at Resurrection Church in Boyle Heights, where he

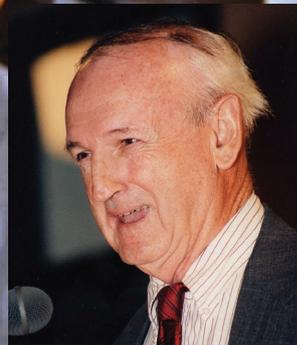
is serving under Msgr. John Moretta — who has been the parish’s pastor for over 43 years — and ministering to the local community, many of whom are immigrant families.

“This community is very economically poor, but spiritually rich,” he says. “I’ve been blessed with a good Catholic education and can understand why we believe what we believe, whereas these people just have faith. It’s such a blessing to be able to help them go deeper in their faith and understand it better.” ❖



Liberal Education in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

The Enduring Value of Learning
for its Own Sake



Thomas Aquinas College's founders never set out to prepare students
for an AI economy, but that's exactly what they have done.

Aaron Langley ('17) never formally studied software engineering. For that matter, he only began looking into the industry about a month after his graduation from Thomas Aquinas College.

Yet, less than six years later, Mr. Langley and three business partners — including two fellow TAC graduates, brothers Brian ('16) and Scott Schardt ('17) — built Autopilot, the highly popular investment app that went viral at launch and today boasts more than 3 million downloads and over \$1 billion in assets under management. The company collaborates with major institutions including Charles Schwab, Robinhood, and Fidelity to expand investor access across the industry.

With the rise of artificial intelligence now threatening the software-engineering profession, Mr. Langley is grateful to have received an education dedicated to strengthening the intellect, rather than obtaining a narrow set of job skills. “Being able to think critically and holistically about things, and not in a formulaic way, helped me learn the fundamentals quickly,” he says. “It’s the critical thinkers who will be best able to make use of the tools that AI has to offer.”

Already, the new technology has affected how his app — and his company — functions.

As its name suggests, Autopilot automates the stock-trading process, most famously through its Pelosi Stock Tracker, which allows customers to duplicate the suspiciously lucrative financial transactions of former U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s husband, Paul. Subscribers can also buy into portfolios based on the trades of other politicians, prominent investors such as Warren Buffett, or registered investment advisors, advancing the company’s ambition to become the operating system for modern asset management, where investors, stock-pickers, and institutions all connect through one automated platform. After the launch of ChatGPT, Autopilot went viral a second time by enabling users to delegate their trades to large language model (LLM)–driven portfolios co-developed with an AI researcher at the University of Florida.

Autopilot’s engineers are similarly turning to AI to simplify decisions and expedite workflow. “It’s transformed the way our team operates,” says Mr. Langley. “It’s taken the whole iteration loop of ‘build, test, fix,’ and made the process so much faster.” In his estimation, this hyper-efficient technology is unlikely to render humans unemployable, but it will place a premium on those employees who can comprehend the logic that undergirds machine learning and muster the ethical discretion unique to the human mind.

Such traits have always been prized, but when computers can outperform humans at most simpler tasks — and humans come to depend on technology to do their thinking — they become all the more imperative. “The more people rely on AI,” Mr. Langley reflects, “the more the creative mind, the free thinker, the liberally educated learner will stand out.”

Deskilling & Workslap

“AI is flipping a lot of things on their head,” observes Peter LaFave ('13), strategic sourcing director at Elevance Health, a Fortune 20 healthcare company with more than 100,000 employees. “It’s a massive disrupter, and that’s not just a buzzword. In the past year and a half, it’s affected a lot of traditional entry-level jobs. It’s having a huge impact in the job market.”

Mr. LaFave has worked in Elevance’s Procurement Division ever since his graduation from the College 12 years ago. For the past three years, he has been responsible for structuring, negotiating, and overseeing the company’s deals and relationships with AI partners for a wide range of projects, including customer relations, business operations, and IT. In November, he traveled to Rome to participate in the Builders AI Forum, hosted by the Pontifical Gregorian University.



Aaron Langley ('17)
Co-Founder,
Autopilot

“Liberal education allows you to see past the bias and groupthink that can otherwise prevail when machines sift through the information for us.”

As a leader in an industry that AI is rapidly remaking, he’s “bullish” about the future of liberal education, especially the kind he received at his alma mater. “It’s counterintuitive, isn’t it? At TAC, there are no laptops in the classroom,” he points out. “Nobody is studying the latest LLMs. Instead, TAC trains the student in critical analysis, innovative synthesis, and cognitive flexibility — all vital in the increasingly AI-integrated workforce and economy.”

While AI can be a tremendous resource, “you can’t outsource all of your thought,” he quips. “Sure, ChatGPT can rattle off a quick summary, but can you build industries off of five-minute summaries? As an employer, wouldn’t you want to hire someone who knows how to use summaries as needed, but who can also identify first principles and causes?”

Such qualifications are the hallmarks of a TAC graduate. “This is what we spend four years doing at the College: learn-

ing how to apply logic, whether Euclidean or Aristotelian, how to distill vast texts, be it *War and Peace* or Augustine's *City of God*, and make connections between them," says Mr. LaFave. "This program emphasizes the integration of different fields of knowledge — natural science, math, philosophy, language, literature, theology — which mirrors how technological innovation often combines disparate ideas."

Across American higher education, where AI cheating is epidemic, these talents are becoming vanishingly rare, giving rise to intellectual atrophy. The phenomenon has yielded a whole new set of vocabulary: "Deskilling" is the erosion of mental skills resulting from over-reliance on AI. Then there's what managers mockingly call "workslop," the prodigious, AI-generated content that seems impressive at first glance, but only if not examined closely. Meanwhile, audiences can fall prey to "automation bias," the propensity to accept uncritically any answer issued by a machine.

This irony, that LLMs beget employees who are more efficient but also less effective, is not lost on Mr. LaFave. "Logic is the foundation of any critical operations system for understanding business cases and making critical decisions," he says. "You can't just rely on a surface-level understanding. You're not going to get very far building a business, or negotiating a deal, without



Peter LaFave ('13)
Strategic Sourcing
Director,
Elevance Health

"What is responsible AI? What decisions do we outsource to an algorithm? Is AI sentient and rational? These conversations are happening today and will increase in gravity as this powerful technology advances."



Why Hire Weirdos?

by John Johnson

So what are you going to do with your TAC degree? That's the question liberal arts undergrads face regularly from naysaying STEM enthusiasts who fail to recognize the merit of this "other" sort of education. The liberal arts purists know this is a bad question insofar as it fails to distinguish between the practical utility of "training" and the end in itself that is education. But the answer to the question I've found most helpful — and most accurate — is simply: "Whatever I want."

I've founded companies in various fields that thrive, in part, due to the liberally educated minds who operate them. In tech, especially, the liberally educated soul has a certain pride of place in our hiring objectives. At Patmos, we've seen interns and entry-level applicants become six-figure earners in a matter of months. One is currently managing a nine-figure project. We've seen difficult problems solved that couldn't be fixed by a mere technician. And we've seen graduates from obscure liberal arts colleges drive a company to bootstrapped success much faster than its VC-funded competition.

Hiring graduates from places like Thomas Aquinas College (granted there are few places "like" TAC) is simply the best-kept secret in tech. The reason is simple: When you know how to think, there's no problem you can't solve, no conversation

you can't have, no skill you can't learn. Liberal education is the universal skeleton key to any technical endeavor.

At a job, one can (and should) learn new skills all the time. But a job isn't where one learns to think. That happens in youth — at home and at school.

Education is really an act of inculturation, for better or worse. And, as any founder will attest, culture can't be "taught" at work. You're either a fit, or you're not.

For great companies, hiring is principally an act of cultural initiation, of welcoming in like-minded fanatics. Peter Thiel reminds us of this in *Zero to One*: "Great companies are built by people who are all-in, who think the mission is worth sacrificing for. They're not normal — they're weirdly devoted to something most people don't yet understand."

"Hiring graduates from places like Thomas Aquinas College ... is simply the best-kept secret in tech."

Skills, certificates, training — all of that comes naturally "on the job." You'll always be able to get the next certification or learn the next software stack. And, to the extent you can think liberally, these acts of upskill will be the easiest thing in the world. So why waste your college years with a practical education when you could spend them becoming a fanatic for the real? That's whom I want to hire.

at least having the capability to open up the hood and understand what's going on.”

The Neural Network

As Jane (Neumayr '98) Nemcova sees it, there's a contradiction at the heart of today's technological revolution: While AI developers strive to replicate the human mind, much of modern higher education has stopped cultivating it.

“They treat the ingestion of information as an end in itself,” says Mrs. Nemcova, who has recently joined Ollang, the first agent-based AI platform for multimodal translation, and Innobo Labs, a 5G wearables company advancing simulation training in aviation and energy. “But the goal of learning isn't data absorption — it's intellectual independence. True education trains the mind to become its own high-functioning neural network.”

A pioneer in applied AI, Mrs. Nemcova has helped shape the field since its early days. She founded one of the first large-scale AI data-solutions companies, supporting many of today's leading products, served as managing director of Lionbridge AI, and later co-founded Veuu, Inc., a first-in-market AI fintech in healthcare. She also launched an early AI course at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies to help linguistics students navigate a rapidly changing industry. These experienc-

Patmos is a strange company. And Patmians are a strange people. We don't raise money in the most capital-intensive industry the world has ever seen – we just earn it. Where other technology companies pay employees to abort their progeny, Patmos bonuses ours for making more, and the bonus compounds the more kids one welcomes into the world. As most technocratic companies understand people to be “the product” (we all feel it!), Patmos has a diametrically opposed understanding: Tech, by nature, must be at the service of the human person. These peculiarities have propelled tremendous growth precisely because they resonate so deeply with something in our bones. We all long for freedom from technocracy.

In some ways, TAC grads are also accused of being “strange.” But their perceived strangeness is simply (and similarly) a consequence of their love of freedom amidst a college system built on manufacturing slaves – comfortable slaves, sure, nestled in the loving embrace of a fluorescently lit cubicle, providing “maximum value to shareholders” by working with “cross-functional teams,” “circling back” often. College these days creates cogs, fit for use ... then deletion.

But I don't want to hire a cog. I want to hire a person. People are worthy of respect. And by respect, we have to mean something very specific: the happy recognition that another (as agent) actualizes me (as patient). No matter who you are, what your background, how you did at work today ... you make me better just by existing in front of me.

es, she says, have only strengthened her conviction that a liberal education is the best preparation for the age of AI.

“Most universities train students into narrow vocational paths,” she notes. “That may provide short-term job options, but it doesn't build the kind of flexible, integrated reasoning that real innovation demands. Thomas Aquinas College does.”

She likens the College's curriculum of inquiry to a mental training regimen. “Just as going to the gym isn't about lifting weights but building strength, reading the *Odyssey* or *De Anima* isn't about recalling answers. It's about forming habits of attention, judgment, and discernment — the very faculties machines cannot imitate.”

A liberal education not only enables one to use technology wisely but also protects against being unconsciously shaped by it. “Machines and algorithms are only as sound as the logic of their makers,” she says. “A mind trained to grasp essence and universals can discern truth from mere output.”

That discernment is increasingly rare. “Popular chatbots may sound neutral, but they reflect the assumptions and biases of their creators. Every system is built on a so-called ‘ground truth,’ which often amounts to an average of public opinion. In a culture that mistakes consensus for truth, the only safeguard is the well-formed mind — one that seeks to know, not merely to process.”



Patmos CEO John Johnson meets with students on the California campus at last fall's job fair.

To the extent companies learn to treat employees as the transcendent, inexhaustible vessels of wonder they are, they will thrive as Patmos has. But for now, Patmos is one of very few oddities in the corporate tech world. And that makes the TAC grad, in all her oddness, a perfect fit for us. In a world that so drastically misses the mark on the simple truth of the human person, the sheer strangeness of sound anthropology begets a corporate superpower.

So, embrace the strange. You'll be normal in the next life. ❖

John Johnson is the founding CEO of Patmos Hosting and co-founder of the Albertus Magnus Institute.

That Spark

“In business, you need logic, but you also need creativity. That’s how you get breakthroughs. That’s how we’ve made some of the biggest leaps in technology and innovation,” says Mr. LaFave. “TAC fosters creativity and innovation, as well as logical thinking, because it trains you to think outside the box and ask those critical questions.”

Generative AI, which produces ostensibly novel text, images, and video, relies on existing datasets to create what are essentially artistic knockoffs. “There’s no kind of insight other than just a statistical, predictive one,” says Mrs. Nemcova. “Ultimately, there’s no intelligence truly there. It’s just assimilating potentially predictive elements” to fabricate derivative works.

“We all see it with AI-generated images, right?” asks Mr. LaFave. “Those are all just composites of what the machine has been trained on. That’s why it always has that bland, generic feel. There’s an element of composite imagery in human art, too, but it’s always going to be unique just by virtue of the uniqueness of each human person.”



**Jane (Neumayr '98)
Nemcova**
Strategic Advisor,
Ollang

“The most influential AI people are teaching their kids to study the liberal arts and languages because they know that’s the only way that you can strengthen your brain.”

A similar argument can be made about business: While LLMs can make practical suggestions, they must necessarily regurgitate others’ ideas, defaulting to the most common or popular. “Nothing is as bad as a bunch of synthesized information,” sighs Mr. Langley. “It’s like an encyclopedia: You’re not going to learn much from it. That’s why we don’t read textbooks at the College, because reading the words of history’s most disruptive thinkers — Copernicus, Newton, Einstein, or Jesus Himself — is so much richer than any digest. It teaches us how we can be disruptive ourselves.”

Like logic, innovation is akin to muscle, strengthened

through repeated use. “There’s something about the way we learned at the College that forced us to be creative,” recalls Mr. LaFave. “You’re sitting down and you’re trying to unpack this Shakespearean sonnet, and everyone seems to be going along the same trajectory, but there’s this doubt lingering in the back of your head. Then you put it out there: ‘Well, I interpret him going in this different direction. What do we all think about that?’ That spark can completely turn the conversation.”

Those practiced in the arts of creativity and conversation will be most likely to spur the innovative ideas that machines cannot. “If you’re trying to do something disruptive or creative, you’re not going to find that with ChatGPT,” says Mr. Langley. “GPT will come up with a faster horse, but it won’t come up with the car.”

Grasping Truth

“I am repeatedly struck by how our founders created an academic program that so well fulfills purposes they never intended,” says Dr. John Goyette, Thomas Aquinas College’s vice president for advancement. “When they drafted our founding document nearly 60 years ago, they had never heard the phrase ‘artificial intelligence,’ and the last thing on their minds was preparing students for an AI economy, but that’s precisely what they have done.”

The College’s founders set out to restore Catholic liberal education for its own sake, or, in the words of Founding President Dr. Ronald P. McArthur, for “grasping the truth about creation.” Any professional benefit that might accrue to future graduates was an added benefit. Indeed, the founders were fleeing long-gathering academic trends which held that higher education had to be “relevant” by catering to ideological fads, shirking the magisterial authority of the Church, and dispensing four years of job training.

“The Enlightenment reframed education as a means to productivity rather than a pursuit of wisdom,” says Mrs. Nemcova. “That shift, from forming persons to producing workers, has shaped our universities ever since.” She sees its culmination in the expensive, careerist models of today. “Many colleges promise job readiness but deliver skills that may expire before graduation. In the rush to automate, even learning itself is being outsourced — students turning in papers written by machines, and instructors using machines to evaluate them. It’s efficient, but it’s not education.”

“Looking back after being in the professional world for a number of years and starting my own company with a couple other TAC grads, we see just how valuable our education was,” says Mr. Langley. Adds Mr. LaFave, “At the College, we were fortunate enough to read the greatest minds of Western civilization. No matter how far AI advances, the value we get from studying Homer, Dante, Austen, or Plato will never diminish.” ❖

How Will Pope Leo Respond to the Challenge of AI?

by Rev. Wojciech Giertych, O.P.

Note: Rev. Wojciech Giertych, O.P., Theologian of the Papal Household, offered the following thoughts about artificial intelligence during his interview with Thomas Aquinas College, the rest of which appears on pp. 30-31.

The question of artificial intelligence is a theme that Pope Leo XIV has considered right from the beginning of his pontificate. He took his papal name from Pope Leo XIII, who wrote *Rerum Novarum* as a response to the social changes that resulted from the Industrial Revolution. Pope Leo is seeing a new revolution with artificial intelligence; he sees the need for the Church to react.

I think that Pope Leo XIII was about 60 years too late with *Rerum Novarum*. The Industrial Revolution called for changes, and had the Church come up with a response earlier, the influence of Marx in the world would have been much less.

With the revolution that we are having now with artificial intelligence, there will be something similar, and certain jobs will disappear. There's also a philosophical question about cognition. There's a moral question about making decisions on the basis of suggestions from a machine. There are ethical questions, and there are social questions regarding the repercussions in society. We can certainly say that all these issues are now hitting us with great velocity, and the changes are much quicker than they were in the 18th century.

So, it is good that Pope Leo has raised this issue for the Universal Church to consider.

I was in Poland when Communism crashed and when democracy and capitalism returned. It was not an easy process to move from a centralized economy, which was basically egalitarian: all people were poor, some a little bit richer than others. (Those who were more corrupt were richer.) There was a sense of stability which Communism gave, of social services, of working in the same company all your life until retirement. Suddenly, this order crashed and gave a chance for the development of

talents and for people who were repressed to become free and set up businesses and do something new.

Some followed up on this opportunity and were very successful, and so now there's a much bigger difference between the rich and the poor in Poland. But some didn't know how to fit into the changes, and often they become very critical. They now oppose democracy and the European Union, with authoritarian tendencies, which is basically a sort of a yearning for the stability of Communism, where Russia dictated everything. And, unfortunately, there are some priests who are supporting this kind of conservatism.

For the Church, it is important in the face of social changes not to side unequivocally with the dissatisfied, and the reading of artificial intelligence in many quarters is apocalyptic. There are certainly new changes which will bring with them dramas, but also new possibilities. The response of the Church must, on the one hand, be to see the new talents and, as Jesus told us, use the talents intelligently, with risk, creatively.

“Pope Leo is seeing a new revolution with Artificial Intelligence; he sees the need for the Church to react.”

On the other hand, the Church should also express some concerns for those people who fail to catch up and are lost in the process. We cannot stop the process. It is normal that, in history, there are developments of technology and new challenges, and this is coming. World society has to learn how to adapt.

The fact that Pope Leo has brought this up gives us hope the Church will not be 60 years too late this time. The Holy Father's call is a stimulating invitation to try to see what the Gospel suggests to us, what the Holy Spirit may be telling us, and how to react to these new challenges. ❖



Aquinas & Aristotle on AI & Angels

Excerpt from “The Mind and the Machine,”

a TAC podcast series by Dr. Michael Augros ('92)

What can Aquinas and Aristotle contribute to our discussion of artificial intelligence? Obviously, they never *spoke* about AI — having never heard of it. But they offer broad, foundational principles about the nature of intellect and sensation, and about nature and life.

Let’s begin with Aquinas’s observations concerning the simulation of human beings. It may surprise you that he had anything at all to say about that — after all, who in his day was simulating human beings in any convincing way?



Well, according to Christian and Jewish tradition, angels can appear to human beings — and in fact, can appear *as* human beings. Sometimes they appear in impressive, unmistakably godlike form — as in the case of the angel who appeared just after the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In his Gospel, Matthew describes the angel as sitting on the stone beside the tomb and wearing clothing, appearing in a generally human form (Matt. 28:1–4). But since his appearance is “like lightning” and he terrifies the guards, he clearly doesn’t look like an *ordinary* human being, either. So, angels can appear in a glorified version of the human form.

But they can also appear as ordinary human beings and sometimes walk among us unnoticed. In Genesis 18, the Lord Himself and two angels appear to Abraham in the form of three men, and even eat a meal with him, although Abraham knows they’re not really men.

The book of Tobit includes another such episode: Tobias finds a “man” who agrees to go with him to Media, but unbeknownst to him, the man is actually the angel Raphael. Eventually, Raphael reveals his true identity, saying, “I am Raphael, one of the seven holy angels who present the prayers of the saints and enter into the presence of the glory of the Lord. ... All these days I merely appeared to you and did not eat or drink, but you were seeing a vision” (Tobit 12:15–19).

Raphael is saying not only that he isn’t a human being, but also that he never really ate or drank — he only *appeared* to do so. According to Christian tradition, then, angels can *simulate* human beings and human actions. The bodies they assume don’t truly belong to them, but are physical manifestations produced for our benefit — so that we can, in some sense, see them, hear them, and interact with them.

One of the questions Aquinas raises about these assumed “bodies” of the angels is whether they can perform living acts — in other words, biological functions. He says, “With regard to what is common to both kinds of actions — the actions of living things and of nonliving things — the actions of life can be performed by the bodies assumed by angels. But not with regard to what is proper to living things, since the Philosopher [Aristotle] says in his book *On Sleeping and Waking* that an action belongs to the thing that has the corresponding power.”

The principles at work in this passage are applicable to artificial intelligence. Can AI perform the act of thinking or understanding? These are acts of living beings — of us. If there’s anything in such acts that’s *proper* to living beings, unique to them, then AI cannot perform them (supposing it’s nonliving). But whatever features are common to those acts and to the acts of nonliving things — those may, at least in principle, be possible for AI.

In the same article, Aquinas observes: “The act of sensing is entirely an action of life. So, in no way should it be said that angels ‘sense’ by means of the organs of their assumed bodies.

“According to Christian tradition, then, angels can simulate human beings and human actions. The bodies they assume don’t truly belong to them, but are physical manifestations produced for our benefit.”

Nonetheless, these organs are not formed to no purpose. For they’re formed not in order that something may be sensed by means of them, but to *indicate* through such organs the spiritual powers of the angels.”

Aquinas says here that sensing isn’t like walking or talking — which are living acts that also have some component in

common with nonliving things. No — he says, “The act of sensing is *entirely* an action of a living thing.” So that’s something we’ll want to explore further. If AI is not alive, then not only would it fail to truly think or understand — if those too are proper to life — but it wouldn’t even be capable of genuine sensation, except perhaps in some metaphorical sense.

Now, I think we have something to learn from Aquinas here, but we may also have something to add — or perhaps adjust — since, even if Aquinas is right that sensing proper is purely the action of a living thing, there seem to be many preparatory acts leading up to sensation that *can* be carried out by nonliving systems. Moreover, Aquinas adds, “Properly speaking, the angels do not speak through their assumed bodies, but rather something like speech occurs — namely, they form sounds in the air that resemble human voices.”

I take it he’s saying something like what we would say about a phone: if you speak to me over the phone, the phone isn’t really speaking — it’s simulating the sound of your speech. In a similar way, the body assumed by an angel doesn’t truly speak, but simulates speech to communicate what the angel has in mind.

So, although Aquinas never heard of artificial intelligence, he did believe that angels could produce convincing simulations of living human bodies and of human behavior — simulations so convincing that they were indistinguishable from real human beings by any outward sign.

Of course, the case of angels is very different from that of AI if AIs do not possess real intelligence, since angels *do* possess it. But Aquinas’s general distinction about what an assumed body

can and cannot do may still shed light on the AI question.

Whatever in a living action consists in some motion or outward behavior can, in principle, be performed by nonliving things. But whatever components of living actions involve something *proper* to life — something dependent on the soul and life of the agent — must be things impossible for nonliving things to do.

If cognitive acts fall into that latter category — as Aquinas suggests when he says that sensing is “entirely an act of life” —

“Can AI perform the act of thinking or understanding? These are acts of living beings — of us. If there’s anything in such acts that’s proper to living beings, unique to them, then AI cannot perform them.”

then understanding the nature of living things may help us see why AI cannot truly think or understand.

Even if AI someday produces humanoid robots that are outwardly indistinguishable from real human beings — in sound, appearance, movement, expression, problem-solving ability, and so on — still, if Aquinas is right, they would not be performing the living acts that these outward motions normally accompany and express. No more than did the bodies assumed by angels. ❖

The Mind
AND THE
MACHINE

Aquinas on AI
a TAC podcast series
with Dr. Michael Augros

thomasaquinas.edu/mind



How to Stop Students from Cheating with AI

Eliminate online classes, ban screens, and restore Socratic discussion as education's guiding model.

by Dr. John J. Goyette ('90)

This article originally appeared in the May 19, 2025, edition of the Wall Street Journal.

When I call on college freshmen to demonstrate one of Euclid's geometrical propositions on the classroom blackboard, I'm never sure what to expect. They could excel or fail, but this much is certain: No one is cheating. That's more than can typically be expected in academia these days.

Since OpenAI released ChatGPT in November 2022, the world of higher education has been turned upside down. Most of the pedagogical and assessment tools that have dominated college classrooms since at least the 19th century — and especially those that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic — are no longer effective.

Cheating is rampant. Students turn to generative artificial-intelligence chatbots to do their readings, complete their take-home exams and write their papers. A January 2023 sur-

“AI assistance can boost students' short-term performance, but it enervates long-term comprehension, especially after the digital crutches are taken away.”

vey from Study.com found that 89 percent of college students had used ChatGPT to complete a homework assignment. Nearly half admitted to using it on at-home tests or quizzes,

and 53 percent had turned in an AI-generated essay.

We're still in the early stages of the AI era, but the future for higher education looks bleak. Early research suggests what educators know intuitively: AI assistance can boost students' short-term performance, but it enervates long-term comprehension, especially after the digital crutches are taken away.

A student who aces a quiz without studying the material has learned nothing. The same is true for a student who completes an essay without performing research, contemplating the subject matter, refining and ordering arguments, or painstakingly choosing the exact words to express the right idea. These students fail not only to retain knowledge, but also to develop their capacities for creative and critical thinking. Even where AI usage doesn't cross obvious ethical lines — when it's used for taking notes or creating study guides, for example — it usually undermines learning.

Students' AI usage usually *does* cross ethical lines. Today's academic incentive structure rewards cheating and rarely punishes fraud or dishonesty. Such an environment destroys students' character formation, creating long-term consequences.

Despite their widespread use of AI chatbots, students don't want an education predicated on cheating. The Study.com survey found that 72 percent of college students would like to see ChatGPT banned from their campuses. They want a rigorous education, if only one were available to them.

So, what can be done? Cheating can be difficult to detect. Aging professors will always be a step behind students when it comes to manipulating technology. And even with the help of software to detect plagiarism or AI, it's difficult to spot

artificially generated content. And these tools can be unfair to students, since false positives abound.

It's time to take a step back from technology and return to pedagogical tools that have served educators for centuries. Start by eliminating online classes and banning screens in the classroom.

Colleges should also institute a more personal and in-person approach to assessment. Take-home exams, which were ripe for abuse long before AI, should be retired. Schools should instead administer in-class evaluations such as blue-book essays, oral exams and chalkboard demonstrations. Papers are too valuable to abandon entirely, but a clear policy that prohibits AI use and imposes serious consequences can reduce cheating.

“It’s time to take a step back from technology and return to pedagogical tools that have served educators for centuries.”

More important, colleges and universities must restore conversation to its position of prominence in the classroom. Any bot can take lecture notes. College students frequently don't even bother to attend classes anymore. Real conversations about perennial questions and ideas can make classes meaningful again.

Oral communication has for centuries been the guiding model for higher education. The Socratic seminar exposes students to rational discourse that actively engages the mind. Medieval universities tested their students through discussion and debate — this is the famous *disputatio* exemplified in the



writings of Thomas Aquinas. The University of Oxford's tutorial system, which focuses on small group discussions, is another remnant of this long tradition, placing reasoned discourse at the heart of a university education.

Some will object that such reforms would be inconvenient, maybe even

impossible. Classes would need to be considerably smaller, and professors would need to give students more individualized attention. All that is true, but at a time when elite schools have endowments worth billions of dollars, some college football coaches make eight-figure salaries, and tuition growth outpaces inflation, the resources are available if the will is there.

I have taught for 23 years at a college that embraces small classes built around Socratic discussions, while charging less for tuition than most other private schools. This model isn't only possible — it works.

AI has exposed a decline in higher education that has been under way for decades. Colleges increasingly focus on job training and credentials rather than intellectual growth for its own sake. Choose-your-own curricula, runaway grade inflation, and the popular notion of the four-year party are symptoms of the same problem. Students have no qualms about cheating, because as far as many of them can tell, college isn't about learning anyway.

Education is meant to liberate us from bias and ignorance. By hindering the development of students' critical faculties, AI is setting up future generations for the opposite. Technology has its place in higher education, but not at the expense of learning. Real students deserve a real education. ❖

Dr. John J. Goyette ('90) is the College's vice president for advancement.

“Nevertheless, Aquinas is Important”

An Interview with Rev. Wojciech Giertych, O.P.

Rev. Wojciech Giertych, O.P., Theologian of the Papal Household, is a longtime friend of Thomas Aquinas College. In 2011, he traveled to California to give the keynote address at the College's 40th Anniversary Gala. This fall, he came to the New England campus for the first time to preside over the Convocation ceremonies.

What are your responsibilities as the Theologian of the Papal Household?

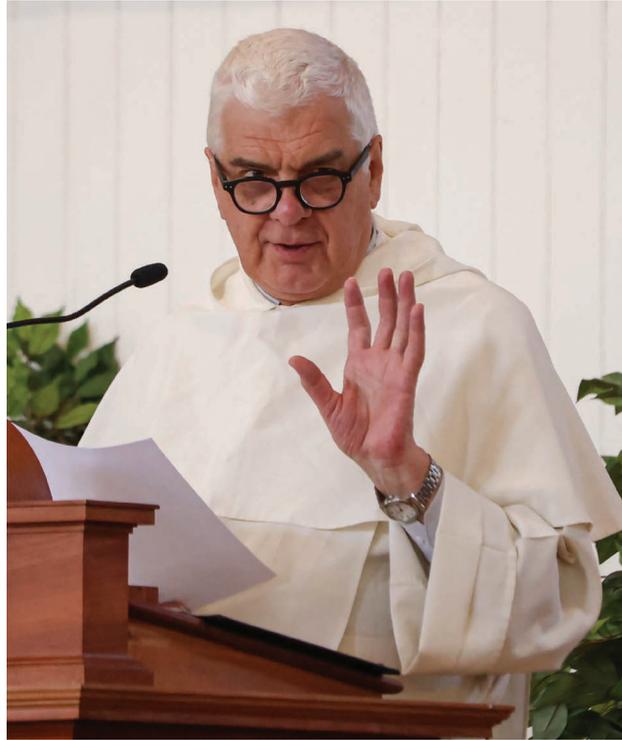
Well, that's an interesting question. I would be delighted to have an answer to it!

I am over 20 years at the job, and at the beginning I was very curious to know — is there some job description? But it turned out there is not. And I have looked it up in various Vatican documents, and there is no doubt that the Papal Theologian exists. But what he has to do, it's not clearly said.

Primarily, I review the discourses prepared for the Holy Father — well, not all the discourses, not the political ones, but the ones that have a theological content. Generally, I receive them beforehand. Since they are written by Catholics, there's not much there to change, but I can suggest some correction, some change, if something is confusing, imprecise. So, this is my regular work, and the reason why I am living in the Vatican, because these texts are sometimes prepared in the last moment.

For most of us, Pope Leo is still largely unknown. Is there anything in your experience that could give us a better sense of what to expect from his papacy?

I am told that he is a listener, and I gather that, in these first months, he is meeting people and listening, attentive to what people have to say before he makes his decisions and gives some clearer leadership in the Church. At the moment, he has entered in a more sort of traditional role. He's going to Castel Gandolfo. He is following the line of John Paul II and the



following popes, meeting with the crowds. He has shown these human gestures, but what is his project for the Church? Does he have it worked out in his mind?

When somebody is elected a pope, it comes as a surprise not only to the world, but to the individual as well. So maybe he needs time to reflect, to come up with something. That's why I think he is at the stage of listening and thinking, and so we don't know.

It has been 14 years since you came out to California for Thomas Aquinas College's 40th anniversary

dinner in 2011. How do you think the world and the Church's place in it have changed since then?

One by one, local churches across the world are falling into a crisis, while others are coming *out* of the crisis. God allows for these social changes, which impact the Church in its rooting in the world. And this is always an invitation to conversion, to a deeper focus on Christ, to a deeper opening to the grace of Christ. But how to respond? How to respond to these challenges in China, in Vietnam, or in Africa?

“Trends come and go, but Aquinas is so great that what he has to say is of great, enduring value.”

I am trying to follow my church in Poland, which, with the election of John Paul II, landed in a terrible spiritual pride. Well, years have passed, and now the crisis is attacking the Church in Poland with a decline in vocations and priests leaving the priesthood, with religious congregations not having vocations, with the youth turning away from the Church. Many of the clergy and the bishops think that the way to salvation comes through

tying themselves to a political party that is — for now, fortunately — out of power, but which has authoritarian inclinations and is totally corrupt, using an external veneer of Catholicism that some people don't see through.

The gluing of the Church to a given political party is disastrous, and so the Church has to go through a crisis in Poland. I think you are lucky in America that, even though many American Catholics generally are siding with the Republicans, having an American pope who is not a great fan of President Trump will help your church avoid the error of gluing the Church with the program of the Republican Party. The Church must see deeper. The Church must form people in an authentic life, a Christian life, personal life, family life, social life, political life. It's the interiority that has to be formed.

*“The renewed Thomism is a gift,
and a hunger for this is already out
there in the Church.”*

How is that achieved on a societal, rather than merely personal, level?

Catholics in Anglo-Saxon countries have primarily focused on profiting from the freedom that their societies provide to establish Catholic families, Catholic schools, Catholic colleges, Catholic parishes, Catholic dioceses, and to use the liberty to ensure that you can transmit the Faith in a serious way to the next generation.

This is what you are doing at Thomas Aquinas College. You have the liberty to do this without government intervention. In Europe, education is the monopoly of the state, and at every change of government, there are new ideas, changes of manuals and textbooks in the schools because it all has to be according to the current ideology. And often the clergy think that we have to win politically, so that we can impose our manuals on everybody. In America, you are reaching out to the faithful, ensuring that what you give them is deeper, is more profound, is more uplifting, is showing them the way to an authentic Catholicism.

Of course, each country has its difficulties. The social, political situation at times is slightly different, but nevertheless, I think the Church should focus less on winning the State first, and more on reaching out to people and forming them authentically. And I think this is the message of Vatican II. It's more important to use our liberty to ensure that the schools are authentic, that the teaching in the parish is true, and that the seminaries are really forming priests in the mind of Christ.

St. Thomas has always been the preeminent teacher in the Church. Now, in an era of both greater confusion and more powerful means of communication, how can the Church use

the teachings of St. Thomas to create the sort of formation you have in mind?

I remember, in my stupidity as a young Dominican student, I met a priest who had worked on a translation of St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa* into Polish. When I met him, in my stupidity, I said, “Well, Aquinas is not popular now. He's out of fashion.” This was in 1976. And he answered, “You know what's in fashion? Pornography. Nevertheless, Aquinas is important.”

Trends come and go, but Aquinas is so great that what he has to say is of great, enduring value. Now, I think that this approach of coming out to people, of being close to them — which Pope Francis seemed to further — is generating a backlash, a call for clearer teaching. And I think there will soon be a cry in the Church for speculative philosophy and theology, which helps you to understand, which gives you clear definitions, which helps you to name reality, and to name the reality of grace with precise terms.

So, Aquinas is returning to fashion?

We have already seen a certain return to Aquinas compared to what we had 30 years ago. There is a difference in respect to the neo-Thomism from the times of Leo XIII right up to Vatican II, which was more philosophical than theological.

Faith is not born out of rational arguments, but once faith is received in baptism and lived out, there is a need for intellectual structures that maintain the Faith, that explain it, that articulate it. The renewed Thomism is a gift, and a hunger for this is already out there in the Church. So, for us Dominicans, if we



are faithful to Aquinas, if we make the effort to study him and to present him in a way which is comprehensible to people of today, this is a great gift that we can give to the Church.

We Dominicans have gone through the 14th century, through the Renaissance period, through the Reformation, the Enlightenment, the 20th century, and we will go through the 21st century. Aquinas will always be with us. If we look to him, we can always find light to answer new problems and questions. ❖

Learning to Surrender

Remembering Jennifer (Danner '98) DellaCrosse 1975 – 2025



Wife, Mother of seven, Nurse, Veteran, Tireless friend, Champion of the Catholic Faith

“That’s how I met her,” recalls Ryan DellaCrosse of the day he first met his future bride, Jennifer (Danner ’98). “I met her in a fight.”

Having just discerned out of the seminary, Ryan encountered Jen at a Catholic young-adult event in Jacksonville, Florida, where the two tangled over a round of “Mafia,” the social-deduction party game. “Thomas Aquinas College sure trains its women how to argue,” he says, “because we got into it, fighting about a game.” Next thing he knew, the two were attending daily Mass and increasingly spending time together.

“This relationship is either going to be really good,” he remembers, “or horrible.”

Seventeen years and seven children later, Ryan now falls squarely on the “really good” side of the divide. “It was amazing. Everything was always amazing.”

Amazing, but not without hardship. This past

April, Ryan and the children bid farewell to Jen when her courageous, 21-month fight against brain cancer came to an end.

A loving wife, a devoted mother, a tireless friend, and a 20-year veteran of the U.S. Army, Jen lived an extraordinary life, defined by service and adventure. A larger-than-life ambassador for the Catholic faith, she set an example of faithful surrender that has inspired new devotion to a century-old novena — and left a mark on everyone she met.

Showing Up

“She just had this energy about her, this playfulness in her life and sparkle in her eyes,” notes Amy Drago. “She was always looking to banter, always looking to tease, always looking for an inside joke.”

Amy and her husband, Brian (’01) — now a member of the Thomas Aquinas College teaching faculty — first arrived on the California campus in



“She knew God was calling her to something, and she knew it was going to be OK for her, but she couldn’t see how it was going to be OK for Ryan and the kids.”

1997, when Brian, having already earned bachelor's and master's degrees in engineering at the University of Arizona, enrolled as a 24-year-old freshman. Older than all of Brian's classmates, and the only married couple among them, the newlyweds initially felt out of place. Jen, a senior and the College's student activities director, set out to change that.

"That first night, there was a dance, and the Virginia Reel started playing," Amy reminisces. "Now, I had never danced the Virginia Reel before, but all of a sudden, I hear this yell from the middle of the Commons. It's Jen, and she shouts, 'Amydragoo!' — Jen always ran people's first and last names together, like they were one word — 'Amydragoo! It's the Virginia Reel! Get over here!'"

Called out and crimson-faced, with the full student body now staring at her, Amy answered Jen's challenge, flinging herself headlong between the twin lines of laughing, clapping dancers. "I didn't know what I was doing, just moving with the music, when I spun around, and saw Jen, with this huge, playful smile on her face." The ice was broken, and the Dragoos were outsiders no longer. "Later on, she said to me, 'Amydragoo, that's when I knew we would be friends, when I saw you take it. I thought, we're going to be good friends.'"

When the Dragoos, who struggled with infertility throughout Brian's four years at the College, were blessed with the first of their six daughters — little Lucie, for whom their new TAC friends had prayed all that time — they asked "Jendanner" to serve as godmother. And 22 years later, "Aunt Jen," then caring for seven children of her own, would travel 800 miles to affix Lucie's second-lieutenant's pin at her Air Force ROTC Commissioning Ceremony.

"Jen showed up at pivotal moments," says Carrie Alexander ('98), whom the Danners honorarily adopted into the family six months after the classmates met on the first day of their freshman year. Jen and Carrie lived together for years after they graduated from the College; they were bridesmaids in each

"Jen was amazing before she came to TAC, but, when she left, there was a sophistication that she had. There was a deeper understanding of her faith."

other's weddings and godmothers to each other's firstborn. Throughout the years, they always prioritized being there when one gave birth to a baby, had to undergo surgery, or celebrated some family milestone.

"It didn't matter if she was carting six kids. It didn't matter," says Carrie. "Jen showed up. She prioritized the important things. She couldn't keep a cell phone. She couldn't keep

keys. The girl had no commitment to the material world. The only thing she cared about was her faith and the souls God put in her life."

"Gas on a Fire"

Born on Christmas Day, 1975, Jen was the oldest of Loree and Dennis Danner's six children, raised in Jefferson, Oregon. She was, as her husband puts it, "the most favorite of everybody, just an exceeeder in everything she did." As a child, she excelled in school, in making friends, and as a member of the high school softball team. "They put her in outfield, because she could throw harder than any human being I'd ever met in my life," Loree recounts. "She could catch that ball, and throw it all the way to home, before the runner would ever get there."



Jen with Amy and Lucie Dragoos at Lucie's 2023 Air Force ROTC Commissioning Ceremony

Success came readily, as did praise, without, it seems, going to her head. "She never cared about awards, even though she got a ton of them," Loree remarks. The faculty at Jefferson High School had an annual tradition of naming one senior as Student of the Year and, in 1994, there was little doubt who would take the prize. "No one had ever been voted by every single teacher," says the DellaCrosses' 15-year-old daughter, Ava, "but that year, they all voted for my mom, which is the first and only time that has ever happened."

With a perfect report card and the SATs and résumé to match, Jen had her pick of universities. A friend of the family introduced her to Thomas Aquinas College, which then — not even 25 years old and still lacking permanent buildings — attracted her through its rich spiritual life and rigorous curriculum. "She went down to visit TAC and saw this whole school in trailers," Ryan laughs. "And she was like, 'This is the school for me!'"

Jen immediately took to the College's spiritual and intellectual life, attending daily Mass and diving into classroom conversations with gusto. "She was eager to get involved and enlivened every discussion," says Dr. Paul O'Reilly, who taught her Freshman Mathematics course and now serves as

the College's president. But the rough and tumble of Socratic seminars brought about a humbling realization. "She loved it, but I remember her telling me, 'Mom, all of a sudden, I'm not the best,'" says Loree. "In high school, she was always the best student, but now she wasn't No. 1." She had to dig deeper, and work harder, to keep up.

For the Christian, every struggle is an opportunity to turn to God, and that's how Jen took the challenge posed by the College's integrated curriculum, especially Dr. O'Reilly's class on Euclidean geometry. "She had a habit of repeating conversations she would have with Jesus," says Amy Dragoo, re-enacting one of Jen's monologues: "I said, 'Oh Lord, help me. I don't know this proposition.' And Jesus would just say to me, 'Jendanner, you have to sit down! You got to trust Me. It will come!'"

This act of surrender marked the beginning of a pattern that would define the rest of her days. At an alumni event some 30 years later, Jen told Dr. O'Reilly how the College, in its own small way, helped prepare her for the closing chapter of her earthly life. "She said that the things she read at the College — Scripture, St. Thomas's discourse about the problem of evil, St. Augustine, and others — helped her deepen her appreciation for God's plan for her life. She also cited the example of so many people when she was a student, attending daily Mass on campus, the chaplains. Those are the things, she said, that gave her the foundation that allowed her to suffer well."

She was learning truths of the Faith she had already grasped with her heart. "Jen knew the emotional side of her faith. She knew that part from her childhood," Carrie explains. "The intellectual aspect of Catholicism is what Jen learned at TAC, and I think it changed her. I think it matured her faith. Jen was amazing before she came to TAC, but, when she left, there was a sophistication that she had. There was a deeper understanding of her faith. She left TAC a better person."

As Ryan observes, "It was something that took her from good to great. It was like putting gas on a fire."

Major Mom

How would she channel that fire? To what end should she direct such passion, such energy? At first, she wasn't sure.

"I think Jen had a hard time figuring out what God wanted her to do after graduating," says Amy. She tried her hand at teaching and various other jobs but struggled to find her place, until she divined her avocation. "She decided she wanted to be a nurse, and the easiest way to do that without a lot of debt was going into the Army." She enlisted on September 12, 2001 — the day after 9/11. Nursing, however, would have to wait. The Army detected in Jen an aptitude for intelligence work. She was sent to the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center in Monterey, California, for training in Mandarin Chinese, then assigned to an El Paso-based unit combatting international drug smuggling. "I could never understand what she was do-



ing there," Jen's mother, Loree, says. "She was a lover, not a fighter." Her adoptive sister saw the matter differently. "The military is less about fighting than about protecting and supporting," Carrie reflects. "And, to a certain extent, her military life was also a bit of missionary work, because she brought faith into every single thing she did.

Jen made people remember their faith. She made people find their faith, even in the military."

The work was grueling and rewarding in its own way, but less than she had hoped for. When it was time to re-enlist, she returned to her original dream of nursing. "So, she signed up to earn a master's in nursing at Jacksonville University in Florida," says Ryan. That's how the two would come to meet over that infamous game of "Mafia." The couple wed on November 3, 2007, at Jacksonville's Our Lady, Star of the Sea Church.

They were soon blessed with children: first Joseph, next Ava, then Vincent, Leo, Maria, Raphael, and Rose. As a mother, Jen "took free will seriously," says Carrie. "She would guide her children, give them what they would need to be successful,

"I hoped for miracles. We prayed. We wanted God to glorify Himself with this, but it never happened."

and then stand back and pray that they made the right choices. She had faith that they might make mistakes, but they could fix them. That's what she was like as a mom."

For Jen, parenting was another act of surrender. "Because she was so fearless, there was a sense she could do anything and fix anything," says Amy. "But once she started having kids, and there was so much outside of her control, that was a step toward surrender and getting to know God in a deeper way."

All the while, she continued her medical career with the U.S. Army, attaining the rank of major. She nursed veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the neurological unit at the Walter C. Reed Medical Center in Washington, D.C., before moving to Houston and, eventually, back to Jacksonville. Longing to incorporate the Church's teachings on marriage and family into her work, she became a certified Natural Family Planning instructor on the side. "It was kind of weird," Ryan quips, "because at that point, we had four kids, and clearly there was no planning going on in our house!"

In her third act as a medical practitioner, she got into hos-

pice care shortly after retiring from the Army in 2021. “Having worked at Walter Reed, she saw people at the end of life, and she wanted people to have that moment where they are at their most vulnerable, or they are lonely, to just feel loved and seen,” says Carrie. “The woman could not stop giving. She couldn’t stop,” Ryan adds. “Whenever she had a moment, she started thinking about other people, how she could help them, even with seven kids.”

Alas, her time as a hospice nurse would prove short-lived, albeit helpful for what would follow when, two years later, Jen was diagnosed with glioblastoma, a highly aggressive form of brain cancer.

It was Fourth of July Weekend, 2023. The DellaCrosses had just returned from an expedition in the Colorado wildernesses with some other families and a priest. When Jen awoke with headaches and, the next day, unable to walk, Ryan brought her to the emergency room, then headed home to care for the children. “Yeah, there’s a tumor,” she would later report back to him. “It’s really big.”

The Surrender Novena

“I hoped for miracles,” Ryan shares. “We prayed. We wanted God to glorify Himself with this, but it never happened.”

The DellaCrosses pursued every treatment available but knew a cure was unlikely. Only a quarter of glioblastoma patients live more than a year past their diagnosis, and only 5 percent survive for more than five. “Jen was not afraid of death. I

mean, come on, the woman’s been pregnant how many times?” Carrie asks. Nor was she daunted by the prospect of pain and suffering, which she saw as an opportunity to pray and sacrifice for others. “She was used to being limited in what she could eat and drink and physically do. She was also used to being uncomfortable. She offered it up every single day. She looked at it and thought, ‘Who is going to benefit from what I am suffering and what I am going to lose?’”

For Jen, the hardest part was knowing she would have to leave her family. “The only times she seemed scared to me in our conversations, it was because she just didn’t know what was going to happen to Ryan and the kids,” says Amy. “She knew God was calling her to something, and she knew it was going to be OK for her, but she couldn’t see how it was going to be OK for Ryan and the kids.”

In her time of helplessness, she turned to prayer.

As it happened, months before her diagnosis, on an ordinary yet overwhelming day, Jen scrolled through the Laudate app on her phone, looking for a prayer suitable to the moment. It was then that she discovered the Surrender Novena, created by Servant of God Dolindo Ruotolo, an Italian priest and contemporary of Padre Pio. The devotion emphasizes complete reliance on God and submission to His will. Each day’s brief utterance ends with this tenfold refrain: “O Jesus, I surrender myself to You, take care of everything.”

That prayer, which readied Jen to receive her diagnosis, would give her the peace to say goodbye to the family she cher-



The DellaCrosse family: Vincent, Ava, Jen (Danner '98), Ryan, Joseph, Maria, Rose, Raphael, and Leo



Jen with her mother, Loree Danner

ished. And Jen, incapable of receiving graces without passing them along, was determined to share them. She created a website, “The Surrender Novena Project” (surrendernovenaproject.com), encouraging this devotion and soliciting visitors’ prayer intentions.

“We’re conditioned to believe you have to do everything yourself. Your goal is independence. Sometimes God jolts you out of that illusion, so you can finally let Him take over,” Jen wrote on the website. “My jolt was cancer. Cancer forced me to go from being the nurse to being the patient, from the caregiver to the one who needed care. It was awkward. I didn’t know what to do. So, I sat in my bed and prayed. In that surrender, I found peace.”

“That’s all she wanted. She wanted people to come back to the Church and to live their faith.

That’s what she did, start to finish.”

Yet surrender is not a one-time decision. It’s a habit, strengthened through diligence and repetition. “Every time, every day,” Jen advised, “just put it back at the foot of the Cross and say, ‘Jesus, I know you’ve got this.’”

“She Taught us how to Die”

As her body began to fail her, and as she endured the pain of various treatments, Jen lived the last 21 months of her life to the fullest. She cared for her children, traveled with her family, and continued to show up for weddings, parties, baptisms, and other special events.

President O’Reilly approached her at the College’s 2024 Alumni Dinner. “She had all the visual signs of having had brain surgery, but she was still that smiling, friendly person,” he says. “My intention was to go over to her and try to say something comforting, but she kind of took control of the conversation. She wanted to know how I was doing, and how I was handling all the travel my job requires, and was I spending a lot of time

away from home? She was offering *me* consolation.”

That Alumni Dinner came at the beginning of a road trip — a “bucket-list item,” says Carrie — that she and Jen took up the Pacific Coast. “Almost every place we stopped, people would come up to her and say, ‘I’d like to pray with you,’” Carrie recalls. “And every time, she would stop everything that she was doing and, with complete joy on her face, would say, ‘I would love to do that.’ She would randomly be stopped by strangers. You could feel her faith.”

Ten days before Jen died, her mother came to be with the family in Jacksonville. “When she couldn’t talk any more — I think she knew what was going on, but she couldn’t communicate — I went up to her room and I got really close,” says Loree. “I said, ‘Jen, I’m praying,’ and she said, all of a sudden, ‘Pray ... too.’ Right up to the very end, that girl was praying, too.”

Jen’s last days, Ryan explains, were “a sign of her life,” equal parts worship and celebration, with dancing in the backyard and prayer in their bedroom, which had been decked out “like a chapel,” in an array of icons and relics. In her final moments, she lay there, surrounded by the husband and children she never wanted to leave, but whom she freely entrusted to the God she served. The room, her obituary reports, “could barely contain all the grace, love, laughter, memories. It was peaceful and beautiful — and so very Jen.”

For all the pain and heart-wrenching tragedy, Jen’s was a happy death, graced and unifying. “I think she taught us all how to die,” says Ryan. Or, as Carrie counters, “I think she taught us how to live.”

In just a few short months, there have been encouraging signs of Jen’s intercession: a fragrant aroma of flowers at her deathbed, a decayed backyard rosebush that suddenly bloomed back to life the day after her passing, and, most notably, word of family members, friends, and others returning to the Faith. “That’s all she wanted,” Carrie says. “She wanted people to come back to the Church and to live their faith. That’s what she did, start to finish.”

For her family and for many friends, who, like Jen, have had to learn to surrender, such signs are a hopeful consolation — a reminder that “every time, every day,” we must “put it back at the foot of the Cross and say, ‘Jesus, I know you’ve got this.’” ❖



IN MEMORIAM

Aggie (Zepeda '82) Laubacher

May 1

Sister of Andy ('79), Peggy (Caldwell '80), Luke ('84), Matt ('85), Tom ('85), Mark ('86), Mary Kate ('89), and Nick Zepeda ('90); mother of Charlie Laubacher ('17)

Barbara Brass Henkels

May 5

Former member of the Board of Governors

Caroline Norman

May 6

Mother-in-law of College Governor
Michael Grace

Margaret Mary Short

May 11

Mother of Cathy (McCarthy '77), Rev. Peter ('78), William ('80), Michael ('87), Margaret (Schmitt '90), Mary (Grimm '94), Nancy (Grimm '97). Grandmother of Thomas ('06), William ('09), Mary Rose ('11), Sr. Gianna Marie (Joan), SOLT ('15), Mark ('18), and Catherine ('19), and Gregory ('25) Short; Margaret (Lessard '22), and Michael Short ('28); Mary Brigid (Strader '04), Therese (Monnereau '05), Erin (Feeney '07), John ('11), Aileen (Steigerwald '14), and Liam McCarthy ('18); Madeline (Grimm '15), Benedict ('17), and Emma (Emrich '20) Schmitt; David ('26), Marya ('26), and Xavier Grimm ('27). Great-grandmother to Dominic Monnereau ('28)

Carol Ann Stoufer

May 30

Mother of Jeff ('00)

Judge Richard Anderson

May 31

Member of the President's Council and
St. Thérèse of Lisieux Legacy Society

James Michael Kasak

May 31

Father of Benjamin ('21), Rebekah (CA'24)
and Sarah (CA'28)

Victoire Aline Kelsey

June 1

Mother of Sean ('92), Matthew ('95),
and Jessica (Haggard '99); grandmother of
Thomas ('23) and Marge Kelsey ('24) and
Jack ('24), Gregory ('26), Patrick ('27),
and Colin Haggard ('29)

Zechariah Lee ('22)

June 13

Alumnus



*Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them.
May the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace.*

Daniel Joseph Hurley

June 14

Father of Sr. Elizabeth Marie, O.P. ('02)
and Rev. Michael Hurley, O.P. ('99)

Jackie Slay

July 7

Former College events coordinator

Barbara Gauthier

July 29

President's Council member

Alan Maurice Goldberg

September 17

Father of Sarah (Goldberg '07) Summe

John Peter Heffernan

September 17

Former member of
the Board of Governors

Patrick Walsh

October 21

Son of Tom ('83); brother of Andrew ('13),
Theresa ('13), Angela ('16), Rose ('20),
Nicholas ('21) and Liam ('22)

James Becher

October 26

Brother of Director of Financial Aid
Greg ('80) Becher

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STUDENT LIFE

CALIFORNIA

1. The Class of 2029 arrives on campus and enjoys an outdoor barbeque.
2. Some 1920s-themed fun ensues at the Sophomore-Freshman Welcome Dance.
3. Students workshop résumés and cover letters in the career center.
4. An elegant game of croquet takes place on the campus lawns.
5. Mother of Divine Grace homeschool program graduates reunite.
6. Classes compete for tug-of-war victory before the annual All-College Barbeque.
7. Freshmen serenade their peers at the Russian dance.





NEW ENGLAND

1. TAC parents and students reconnect at Alumni and Parent Day. 2. Freshmen head to the Connecticut River for the Junior-Freshman River Day. 3. Scarf-adorned students enjoy hot apple cider on a crisp fall day. 4. A panel of students addresses friends of the College during the Fall Seminar Weekend. 5. The New England community honors Our Lady for a candlelit Marian Holy Hour. 6. Medieval mirth abounds at the Sherwood Forest-themed Sophomore-Freshman Dance. 7. Students slip, slide, and soak in suds after their annual class tug-of-war match.





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