



THOMAS AQUINAS COLLEGE NEWSLETTER

COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE: THE THOMAS FIRE

VOLUME 46, ISSUE 1

Grateful but Grieving

Thomas Aquinas College Survives Historic Fire that Bears its Name

When it comes to naming wildfires, firefighters normally choose a title that references the fire's point of origin. So when the largest blaze in California's recorded history erupted just half a mile from Thomas Aquinas College on the evening of December 4, 2017, first responders dubbed the inferno "Thomas" — a tribute to the campus that the flames taunted mercilessly but, by God's grace and through the work of U.S. Forest Service firefighters, mostly spared.

"There was a moment late that night when the campus was literally surrounded by flames," recalls President Michael F. McLean. "Giant embers rained down from every direction. It was a historic, once-in-a-lifetime event that we are grateful to have come through safely, with no serious injuries and our buildings intact."

The fire began on the last Monday of the fall semester, as students were leaving dinner in St. Joseph Commons and upperclassmen were preparing for the evening's seminars. The initial outbreak occurred at about 6:28 p.m. The flames — driven by easterly Santa Ana winds with gusts of up to 60 miles per hour — spread with alarming speed, consuming as much as one acre per second.

Alert to the danger, College officials immediately evacuated the campus. Students quickly made their way to Sacred Heart Church in neighboring Ventura, where they were met by members of the faculty and Board of Governors, parents, and friends of the College. "It was heart-



Two days after the Thomas Fire encircled Thomas Aquinas College, a cloud of smoke hangs over the campus as nearby communities continue to burn.

ening to see how quickly we were able to find places for more than 300 students to stay," says Assistant Dean Christopher Decaen. "There were so many generous offers of help."

A few hearty souls remained on campus: Dr. McLean and his wife, Lynda; Facilities Manager Clark Tulberg; Operations Supervisor Pierre Rioux; Janitorial Maintenance Supervisor Andrew Carey; Landscape Assistant Ben Coughlin; and chaplain Rev. Robert Marczewski. Before long the firefighters arrived and began a night-long battle with the flames. At 3:30 a.m., fearing they might lose the campus, they moved the College staff to the athletic fields, sprinklers running at full blast around them.

By morning, after nearly all the brush had burned and the fire moved westward, it became clear that the campus

would survive. "The firefighters were truly heroic," says Dr. McLean. "Thanks to their efforts, the flames, amazingly — maybe even miraculously — never reached any of our major structures."

Others, including several alumni and friends of the College, were less fortunate. Over the course of nearly six weeks, the Thomas Fire ravaged more than 280,000 acres, destroying nearly 1,100 structures, and giving rise to the Montecito mudslides that later killed 21 people, including a good friend of the College, Roy Rohter. (See "In Memoriam," page 10.)

On campus, the recovery began as soon as the flames receded. Initially College officials sought to hold final examinations, as originally scheduled, during the second week of December. "Our use of the Discussion Method in the classroom makes finals especially important for us,"

explains Dean John Goyette. "They are particularly so for our quieter students, giving them a chance to demonstrate their mastery of the material." But with no electrical power, the road to campus being closed, and students housed far and wide, it soon became clear that the College would need to postpone finals until the start of the next semester.

The challenge was keeping students informed, as the fire had left the campus not only without electricity, but also with no phone service or email access. Regular updates on the College website, promoted via social media, became the primary method of communication, along with an emergency Gmail account and the Assistant Dean's cellular phone. Tutors, meanwhile, scrambled to assemble an electronic database of course texts so that students could access their readings remotely.

For the next month, workers from the College's facilities crew and an external recovery company raced to ready the campus — purifying the air in the buildings, cleaning soot from roofs and walls, replenishing the refrigerators in the dining commons — in time for the next semester. "Our postponed finals went off without a hitch, and the second semester is now successfully under way," says Dr. McLean. "There is still much recovery work to be done, but we are thankful to God to have emerged from this tragedy relatively unscathed. We continue to grieve and pray for those who have lost so much."

Road to Recovery

Friends and Benefactors Step up to Support College in its Hour of Need

In the immediate aftermath of the Thomas Fire, it was evident that damage to the campus of Thomas Aquinas College, although far less than what so many others had experienced, would be significant. The fire destroyed an estimated 100 trees on campus and ruined more than 4,000 feet of perimeter fencing. The College also lost two storage sheds, extensive landscaping, and some 100 pounds of refrigerated food in its kitchen. Add in lost productivity and recovery expenses — emergency power generation, air purification, and security and clean-up costs — and the total price tag exceeds \$3 million.

"Given our size and budget, those costs would have been a challenge for us," says President Michael F. McLean, who notes that the College's Annual Fund must raise \$5 million a year for financial aid costs alone. "But we were blessed. Our insurance coverage proved largely up to the task of meeting our needs, and in the few places that it fell short, our friends more



Before-and-after photos of the College's Lourdes Grotto: The Thomas Fire destroyed most of the groundcover and badly charred the surrounding trees, which now must be replaced.

than helped make up the difference."

Among them was the Dan Murphy Foundation, a longtime benefactor of the College that, most notably, in 2006 made the lead gift for the construction of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel. In March, the Foundation awarded the College a \$511,000 grant to replace trees and irrigation surrounding the campus, especially its lower portion, where the damage is most severe and where the risk of falling, fire-weakened trees has deprived students of praying at the walkable Stations of the Cross and Lourdes Grotto. "Because of



the Dan Murphy Foundation's tremendous generosity, this beautiful, beloved portion of our campus will soon be available to us again," says Dr. McLean.

Looking to the future, the Trustees of the Edwin L. Wiegand Trust of Reno, Nevada, have supported a grant to protect and preserve Thomas Aquinas College going forward. The Wiegand Trust has awarded the college a \$370,000 grant to purchase a backup power system for St. Joseph Commons, which houses the kitchen and dining room. The new equipment will ensure that in an emergency like

the Thomas Fire — during which electricity and road access to the campus were curtailed for several days — students will be well-fed, and refrigerated food will not go to waste.

Then there are the hundreds of donations from members of the Board of Governors, alumni, parents, and other friends of the College — totaling more than \$300,000 — that arrived during the weeks following the fire's first night. "The rush of donations was astounding," says Dr. McLean. "Many of the gifts came from first-time benefactors, people with little or no connection to the College who learned about us from news reports and were eager to help. Many of the other gifts came from longtime friends who had recently made donations, but whose hearts were stirred to give again. We are profoundly grateful to all the kind people whose generosity, during a time of great stress and uncertainty, was a tangible reminder of God's unceasing providence."

From the Desk of the President

After the Fire, Prayers and Gratitude

Thomas Aquinas College has survived an event which gives new meaning to the words of St. James: “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire ...” (James 3:5). Overnight on December 4, those of us on campus witnessed in the Thomas Fire, and in the powerful Santa Ana winds, awesome forces of nature and the awesome power of nature’s God. At the fire’s height here, the campus was surrounded by wind-driven flames and was showered by wind-driven embers and burning vegetation. It seemed apparent that at least some of our facilities would be seriously damaged or destroyed.

Overnight on December 4, and in the days following, those of us on campus and in the surrounding communities also witnessed the planning, tactics, and courage of numerous firefighters from units all around California, firefighters who stood their ground in the face of the blaze and protected our campus and our facilities as well as persons and property throughout Ventura and Santa Barbara counties. A tour of the campus now testifies to the fire’s destructive power and to the threat it posed to so much of what we hold dear at the College. It testifies, too, to the skill and heroism of those firefighters.

“A tour of the campus now testifies to the fire’s destructive power and to the threat it posed to so much of what we hold dear at the College. It testifies, too, to the skill and heroism of those firefighters.”

That the College survived the Thomas Fire is due to the mercy and beneficence of Almighty God; to the firefighters whose courage and competence were extraordinary to us, ordinary to them; to those faculty and staff who so carefully and skillfully organized the evacuation; to the students who executed our evacuation plan promptly and prudently; to those faculty and staff who stayed behind and did what they could, often at some danger to themselves, to assist the firefighters



President Michael F. McLean surveys the damage to campus from its charred eastern hillside.

where they were able; and to those faculty, staff, Board members, parents, and friends who welcomed our evacuees into their homes. Nor can we forget those parents who suffered and worried and prayed from afar. Finally, we cannot forget those who designed and built this campus in ways which make our buildings resistant to fire and those who had the foresight to ensure that we have an infrastructure of water, generators, pumps, and hydrants, which goes largely unnoticed and unappreciated in normal times, but is the difference between catastrophe and survival when the chips are down.

Our work of putting the campus back together has been greatly assisted by all of those who generously stepped up on short notice and contributed to our fire recovery fund. We were assisted, too, by our insurance carrier, which reimbursed

us for clean-up and remediation expenses of over \$2.7 million; by the Edwin L. Wiegand Trust, which donated \$370,000 for the purchase of a backup power system for St. Joseph Commons in the event of future outages; and by the Dan Murphy Foundation, which contributed \$511,000 toward the renovation of damaged vegetation on the campus perimeter and in the area surrounding the Hacienda.

The Thomas Fire eventually burned nearly 300,000 acres and became the largest wildfire in California’s recorded history. Many lost property and homes in the fire, including some of our neighbors and some who are part of the Thomas Aquinas College community. A young Cal Fire Engineer, Cory Iverson, lost his life fighting the fire in the hills near Fillmore. We will continue to offer prayers for the repose of Cory’s soul and for con-

solation for his family and friends; prayers of gratitude for those who helped save the College and so much of the surrounding area; and we will continue to offer prayers of petition for those who suffered more than we.

IN MEMORIAM

Cory Iverson
1985–2017

Fire apparatus engineer with Cal Fire’s San Diego unit, who gave his life while battling the flames outside of Fillmore

“For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it.”
– Luke 9:24

Good Neighbors

Tragedy Brings Out the Best in Surrounding Community

In the early days of the Thomas Fire, Jacob Coke — general manager for Bon Appétit Management Company, which operates food services at the College — returned to find his evacuated home had been looted, robbed of all valuables and Christmas presents. Fearing a spoiled Christmas for the Coke children, the College’s personnel assistant, Yolanda Rivera, put together a crowdfunding campaign. In a little more than a week, the campaign raised more than \$7,000 from Mr. Coke’s colleagues at Bon Appétit and the College, as well as many alumni who remember him fondly. In the above picture, Mrs. Rivera can be seeing showing Mr. Coke the results of the campaign. He was overwhelmed by his friends’ generosity!



On December 8, as Thomas Aquinas College was beginning to clean up after the Thomas Fire, Admissions Director Jon Daly attempted to purchase 20 burritos at Garden Market for the campus cleaning crew — a favorite Santa Paula establishment which the College’s students, faculty, and staff have frequented for years. Mr. Daly was not able to pay for the order, though, because when the market’s crew learned that he was bringing the burritos to the College’s recovery workers, they refused to let him pay — insisting that he accept the delicious meal free of charge. “On behalf of all those who were so well and generously fed that day, we offer our warmest thanks to our friends at Garden Market,” said Mr. Daly. “We are blessed to call you neighbors!”



Terror, Hope ... and Faith

Firsthand Reflections of Those who Remained on Campus

Although the Thomas Fire ravaged parts of Southern California for nearly six weeks, on the campus of Thomas Aquinas College, the inferno came, and passed, within the course of a single night: December 4, 2017. The fire began in the evening, after most of the faculty and staff had gone home for the day; and due to the proximity of the flames and the intensity of the winds, students were evacuated within minutes. Thus, only seven members of the community stayed on campus that harrowing night, and — with the road to campus shut down — they remained there for the next several days. Below are some of their observations.

“Like a Flaming Waterfall”

Clark Tulberg

Facilities Manager

I was having dinner with my family when Pete Rioux called to tell me there was a fire in Steckel Park. I was on the road in maybe 10 minutes, and when I passed Steckel Park, it was already lined with fire trucks. I stopped to ask the fire chief if they wanted us to shelter in place or to evacuate the campus. He said there was no evacuation order, but he suggested we leave. When I got to campus and passed that message on to President McLean, he agreed right away.

All night there were flare-ups on the ridge overlooking the campus, but the wind kept pushing them back. Once the flames got a toehold on this side, though, in no time the whole mountainside was on fire. The wind was blowing huge plumes of flame and ash in every which way. At some points the fire looked like a flaming waterfall, and other times like a volcano. Every once in a while I would run through the sprinklers just to cool myself off, and my beard would start to sizzle.

“At some points the fire looked like a flaming waterfall, and other times like a volcano.”

— Clark Tulberg, facilities manager

Terrified ... Yet Confident

Lynda McLean

Wife of President Michael F. McLean

Michael and I were in our on-campus home when we got word that a fire had started. We headed up to the Commons, where the students were gathered, preparing to evacuate. It was never a thought in my head that I would leave: As the captain of the ship, Michael was determined to stay, and I did not want to be separated from him. We wanted to see what was happening, to help out in any way we could to make sure the College survived.

We next went to the patio behind St. Gladys Hall to check on the progress of the fire, and then headed to the administration building. It was dark, and as I was crossing in front of the Chapel I missed a step and crushed my foot, breaking my ankle! Someone was able to get me crutches from the nurse’s office, but that was the end of my helping in any way.



Standing on the very athletic field where they waited out the worst hours of the Thomas Fire: Operations Supervisor Pierre Rioux, President Michael and Lynda McLean, Facilities Manager Clark Tulberg, Landscape Assistant Ben Coughlin, Chaplain Rev. Robert Marczewski, and Janitorial Maintenance Supervisor Andrew Carey

I became a burden instead — the only injury sustained on campus during the entire fire!

We began the night in Michael’s office, but were moved to the athletic fields at about 3:30 a.m. We spent the rest of the night in the car, watching the fire on the mountains all around us. Right at the edge of our road, trees were going up in flames. It was terrifying and yet all through it I felt fairly confident that the school would be safe.

The Search for Father

Andrew Carey

Janitorial Maintenance Supervisor

It was the middle of the night, and we were all on the athletic field, with the fire closing in around the campus. It was raining fire. And then Clark rolls up in his car and says, “Hey, we don’t know where Fr. Marczewski is!”

So we drove up the fire road by St. Peter and Paul’s Hall, and I ran in to look for him. Even the air *inside* the building was all smoke at this point. I went to Father’s apartment, but couldn’t find him anywhere. So I went back outside, and that’s when we noticed a chair burning right outside the fire escape of St. Junipero Serra Hall, the flames licking up on the door, which was charred black. So Clark and I moved the chair and stamped out whatever fire was there. We then spotted another fire in the bushes beside St. Katherine’s and stamped that out, too.

Eventually we ended up back at the athletic field, still unable to find Father, hoping that maybe he had evacuated. And then, suddenly, Fr. Marczewski comes strolling onto the fields, walking on the path from the library! It turns out he had gone to the Chapel to consume the Eucharist, just in case. We were so relieved!

“Trust in God Alone”

Rev. Robert Marczewski

Chaplain

After everybody was evacuated, things seemed peaceful on campus, so I went to bed. I woke up at about 3:00 a.m. and saw everything on fire around us. I got concerned, and decided to go to the Chapel

to consume the Blessed Sacrament. While I was there at the altar, the force of the wind and fire was flipping the Chapel’s big, heavy bronze doors open and closed. It was something to see!

Eventually I made it back to the soccer field, where everybody else was, and we just stayed there. There was a sense of humility, and a sense of helplessness. You just had to wait. And that part was a valuable experience, a reminder of something we teach and try to live by: Trust in God alone. He is in charge, and He brings good out of evil, even evil we cannot explain or understand.

The next morning the Blessed Sacrament was consecrated and reserved again in the tabernacle. And over the next week, when it was just the few of us on campus, we had Mass in the Chapel every day.

That was pretty much my experience of the fire — the sense of humility and mystery. No insurance, no fireman can give you safety. Ultimately it comes only from God.

Heroic Efforts

Pierre Rioux

Operations Supervisor

The fire trucks came to campus right away, around 10 or 15 minutes after we first saw the fire. At least some seemed to stay here all night long, maybe five or six U.S. Forest Service trucks and 30 to 40 firefighters.

Often times when there was a flare-up or fire, a truck would drive over there very quickly, and the firefighters would work to put it out. They put out one by the guest trailers, and another by the oak tree between St. Bernard’s and St. Katherine’s. There was also a very brilliant, very visible fire that broke out in front of St. Joseph Commons, by the coffee shop, and they took care of that one, too.

Even after the fire had passed us by, the firefighters kept coming by campus, checking for spot fires, burning embers, things like that. Any one of those small fires could easily have spread had they not been extinguished. I think that, with divine assistance, the firefighters certainly saved the campus.

A Celebratory Feast

Ben Coughlin

Landscape Assistant

We brought a small refrigerator into the faculty building, where we were staying, and filled it up with food from the Commons. Thankfully, the kitchen crew had just prepped dozens of tri-tip steaks, so we had steak dinners every night.

I didn’t work on Friday because it was the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. Instead I spent the day preparing for a big feast that night. I cooked up some steaks and fried potatoes, plus mushrooms and some other vegetables. There was a lot of heavy cream in the kitchen that I knew would need to be thrown out, so I made a triple batch of truffle loaf — chocolate mousse with raspberry sauce — for dessert. Dr. McLean invoked presidential privilege and authorized us to get a couple of bottles of wine and some port from the wine cellar.

We gathered in the Commons, in the President’s Dining Room, for a dinner that, at first, was going to be only in honor of the feast day. But it ended up being an end-of-the-ordeal meal, too, because the road opened up the next morning. It was a real celebration.

“I was also, from the beginning, very impressed with the dedication of the members of our own staff who stayed to protect our campus. They knew that there were things they could do to help, which they did, with no questions asked.”

— Michael F. McLean, president

Confidence Well Founded

Michael F. McLean

President

When the embers were blowing, and the burning branches were raining down onto the field, and the wind was ferocious, I just thought, “It will be amazing if we get through this without a loss of property.”

On the other hand, I also watched the fire trucks come in, and I saw the professionalism in the firefighters’ approach. They were obviously well trained, and they proved to be well-prepared for whatever circumstances arose. I had a lot of confidence in them, and it turned out to be well founded.

I was also, from the beginning, very impressed with the dedication of the members of our own staff who stayed to protect our campus. They knew that there were things they could do to help, which they did, with no questions asked. They worked hard to make sure that the fire didn’t re-assert itself and do any further damage, and then they worked hard to try to put things back together.

I was edified by their performance, by their dedication to the College. They worked around the clock for that whole week, and their efforts were extraordinary.

Abundance of Grace

College Buoyed by Prayers & Support During Thomas Fire

Throughout the Thomas Fire, members of the College community were heartened by the countless prayers and offers of help that came from all quarters — including Twitter. Below are just a sampling of many gracious and generous tweets.



Franciscan U
@FranciscanU

Follow

Our prayers are with you all and for the preservation of your beautiful campus.

May Almighty God, through the intercession of his most Blessed Mother and St. Thomas Aquinas, preserve your campus and protect all those working so hard to control the fires.

8:03 AM - 5 Dec 2017

16 Retweets 63 Likes



 2  16  63



Tom McArdle
@MacArdghall

Follow

Acted at the first sign of danger - proving TAC is smart not just academically!

ThomasAquinasCollege @TACollege

*** FIRE UPDATE ***

The precautionary evacuation of campus is complete, and everyone is safe, but the #ThomasFire rages on. St. Thomas Aquinas, pray for us!

3:28 PM - 5 Dec 2017



Caroline
@AnchorRoad

Follow


Praying so hard right now. I heard about the #ThomasFire right after it started because I'm an alumna of @TACollege. I have many friends in the area and many friends whose children attend there. Unbelievable how it has grown. Please pray for all affected & the firefighters, esp.

6:36 AM - 5 Dec 2017

2 Retweets 4 Likes



  2  4




lumasimms
@lumasimmsEPPC




Follow

My daughter attends @TACollege please pray for her and all the students, staff, and faculty. Pray also for all the buildings on campus.

8:48 PM - 4 Dec 2017

5 Retweets 25 Likes



 3  5  25



Pater Edmund
@sancrucensis

Follow

Forest fire near my Alma Mater @TACollege. My little brother, a junior, was evacuated with the rest of the students.



11:14 AM - 5 Dec 2017

1 Retweet 3 Likes



  1  3



GrottoNetwork
@GrottoNetwork

Follow

Join us in praying for the safety of the Ventura County community, especially those evacuating @TACollege tonight. #GrottoPrays #ThomasFire (📷 = @ABC7)



8:25 PM - 4 Dec 2017

145 Retweets 203 Likes



  145  203



Lisa VanDamme
@lisavandamme

Follow

We have my daughter, a TAC student, and two of her friends safe at our house in Orange County, and we are happy to take many more. TAC community please reach out if we can be of help. #ThomasFire @TACollege

8:57 AM - 5 Dec 2017 from Aliso Viejo, CA

1 Retweet 4 Likes



  1  4



Michael Barber
@MichaelPBarber

Follow

Praying for all the good people at @TACollege This is very frightening. Please be careful. We need you folks.

12:41 PM - 5 Dec 2017

7 Retweets 14 Likes



  7  14



Catholic News Agency
@cnslive

Follow

Praying for the students, faculty and staff @TACollege. #ThomasFire

8:35 PM - 4 Dec 2017

32 Retweets 97 Likes



 3  32  97



Laura Roland
@LauraKRoland

Follow


Humbled by the prayers from family, friends, colleagues and complete strangers for my son and his @TACollege community. While I rejoice that he is well, I am heartbroken at the devastation their neighbors in Ojai and Santa Paula have endured. #thomasfire

11:37 PM - 5 Dec 2017

4 Likes



   4



Maria Immaculata
@VoluntasDeiFiat




Follow

Deo gratias!!!! Prayed, praying, will pray! Thanks for the update beloved alma mater

ThomasAquinasCollege @TACollege

*** THOMASFIRE UPDATE ***

4:31 PM - 5 Dec 2017



Katrina Trinko
@KatrinaTrinko

Follow

Please keep the Ventura, Calif. area & @TACollege in your prayers...unbelievable how horrible this fire is.



Ventura County wildfire destroys more homes, reaches Pac...
A fast-moving, wind-fueled brush fire has burned about 50,000 acres in Ventura County, officials said.
latimes.com

1:06 PM - 5 Dec 2017

15 Retweets 44 Likes



 1  15  44



Benedictine College
@BenedictineKS

Follow

Thoughts and prayers are with those affected by recent fires and natural disasters, including @TACollege.

10:18 AM - 5 Dec 2017

6 Retweets 28 Likes



 1  6  28



Mairead McArdle
@JohnsonHidy

Follow

#Thomasfire rages only five or so miles away from my Alma mater, @TACollege #CaliforniaWildfires



7:28 AM - 5 Dec 2017

8 Retweets 15 Likes



 1  8  15



Lauretta Brown
@LaurettaBrown6

Follow

Please say a prayer for the safety of students and faculty at my alma mater @TACollege and all those in the area

5:22 AM - 5 Dec 2017

3 Retweets 5 Likes



  3  5



WY Catholic College
@WYOCathCollege

Follow

Please keep the students, faculty, and staff of @TACollege in your prayers today, as the #ThomasFire rages around them.

7:29 AM - 5 Dec 2017

4 Retweets 19 Likes



  4  19



Biola University
@biolau

Follow

Please join us in praying for those impacted by the fires currently sweeping Southern California, including our friends at @TACollege. #ThomasFire #RyeFire #CreekFire

5:34 PM - 5 Dec 2017

15 Retweets 69 Likes



  15  69

“All the Things of this World Will Pass Away”

Students Share their Memories of the Thomas Fire

By Thomas Baker (’20)

I first saw the fire shortly after I finished eating. I was sitting at a table in the Commons when I saw people running to look out the windows. At first I suspected it was nothing of interest, and didn’t bother getting up. But as more and more people gathered, my curiosity won me over, and I hurried to the window. I knew what was happening as soon as I saw the orange smoke. I started to wonder whether the fire department would get to campus soon enough to save the College, and whether there were enough cars to evacuate everybody.

With the courier vehicles and students’ cars, we all evacuated to a church in Ventura. From there, I joined a small group that went to stay with the family of Ryan Kielas (’19) in Ventura. At this point, everything seemed safe. We were playing a card game when one of the girls in my group looked out the window.

“Hey guys,” she said, “take a look outside!”

All along the horizon, clouds of glowing, orange smoke rose into the sky. It didn’t look good. We thought we would wait and see how it progressed, but it only got worse with time. When we started to see towering flames, we decided to leave. The Kielas family had friends living 50 miles south in Malibu, so we all went to stay with them. We arrived a little after midnight. Even from so far away, we could still see a faint orange glow to the north.

The next day we saw on the news that homes in Ventura were burning, and that the fire was still raging with 0 percent containment. Later that day, it was at 1 percent. (I think that was because the flames had burned all the way to the ocean.) We kept checking for updates on the state of the College and texting our friends to make sure they were safe. A lot of rumors were going around, and someone mistakenly reported that our chaplain’s house had burned down. It was hard to tell the facts from fiction.

After a couple of days, when the Kielas’ neighborhood was no longer in danger, we all headed back. The air quality was so bad that we needed masks, but thankfully their house was unaffected. We had heard by this time that the College was safe, so our main remaining concern became studying for finals. The news that exams were canceled came soon after that, and on Saturday the campus opened for students to retrieve their belongings. I then contacted the airline and had my reservation for my flight home to Colorado switched to that evening. I arrived home that night, safe and with a crazy story to share!

My experience of the Thomas Fire gave me a lot to be grateful for. I’m grateful for the hospitality of the families in whose houses I stayed. I’m grateful for the friends with whom I spent the days of evacuation. I’m grateful for the bravery of the firefighters who fought to protect the College and stop the fire. But most of all, I’m grateful for God’s divine providence, through which the students and the College were protected during such a disaster. May God continue to protect and bless Thomas Aquinas College as He has always done!



Evacuees: Joe Daly (’19), Ryan Kielas (’19), Erica Johnson (’21), Maria Gilicinski (’19), Claire Kielas, Thomas Baker (’20), and Matthew Van Hecke (’18)

By Amanda Van Der Linden (’18)

I was in the Chapel, sitting in the choir loft for Benediction, when I heard the bells begin to toll. My first thought was, “That’s strange ... I thought we only rang the Chapel bells before Mass. Maybe there’s a new policy?”

Seconds later, I remembered. Ringing the bells is also the signal that there is an emergency. I went down the stairs and talked to the student who was doing the ringing; he told me that there was a fire threatening campus and that everyone was to meet in St. Joseph Commons. Coming out of the Chapel, I could see the flames coming over the hill.

It was so sudden — one moment I’m spending some time in the Chapel before seminar, and the next I’m running to the Commons, running to my dorm to grab a few essentials (including my laptop with all my thesis work on it and a sleeping bag), and then anxiously awaiting to hear the evacuation plan.

Providentially, I happened to be borrowing my mom’s car at that time because I was planning to drive to a job interview that weekend a few towns over. Because of the fire, I never did end up going to that interview, but I was very grateful to have my own transportation for the evacuation and to be able to help some of my fellow students make it off campus safely.

Once my three passengers and I arrived at the designated meeting spot — Sacred Heart Church in Ventura — we split up to travel to the homes of evacuation host families. I was grouped with five freshmen, including Elanor Piquette (’21), whose family graciously hosted us at their home in Camarillo.

From Monday evening until I drove home on Wednesday, our time was spent in uncertainty of what would come next. We checked the CalFire website for updates on the Thomas Fire, and we checked the TAC Facebook page and website for updates on the state of our campus and if/when classes would resume. We contacted family and friends to inform them of our situation. But the time was also filled with little joys and the opportunity to get to know each other and our host family better. We went shopping for essentials; attended morning Mass; prayed for the safety of the campus, the surrounding residences, and the firefighters; attempted to do some homework; played board games; and even had brownies and ice cream!

Although it was a frightening experience to have come so close to having our beloved campus (and many of our earthly belongings) consumed in flames and to see the devastation that the fire wrought on the surrounding communities, God indeed brings good out of evil. This disaster prompted many prayers and provided abundant opportunities for people to show Christian charity to those affected by the fire.

I would like to say thank you to all those who have supported and prayed for our college community during that trying time. I am so happy that we were able to return to TAC for classes this semester and that I will have the blessing of graduating from our (mostly) unharmed campus this May.



At the Piquette home: Therese Evich (’21), Elanor Piquette (’21), Elayne Piquette, Michael Scriber (’21), Madalyn Piquette, Charles Piquette, Owen Piquette, Anna Asper (’21), Amanda Van Der Linden (’18), Garin Ballard (’21)

By Clare Tabera (’18)

Throughout the fire, I stayed with five friends at my family’s home in Huntington Beach, California. We spent the week watching the news, cooking, attempting to study — and worrying about the 30-plus chickens I kept in the College’s aviary on the lower campus.

I first began keeping chickens about two years ago. Michael Duffresne (’19) had brought five hens there, and I ended up visiting them more often than he did, so I offered to buy them. From there the flock grew. Sometimes I would get some of the chicks hatched from leftover eggs in the Freshman Lab. A couple of times the chickens would hatch some of their own chicks. But mostly I got them from the feed store in Santa Paula. I loved going down to the aviary nearly every day to feed them and collect eggs, which I turned into a small business by selling to faculty and students.

At some point, Thomas Becher (’19), Thomas Macik (’19), and Michael pitched in and got two goats to keep next to the chickens. One of the goats gave birth, and then there were a total of four of these adorable, hilarious animals scampering around. They liked climbing on everything and figuring out every possible way to break into the chicken feed, leading Thomas B. to build more and ever-stronger fences.

When we hurriedly left campus the night of the evacuation, we had to leave the animals behind, figuring that if the fire were to get to them, it would have to go through the campus first, which of course would have been far more devastating. But on Tuesday or Wednesday morning, we got a text informing us that the chickens had all died. Every newspaper spoke of how the only damage to campus was of surrounding “brush and trees,” so I did not realize until I returned on Saturday how incinerated the aviary would be. There was almost nothing left but the metal framing and a storage can. My chickens were unrecognizable piles of charcoal.

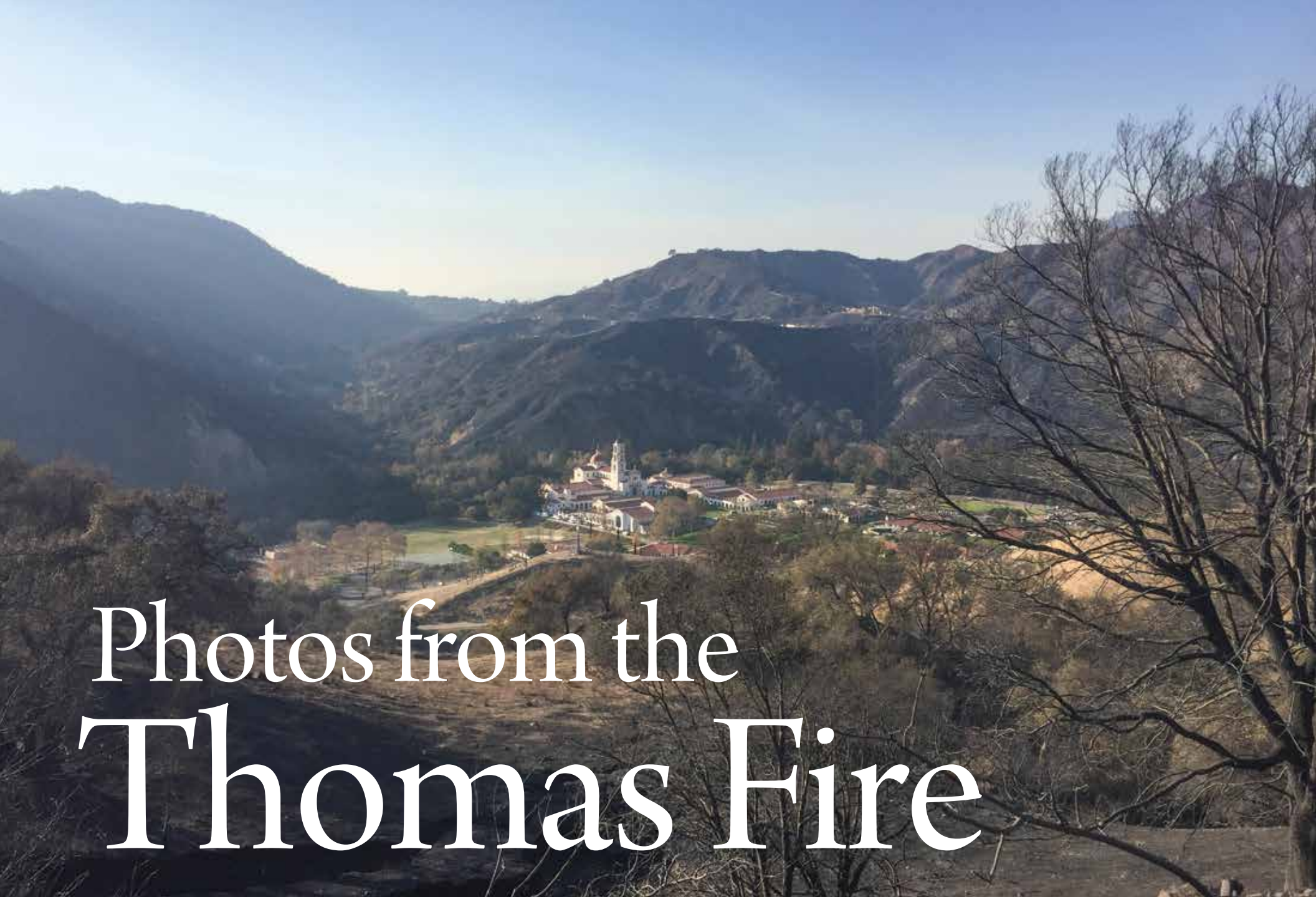
Shortly before receiving the news about my chickens, I got the message that one of the goats had died and the other two were released into the wild. They have not been found.

As sad as it was to lose this lovely place with these sweet animals, I felt that I could not complain too much after having seen whole neighborhoods burning to the ground on TV. It is times like these when we are reminded that all the things of this world will pass away. It is good to practice surrendering all things to God now.



John Herald (’19) and Clare Tabera (’18) with some of the chickens she kept in the campus aviary

“When we hurriedly left campus the night of the evacuation, we had to leave the animals behind, figuring that if the fire were to get to them, it would have to go through the campus first, which of course would have been far more devastating.”



Photos from the Thomas Fire

“The Thomas Fire”

A poem by Nico Silva ('20)

You took our name,
the name of our sanctuary —
Our peaceful pillar high above
the Ojai Valley.

We, the young truth-seekers,
sat in circles speaking
thoughts theological,
philosophical, scientific,
linguistic, and mathematic.

The wind once whispered
the answers to our wonder,
sifting through the grass
of the soft green hills we
crossed between class.

But that night the wind
wanted to settle all scores,
not content to contend
with us by gentle rapping on
our window panes and doors.

As the stars tried to tuck
the campus into bed,
begging us thinkers to rest
our metaphysically-fazed heads,
You peeked your fiery eyes over
the black hill behind my dorm,
gentle at first, as candles light
the sacred rites priests perform.

Some of us marveled at your
advent, others ignored you
as you lit yellow the black
hills and inched your way toward
our sanctuary dedicated to
liberal arts and our Triune Lord.

That's when you grew stronger,
like a fiery army ready for war.
No longer creeping over red-hued
hills, you now charged forward.
Your menacing, hot rays turned
a dreamy campus night to day.

Someone rang the Chapel bells
like it could your anger stay.
Alarms. They squealed like
animals about to be slaughtered
as the wind gave your beastly hunger
what seemed like more fodder.
Students sprinting to cars,
books, clothes, personals in hand:
fifteen minutes to save what we can.

As you prepared to devour our
home into your fiery lips
like a scene from St. John's apocalypse,
students who earlier tried to a semester
into their brains cram,
now huddled in the Commons for the
school's evacuation plan.

The Dean wanted
everyone to find
a ride with someone
who'd be so kind
to keep their fellow
man in need in mind.

But no one needed the help
nor was in a bind to find a ride,
for the students had already
made sure no one would be
left behind.

Our caravan of cars departed
as your flames licked the sky
and pounded the school's
brush-covered property line.
Our alma mater covered in
a demonically orange glow,
and everyone wanted to know
if we'd ever see this our home
again or if you the Thomas Inferno
would try to make this moment a final
goodbye.

I stared at the Chapel once so white
but now in deadly red light bathed.
I thought of all the things I couldn't
take with me that in my dorm stayed.
I thought of the memories with friends
and moments on this campus made.

I thought of the millions that generous
benefactors had over the decades paid
to in some way our mission of pursuing
the true, good, and beautiful aid.

I drove north away from you, Thomas.
And, as your frightening
visage began to fade
in my rearview mirror,
I swallowed my fear,
remembered my faith,
and prayed.

I hoped if this was the end
our future was secure,
that the students of this
school would endure.
And like a Phoenix from
the ashes, humbled and purer,
grow stronger from this,
renewed, ever newer.

In the immediate aftermath of the fire, as seen in the photos above and below, the College's buildings remain intact, but the air is thick with smoke; vegetation around campus has been destroyed, and the surrounding hillsides are charred black.

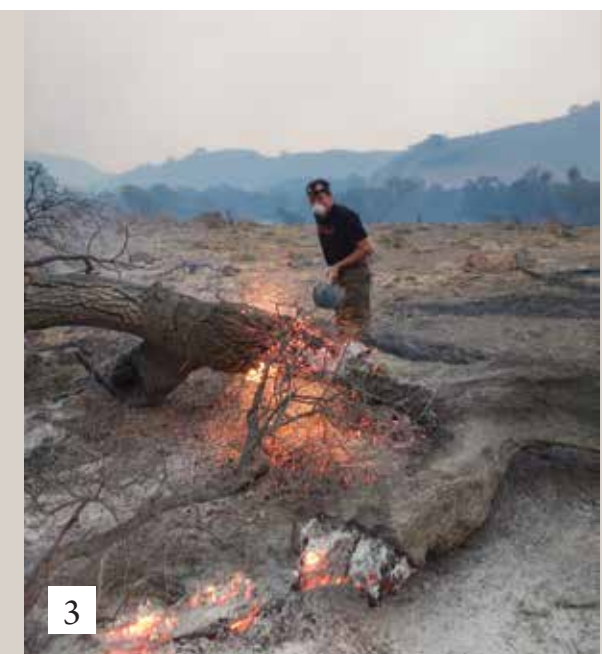




1



2



3



4

1. On the first night of the fire, flames cast the dome of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel in an eerie glow.
2. A few hours later, the blaze reaches the campus hillsides.
3. College facilities workers extinguish spot fires throughout the night.
4. The next morning, smoke comes down from the hillsides behind St. Junipero Serra Residence Hall
5. ... and embers continue to smolder in burned-out trees and stumps.



5



6



7



8

6. After the fire, the College's walkable Stations of the Cross are still standing, but covered in a blanket of ashes and soot. Due to the danger of falling trees, they remain inaccessible throughout Lent. 7. Smoke hangs over the hillsides above St. Katherine of Alexandria and St. Bernard of Clairvaux residence halls. 8. Facilities workers set up a temporary generator
9. ... and prepare a meal for themselves in the St. Joseph Commons.
10. Student workers don protective masks ...
11. ... and begin the task of cleaning up the campus.



9



10



11

“Like a Third Set of Grandparents”

Evacuated Students Find Refuge and Solace with Heather and Bud Daily

There was little time between the start of the Thomas Fire and the evacuation of Thomas Aquinas College — only enough for one decade of the Rosary.

“As we were gathering in the Commons, getting ready to evacuate, my friend Karina Bates (’18) stood up and yelled ‘Hey, everything’s burning, so we’re gonna pray a Rosary right now!’” recalls Mariah Halbur (’18). “We all went over to the crucifix, but there was only time for one decade.”

After they received their evacuation instructions, Mariah got into the car of Nicholas Gartonzavesky (’18), along with his brother, John (’21), and a few friends who made the 30-minute drive to Ventura’s Sacred Heart Church. The Rosary continued en route, and the prayers were answered. Not only would Thomas Aquinas College survive the fire, but — thanks to the generosity of many good friends — every student would find refuge.

For Mariah, the Gartonzaveskys, and seven of their soon-to-be-closest friends, that refuge would be the Camarillo home of College Governor Bud Daily and his wife, Heather. “We offered our house because we knew the students needed a place to stay,” says Mr. Daily. “But we didn’t foresee what a joy it would be for us to have them with us. They were so much fun, so polite, so peaceful, despite all that was going on in their lives.”

For hosts and houseguests alike, it was a blessed seven days.

Settling In

As the cars left campus for Sacred Heart, College officials contacted friends in the area, asking for volunteers to house students. Alumni, faculty, parents, and neighbors responded immediately, as did local members of the Board of Governors. Chairman Scott Turicchi and his wife, Lannette, who live in Pasadena, opened their house in Santa Barbara to 15 students. And Mr. and Mrs. Daily, who were in the process of trying to sell their home, opened their doors nonetheless.

“I called Heather from the church parking lot and asked her how many students we could take — four, five?” says Mr. Daily. “She said, ‘Keep going.’ Six, seven? Again, she told me to keep going, all the way to 10.” Within minutes, three cars of student evacuees were on their way.

“I was pretty shaken up,” remarks Suzanne Urbancic (’18), who was uneasy about staying with strangers. Yet those concerns soon dissipated. “Mrs. Daily met us at the door and gave us all a hug as we walked in,” she continues. “Then she said, ‘You are safe here. You are welcome for as long as you need to stay.’ And I’m thinking, ‘Thank you so much! How can you be so wonderful?’ It was very comforting.”

In no time, the students made themselves at home, and a day-to-day routine emerged. They lived, as Nicholas puts it, “like college students” — staying up late into the night and rising late in the morning. When they awoke, they invariably found Mrs. Daily in her kitchen, lovingly preparing breakfast. Although the students claim that, in her generosity, she left them little work to do, Mrs. Daily contends otherwise. “They were very helpful!” she insists. “The girls helped me with meals, and the boys always volunteered for cleanup.”

During the day the students took trips, as needed, to purchase clothes, toiletries, and other essentials that, in their haste, they were unable to bring with them. They paid close attention to the progress of the fire and regularly called their parents. In down moments they played chess, read books, and studied.

Dinners, says Mr. Daily, alternated between “home cooking and international takeout,” followed by the nightly Rosary. After prayers, the Dailys retired for the evening, and the students played their nightly game of Farkle — a riotous game involving six dice and ear-shattering laughter — then watched a movie.

“Somehow, emotions didn’t rise, tempers didn’t fray, and everything between the 10 of us actually worked



Students who stayed with Heather and Bud Daily, top: Mariah Halbur (’18), Mary-Catherine Eddyblouin (’19), Thomas Graf (’19), Suzanne Urbancic (’18), David Urbancic (’21), Mr. Daily, Benedict Urbancic (’19), Nicole Steltz (’19), and John Gartonzavesky (’21); Bottom: Nicholas Gartonzavesky (’18) and David Sherwood (’18)

really well for the full week,” reflects David Sherwood (’18). Adds Mrs. Daily, “The students were very thoughtful toward each other and to us.”

Stepping Out

Just about every day the Dailys and their charges devised some sort of activity to busy themselves, including walks around the nearby golf course and hikes in the area. On Wednesday, Mrs. Daily asked if anyone wanted to go to the Camarillo Public Library. “Let’s go!” said Nicole Steltz (’19) excitedly. “We’re TAC students. We like to read!” After surveying her peers about titles, Nicole procured a library card and checked out 35 books. “We got the entire *Lord of the Rings* series, *The Silmarillion*, Nicholas Sparks, and P. G. Wodehouse,” Thomas Graf (’19) observes wryly. “It was the most TAC library trip in existence.”

That night, “just to add to the TACness,” says David, the group staged a dance. “Everyone was still anxious,” explains Nicole, “and David said, ‘I have some music, let’s do some dancing after dinner.’” Thus the Dailys’ patio — with its panoramic view of the Camarillo Valley, where, sadly, fires still burned in the distance — became a dance floor. “We went out there and did some couples swing and a little waltz,” says Nicole. “It was so much fun.”

Thursday was, according to most, the pinnacle of the visit. “That afternoon Mr. and Mrs. Daily asked that, since their children were out of town, would we like to decorate their tree for them. We were so happy to be able to help!” says Suzanne. Everyone had a job: “The guys went with Bud and got the tree, and the girls decorated it,” says Mrs. Daily. “I never changed a thing. It was so perfect.” That evening the couple took their young guests out to dinner, then ice cream, after which they toured the neighborhood Christmas lights.

When the group returned, the students had a treat planned for their hosts. “We decided to put on a concert,” says Nick. “Benedict Urbancic (’19) had the idea to call our group the Thomas Fire Choir, and we named our first soundtrack ‘Zero Containment.’” The impromptu choir, which providentially included sopranos, altos, tenors, and basses, had held two surreptitious practices beforehand. That night, they serenaded the Dailys with “Veni, Veni Emmanuel,” “Nearer My God to Thee,” “Ave Maria,” and “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming.”

“They put on a concert for us, eight of them, right there in our living room, as we sat on our sofa,” says Mrs. Daily. “Their harmonizing was amazing! I want to cry just thinking about it. They said it was their gift to us, and it was beautiful. I will never forget it.”

Heading Home

On Saturday — after long days of wondering about the state of the campus and the remainder of the semester — the students received some welcome news. “My dad texted me a picture of the TAC Twitter feed,” says Nicole. “And he wrote, ‘TAC is alive!’ Then, almost right

away, we started getting texts from prefects saying that the College was OK. We all just took a deep breath. I looked at the College’s Facebook page, then announced: ‘Finals are canceled!’”

Everyone cheered. They were free to go home. Mr. Daily urged the students to call their parents, and his wife endeavored to make sure they returned home safely. “She asked me to call her when I got back, so she would be sure I made it to Ohio,” says Suzanne. “When I got off the plane, I gave the phone to my mom, who was so thankful” — as were they all. For one week, when the students needed it most, the Dailys were, as David described it, “like a third set of grandparents.”

Upon learning that finals had been canceled, the couple’s adopted grandchildren departed as quickly as they had arrived, leaving for points all over the country. “They took off in cars, planes, and trains,” says Mrs. Daily. “We were so happy for them and their families ... but also a little sad to see them go.”

Fire Babies

Two Tutor Families Welcome Newest Members During Thomas Fire

Maria Sophia Grothoff

The Thomas Fire struck Ventura County on December 4, 2017 — the very day that Crystal Grothoff and her husband, David (’07), a tutor at the College, were expecting their first daughter.



Bags already packed, the Grothoffs — along with their two-year-old son, Joseph, and Mrs. Grothoff’s mother, Holly Damiani — fled to the home of friends in Ventura. An hour later, the quickly moving fire forced them to evacuate once more, this time to a hotel in Thousand Oaks.

“We kept thinking of the Holy Family, fleeing the deadly threat from Herod,” says Mr. Grothoff. “We thought this was some small share in what they endured.”

Another hour later, Mrs. Grothoff was ready to go to the hospital. The couple left Joseph and his grandmother in the hotel, and at 5:30 a.m. on December 5, welcomed Maria Sophia — named for the Blessed Mother, whose protection they experienced throughout the night.

Frederick Darien Cooper

The fifth child of Briena (Dunkel ’06) and tutor Dr. Travis Cooper was four days overdue on December 4, 2017 — the evening that Xander, the oldest of the baby’s four big brothers, spotted a fire from the family’s front yard.



Dr. and Mrs. Cooper worried. Their home — like the hospital they had chosen for the delivery — lay directly in the path of the flames. They immediately arranged to leave their boys with Mr. Cooper’s parents in Rancho Mirage, then spent the night at the home of a fellow tutor.

The next morning the fire raged on, but the hospital was still standing. The couple checked into a local hotel and, by God’s grace, the fire eventually left the area before their baby arrived. Frederick Darien was born on December 13, thirteen days after his due date. Mercifully, the fire had been stopped in the Coopers’ backyard, and their home was still there to welcome him!

“We Can’t go Back to Where We Once Were”

Alumni Family Adjusts to Life Anew After Losing Home in Thomas Fire

Nearly two months after Jessica (Kelsey) and Nathan Haggard (both '99) lost their home of six years to the Thomas Fire, they are trying to remember how — in those traumatic first days — they broke the news to their eight children. Their eldest, 16-year-old Jack, recalls a conversation that took place in the kitchen of his grandmother’s house in the San Fernando Valley, where his family had evacuated during the fire.

“I asked Mom what’s for breakfast. She said our house burned down.”

Mr. Haggard, a systems engineer at Apple, laughs. “We didn’t exactly have a staged roll out of the news.” Adds Mrs. Haggard, “At least they found out quickly, instead of wondering why Mom was crying all day!”

It wasn’t the announcement they would have planned, but then, nothing about December 4, 2017, or the days, weeks, and months that have followed it, has gone according to the Haggards’ plans — or even complied with what once seemed like reasonable expectations.

A lifelong resident of Southern California, Mr. Haggard was fairly certain, based on past experience, that although wildfires can move quickly, they typically keep to the open wilderness — and seldom spread uncontrollably into the heart of densely populated subdivisions. Then came the Thomas Fire, which, in a matter of hours, migrated from the edge of the Thomas Aquinas College campus, just outside of Santa Paula, into the Haggards’ hillside neighborhood in East Ventura, some 10 miles away.

“You picked a good night!”

It was Mr. Haggard’s youngest brother, Martin (’18), a senior at the College, who first alerted the family to the news. “Martin called to tell us there was a fire around the campus, and wanted to know if he and five of his friends could come stay with us while they were evacuated,” says Mrs. Haggard, a full-time, stay-at-home mom. “We said, ‘Sure, that’s fine,’ never imagining the fire would reach us. We were watching Monday Night Football, and we had just finished dinner, when they arrived with snacks. It was a close game, and I said, ‘You picked a good night to come!’”

When the Haggards learned via social media, about an hour later, that the fire had already traveled half the distance to their home, they began to consider their own evacuation. When the lights went out, they sent Martin and his friends to Mr. Haggard’s mother’s house in Chatsworth. And when firefighters arrived with loudspeakers at the foot of their neighborhood, urging residents to flee, they departed, too.

After a restless night, they woke the next morning to a news report that described their neighborhood as “on fire” and their cul-de-sac as “destroyed.” Nearby friends visited their property and confirmed their worst fears. “At least there was comfort in knowing right away,” says Mrs. Haggard. “Some of our neighbors were left wondering for days.”



Jessica (Kelsey) and Nathan Haggard (both '99) with their children: Jack (16), Greg (14), Patrick (12), Colin (10), Emilie (9), Ronin (7), Maren (5), and Killian (3)

“It was the strangest thing in the world.”

Save for a few items that somehow survived the blaze, the Haggards’ household possessions were all lost. That included family heirlooms and priceless objects of sentimental value, such as paintings by Mrs. Haggard’s father, who had died three years earlier; their wedding album; baptismal gowns.

Compared to those who lost much more, the Haggards are faring well: No one in their family was physically harmed, they are well-insured, and — thanks to a friend’s help — they were able to find a long-term rental home close to their children’s schools. Bulldozers have cleared the remains of their home, and they expect that, within two years, they will live in a new house, built to their specifications, on the very same site.

They also have been buoyed by the support, assistance, and love of friends, many of them fellow alumni, in the wake of the disaster. “I put it on social media that morning that our house was gone, and within hours people just started coming,” says Mrs. Haggard. “They would drop bags off on our front stoop. Within a couple of days the kids had tons of clothes, tons of shoes. They were all set! Others dropped off toiletries and food. They were anticipating our every need.”

When word got out that some of the Haggard children thought Christmas would be canceled, friends sprang into action once more, urging the couple to post a wish list on Amazon. “It was the strangest thing in the world,” says Mr. Haggard. “We would put items on the list, and a few moments later, the list would be empty again, because people would buy them so quickly. And everyone kept telling us, ‘You’ve got to put more items on your list!’ It was overwhelming. We felt lifted up by the food, and money, and toys, and clothes, and all the things you would need.”

Ironically, in the weeks before the fire, Mr. and Mrs. Haggard had warned their children to expect a smaller pile of presents under the tree that year. “We gave them this pep talk, and we said, ‘OK, this Christmas is going to be a lot less about material goods. Let’s focus on doing

things for each other and being more thoughtful,’” says Mrs. Haggard. “And now, suddenly, there’s a little change, because they’re going to be getting *tons* of stuff. So — let’s focus instead on being super-thankful! I felt like God was shaking everything up for us. We say, ‘Let’s teach them this lesson!’ And He says, ‘No, you’re going to teach them *this* lesson instead.’”

“We are now shaped by this.”

“God is forcibly molding us into something that He wants us to be, so the trick is to let him do it,” says Mr. Haggard. “We’ve learned that when you have sorrows and suffering, the point is not to get over them or remove them, because they are now part of who we are; part of whom God is saving now includes that.” Observes Mrs. Haggard, “We have to embrace that we are now *these* people. We can’t go back to where we once were. This is knowledge that God wants us to have; we are now shaped by this.”

The couple likens the experience to a picture that hangs beside the bay window overlooking the front lawn of their rental home. It’s a replica. The original — a brown-wash sketch of a man that Mrs. Haggard’s late father had made decades earlier — was destroyed in the fire. “I took it with me when I came to TAC as a freshman,” says Mrs. Haggard. “It was in my dorm room for all four years, and it’s followed me everywhere we’ve lived.”

Five or six years ago, Mr. Haggard photographed the sketch and, providentially, he came across the digital image shortly after the fire. A friend who is a graphic designer printed it on canvas, creating an almost-identical reproduction that Mr. Haggard and the children presented to a surprised Mrs. Haggard on their anniversary, January 6. “I thought it was the original when I first opened it,” says Mrs. Haggard, then adding, with a smile, “but when you look at it, you can see it’s a little bit cleaner.”



For the Haggards, in that small difference lies a world of meaning. “Although we wish we’d never lost the painting, it now has even more significance than it did before,” says Mr. Haggard. “To have it represent Jess’s father, and his art, and the fire, and our friends all helping us rebuild our life, all in one picture — that’s pretty cool.”

Moreover, the painting symbolizes a painful but valuable lesson brought by way of tragedy. “When you’re married and you have a family, you’re sometimes tempted to think that your life is just laid out for you, that you’re just going to do the next 10, 20, 30 years by rote,” says Mr. Haggard. “Then, when something like this happens, you remember that the future really is uncertain. And that forces you to say, maybe we’ll just pay attention to today, because that’s all we have.”

Caregiver Calls on Alumni in Hour of Need

On the first night of the Thomas Fire, the College’s registrar and director of student services, Mark Kretschmer (’99), participated in *three* evacuations. First he helped to get students off of the campus. Then he moved his wife and two small children from their Santa Paula home to his mother’s house in



Marilynn Kretschmer with her youngest son, Mark (’99), the College’s registrar and director of student services

the Ventura hillsides. Finally, when the fire rapidly spread westward, he evacuated both his family and his mother to the parking lot of a nearby church, where they spent the remainder of the night.

Mr. Kretschmer’s mother, Marilynn, is a stalwart of Thomas Aquinas College: the parent of three alumni and, from 1979 to 2003, the campus nurse. On October 10 she lost her husband, Ted, to pancreatic cancer, and less than two months later, she lost their home of 45 years. “At about 2:30 a.m., a 100 mile-per-hour wind, blowing enormous embers, came across the neighborhood,” she says, recounting the testimony of firefighters who were in the area. “It lit up rows of houses, and when it hit the hillside, the whole area just burst into flame, for 15 to 20

minutes. Then it died down — and that was it.”

A former Red Cross nurse who has aided countless others in their times of crisis, Mrs. Kretschmer is bearing the tragedy well. She is living with Mark and his family, and — eager for a place to host her 16 grandchildren — she is already planning her new home. The project is an alumni affair: Michael Mier (’99), of VenTERRA Environmental in Ventura, is clearing the lot; Anthony Grumbine (’00), a principal at Harrison Design in Santa Barbara, is drawing the architectural plans; and David Dunlap (’03), owner of DMD Construction in Santa Paula, will build the new house. “My mom,” says Mr. Kretschmer proudly, “is a strong woman of deep faith.”

In Memoriam

Roy Rohter (1933–2018)

A month after the Thomas Fire erupted near the campus of Thomas Aquinas College, spreading its ravenous blaze across more than 400 square miles, disaster struck yet again. A winter’s rainstorm triggered deadly mudslides on the newly denuded hillsides of nearby Montecito, killing 21 people and wounding dozens of others. Among the victims were Theresa and Roy Rohter, who were swept from their home early in the morning of January 9. Although Mrs. Rohter was rescued and is recovering from her injuries, Mr. Rohter — a friend and benefactor of the College — did not survive.



Born and raised on the South Side of Chicago, Mr. Rohter was a natural salesman and entrepreneur who eventually became a successful real-estate broker. It was in Chicago that he met Theresa, the daughter of Yugoslavian immigrants, and the two wed in 1968. Over the course of their nearly five decades of marriage, the couple was blessed with three children and 13 grandchildren. Their youngest daughter, Andrea (Krautmann ’00), is a graduate of the College, as is her husband, Jay (’00).

Although his father was Jewish and his mother Catholic, Mr. Rohter grew up in a non-practicing household and had no real faith until his mid-40s, when he experienced a Road to Damascus-like conversion while attending Mass at the invitation of a friend. Around this time, he opted for an early retirement, choosing to dedicate his life to philanthropy in the service of the God he loved deeply. He was especially devoted to the pro-life movement and to Catholic classical education, a passion that led him to found three schools, one in Texas and two in California — the latter two headed by Thomas Aquinas College alumni.

“In 2006, my first year as headmaster at St. Monica Academy, Roy took me under his wing,” recalls Marguerite (Ford ’79) Grimm. “He graciously invited me to lunch in Montecito, and over a fabulous meal he gave me a crash course in being ‘professional.’ Being the great mentor, no detail was too small!” Adds Michael Van

Hecke (’86), headmaster of St. Augustine Academy in Ventura and Mr. Rohter’s close friend of 25 years, “Roy has done so much for so many people and pro-life and Catholic-education causes. Thousands have been blessed by the Rohters’ friendship and generosity.”

Among those blessed are the students of Thomas Aquinas College. The Rohters are longstanding members of the President’s Council, the backbone of the College’s Annual Fund, as well as its Legacy Society. “Roy played a pivotal role in the lives of countless young Catholic students — students who came to a deeper knowledge and love of Christ because of his vision, commitment, and generosity,” says Thomas Aquinas College President Michael F. McLean.

Years before his death, Mr. Rohter arranged for his funeral Mass to be offered in the College’s Chapel of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity. “Our father, in his wisdom, has been planning for this day for many years,” his son, Reev, said in his eulogy. “The day my father would pass away, everything was in place for his family and friends to start the prayers.”

Remarkably, Mr. Rohter’s death — “sudden and unexpected,” to borrow his description of his conversion, which was also the title of his recently penned memoirs — would inspire far more prayers than he could have ever imagined. The first identified casualty of the Montecito mudslides, Mr. Rohter “suddenly became newsworthy,” said Reev. “His picture was on the front page of newspapers; he was on the local news, and then the national news. Along with his picture was a request, ‘Pray for me.’ And that request was answered. Instead of hundreds, it became thousands, possibly tens of thousands — who knows? In one fell swoop my father’s wishes to our family became a nationwide request. I am personally convinced that this was meant to be, and is part of God’s amazing plan.”

The priest whom Mr. Rohter chose to offer his requiem Mass at the College — Rev. Fr. Rhone Lillard, F.S.S.P., a member of the College’s Class of 2000 — encouraged his friends and loved ones to remain vigilant in their prayers. “Let us give thanks to God for the gift and love of Roy, for all the blessings that God has bestowed on us through him,” said Fr. Lillard. “And let us return that love by storming heaven for him, remembering him today, and every day, in our prayers and sacrifices.”

Mary Virginia McEnhill McInerney (1926–2017)

A longtime, dear friend of Thomas Aquinas College, Mary Virginia McEnhill McInerney passed away on November 30, 2017.

The oldest of the six children of Elizabeth and Jack McEnhill, Mrs. McInerney was raised in Oakland, California. She and her late husband, Bill, first started dating when the two were attending separate Bay Area Catholic colleges in the late 1940s. She was delighted when he was elected as his college’s student body president, in no small part because, as a perk of office, he was invited to social events at neighboring Catholic campuses — and so was she, as his date. There were Saturday-night dances followed by late-night hamburgers and milkshakes, after which they would meet up again the next morning for Sunday Mass.

“They were Catholic colleges, we were Catholic kids, and our families and friends were Catholic. It was wonderful,” Mrs. McInerney recalled in a 2010 interview. “The faith that our parents had handed on to us was also given to us in the colleges. It was still there.”

The couple wed in 1949 while Mr. McInerney was in his last year at the University of California, Berkeley, Boalt Hall School of Law. They remained happily married for more than 64 years, welcoming 4 children and 15 grandchildren, until Mr. McInerney’s death in 2013.

Throughout her life, Mrs. McInerney was actively involved in numerous volunteer and charitable endeavors, including terms as president of the San Miguel Board



of Providence Hospital and the Piedmont Area Republican Women. She and Mr. McInerney were also highly involved with Mercy Retirement and Care Center, where they volunteered monthly for decades, and the Order of Malta. On behalf of the Order, they led the effort to establish a free medical clinic for the poor at Oakland’s Christ the Light Cathedral. The couple brought *malades* on 23 pilgrimages to Lourdes, and Mrs. McInerney made her 24th and final pilgrimage, joined by her daughter, in 2014.

The McInerneys were introduced to the College in its early days by an old friend who was a member of the original Board of Governors, John Schaeffer, and his wife, Jane. They became faithful benefactors right away, finding in the school the sort of faithful Catholic education and culture that they had enjoyed during their own col-

IN MEMORIAM

Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord.

Wojciech Antoni Krotoski, M.D.
January 1, 2016
Legacy Society member

Carol Anne Wright — May 14, 2016
Legacy Society member

Mary Virginia McEnhill McInerney
November 30, 2017
President’s Council member

Arthur Edwin Hippler — December 5, 2017
Father of Arthur M. Hippler (’89)

Charles Knight (’96) — December 20, 2017
Alumnus

Roy Rohter — January 9, 2018
*Father of Andrea (Krautmann ’00),
President’s Council and Legacy Society member*

Jeannette Margueritte Fehner
February 4, 2018
Legacy Society member

Dr. John Kelly — February 22, 2018
*Father of Rev. Brendan Kelly (’85)
and tutor Dr. Brian Kelly (’88)*

Margaret Halpin Ortiz
February 24, 2018
Mother of Celina (Ortiz ’03) Skoby

Rose Nieto Zegler — February 25, 2018
*Mother of tutor Dr. John Nieto (’89)
and campus security guard Michael Zegler*

Ellsworth E. Tulberg — March 2, 2018
*Father of Clark Tulberg (’85); grandfather of
Samuel (’11), Dorothy (Berndt ’11), and Henry (’16)*

Kenneth O. Olsen, Sr. — March 4, 2018
Legacy Society member

lege days. Saddened that their alma maters had become largely secularized, they adopted the College as their own, and for nearly 50 years were members of the President’s Council, the backbone of the College’s Annual Fund.

In 2009 the couple attended the dedication of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel. At the time, Mrs. McInerney remarked about how she enjoyed seeing “all the alumni — fathers and mothers of four, and five, and six children, little babies — don’t tell me that doesn’t absolutely impress a grandmother! To see all these wonderful families, you know there’s hope for our church; there’s hope for our country.”

For many years, the McInerneys were also regular attendees at the College’s Summer Seminars. Mrs. McInerney even attended the 2017 seminars, just months before her death. “For five years, we have been without the presence of Bill at our seminars, and now we will miss Mary, too,” says Thomas Aquinas College President Michael F. McLean. “They were such good, loyal friends. We pray for the repose of their souls and the consolation of their beautiful family.”

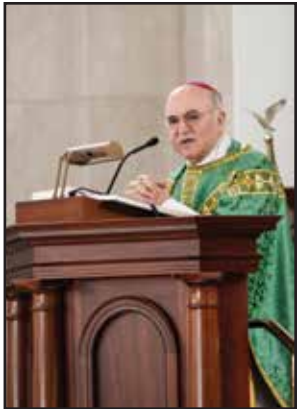
In her published obituary, Mrs. McInerney’s family notes that “Mary said the Rosary almost every day and wishes that all will honor the Blessed Mother.” In lieu of flowers, they ask that friends consider a memorial donation to the College or to the Oakland Clinic of the Order of Malta.

College Update

Recent Events and Happenings

Archbishop Viganò Visits Campus

On the morning of January 12, Thomas Aquinas College was blessed with a visit from the Most Rev. Carlo Maria Viganò, Apostolic Nuncio Emeritus to the United States of America. His Excellency stopped by during a trip to Southern California, where he met with the Most Rev. Kevin Vann, Bishop of Orange, and visited the Norbertine Fathers of St. Michael's Abbey. The Archbishop toured the campus, viewed damage from the Thomas Fire, and offered Mass in Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel. He then joined President Michael F. McLean and Dean John J. Goyette, as well as students and chaplains, for lunch in St. Joseph Commons.



“You give me unexpected joy to be with you today for the celebration of this Eucharist at this college dedicated to St. Thomas Aquinas,” Archbishop Viganò said in his homily. “I have been spending almost five years in this great country as the representative of the Holy Father, and I heard many, many times people speak about your college. And, of course, I was waiting for the occasion to come, to see this great institution which is very well known in all the country and beyond.”

“It was truly an honor to have Archbishop Viganò here on campus,” said Dr. McLean, noting that His Excellency has a longstanding friendship with the College, including hosting a 2014 event at the Papal Nunciature in Washington, D.C. “The Archbishop offered Mass with great reverence and gave a thoughtful homily that our students very much seemed to appreciate. We are grateful for his taking the time to visit, and also to our friends the Norbertine Fathers — particularly Fr. Gregory — for bringing him to be with us.”

A Visit from Bishop Barron

Thomas Aquinas College's regional auxiliary bishop, the Most Rev. Robert Barron, paid an informal visit to its Santa Paula campus on the evening of February 28, where he met, dined with, and offered Mass for the College's students.

Noting that he has been named one of four American delegates to this fall's Synod on Young People, the Faith, and Vocational Discernment, His Excellency said he was eager to hear the impressions and thoughts of the College's students. “What's on your mind? What's on your hearts?” he asked. “I'll be [in Rome] for a month, and have a chance to share insights with the other bishops, with the Pope himself. So, with that in mind, especially, let me hear what's on your mind, Thomas Aquinas College!”

During the ensuing discussion, His Excellency took a wide variety of questions. Among his advice was that students dig deep into the great works they study as part of the College's classical curriculum. “You're studying here these ancient texts. Never let people say to you, ‘Oh come on, you're wasting your time with these old dusty [books].’ Oh, no, that's where the wisdom of the race is found! These mystagogical programs are embedded in those texts, and the culture needs that like mad.”



Bishop Barron with student acolytes and head chaplain, Rev. Paul Raftery, O.P.

College Amends New England Timeline

Since taking ownership, last May, of the former campus of a preparatory school in Northfield, Massachusetts, Thomas Aquinas College has amended its plan for the property. The College now hopes to open a New England campus in August, 2019, contingent upon the approval of the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education.

“When the National Christian Foundation first gave us the Northfield property, we decided, despite admittedly long odds, to try to launch a branch campus in time for the 2018–19 academic year,” says President Michael F. McLean. “It has become clear, however, that the project requires a more generous timeline. As such, we have decided to amend the Northfield plan and delay the prospective opening of a New England campus until August of 2019.”

In pursuit of that goal, the College continues to maintain the beautiful New England property while working with the Massachusetts Department of Higher Education on its application. “In the event that the College receives the Commonwealth's approval, we will have more time to raise funds and prepare the campus for occupancy,” says Dr. McLean.

Thomas Aquinas College hopes to welcome students to New England at Convocation 2019. “We remain fully committed to this project,” says Dr. McLean, “and hopeful that we can bring the College's unique approach to Catholic liberal education to the East Coast.”

College Gets High Rank on Kiplinger List

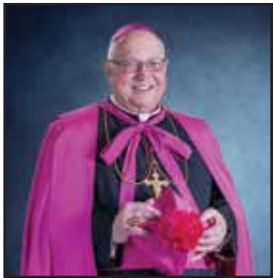
In its “300 Best College Values for 2018,” *Kiplinger Personal Finance* ranks Thomas Aquinas College as No. 14 among American colleges or universities, making it the highest-placed Catholic institution on the list.

Now in its 20th year, the Kiplinger guide highlights educational institutions that combine outstanding academics with affordable cost. In addition to placing Thomas Aquinas College in the top 20 nationwide, the guide lists it as No. 7 among liberal arts colleges — the only Catholic school to be named to the Top 10.

“We are delighted to receive Kiplinger's recognition,” says Admissions Director Jon Daly. “We consider it an affirmation of our founders' conviction that the best way to achieve academic excellence is not to abandon the Church's moral and intellectual patrimony, but to embrace it.”

Bishop Morlino to Serve as 2018 Commencement Speaker

The Most. Rev. Robert C. Morlino, Bishop of Madison, Wisconsin, has accepted President Michael F. McLean's invitation to serve as Thomas Aquinas College's 2018 Commencement Speaker. As part of the May 12 exercises, His Excellency will also serve as the principal celebrant and homilist at that morning's Baccalaureate Mass.



“We are grateful that our longtime friend Bishop Morlino has agreed to come to California to join us for Commencement,” says Dr. McLean. “We are honored that he will be part of this important day in the life of the College and its newest graduates.”

A native of Northeastern Pennsylvania, and a graduate of the Jesuit-run Scranton Preparatory High School, Bishop Morlino was ordained to the priesthood for the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus on June 1, 1974. In 1981 he became a priest of the Diocese of Kalamazoo, Michigan, where he served for 12 years before Pope St. John Paul II named him Bishop of Helena, Montana, in 1999. In 2003 the Holy Father named him Bishop of Madison. Over the years, Bishop Morlino has served as chairman of two committees within the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and since 2005 he has also served as chairman of the Board of Directors of the National Catholic Bioethics Center.

St. Vincent de Paul Lecture and Concert Series

Endowed by Barbara and Paul Henkels

Highlights from the Last Quarter

- **Dr. Gregory Vall**, a professor of Sacred Scripture at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans, spoke on November 3 on the subject, “The Sabbath Precept in the Divine Economy.”

- A former member of the Swiss Guard, **Dr. Mario Enzler** of The Catholic University's Busch School of Business and Economics, gave a November 17 presentation about his service to Pope St. John Paul II, “I Served a Saint.”

- The **Thomas Aquinas College Choir** gave its final concert in St. Joseph Commons on November 17. The Choir performed Vivaldi's Gloria in D major and Mozart's Coronation Mass in C. Future concerts will take place in the recently completed St. Cecilia Lecture and Concert Hall.

- The first lecture to be held in St. Cecilia Hall took



place on January 19, when **Dr. Christopher Decaen**, a member of the College's teaching faculty, presented “‘Joseph is a Fruitful Bough’ (Gen 49:22): The Patriarch, His Seed, and the Messiah.”

- In honor of President's Day on February 23, **Dr. Mary Nichols**, a professor of political science at Baylor University, delivered a lecture entitled, “Justice and Tragedy in Book 5 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: A Shrine to the Graces.”

- To mark the celebration of its patron's feast day on March 7, the College invited **Dr. Steven A. Long**, a professor of theology at Ave Maria University, to present the lecture, “St. Thomas Aquinas on the Natural Moral Law.”

- One Friday night each semester, the student body and teaching faculty gather for the **All-College Seminar** — simultaneous meetings of small groups (about 20 students, drawn from all classes, and two tutors) to discuss a pre-selected reading. The spring semester's seminar took place on February 9 and focused on St. Thomas Aquinas' writings on the Crucifixion and Resurrection from the *Compendium Theologiae*.

- Periodically members of the faculty or chaplaincy present on-campus “tutor talks,” informal lectures followed by question-and-answer sessions. These late-afternoon gatherings afford an opportunity for the speakers to discuss some topic of interest to them and to share their thoughts with other members of the community. On February 7 tutor **Dr. Andrew Seeley** gave a talk entitled, “‘Now We Can See Them and We Can Honor Them’: The Education of the Hobbits in the *Lord of the Rings*.” On March 14 Tutor **Mr. Brian Dragoo** presented “Modeling Tough Decision-making with the Mathematics of Game Theory.”

Text and audio from select lectures and concerts are available at thomasaquinas.edu/lectures.



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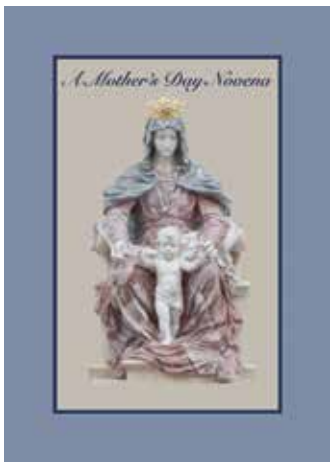


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CAMPUS LIFE

1. Members of the College community participate in OneLife LA, the Archdiocese of Los Angeles' annual event to promote the beauty and dignity of all human life. 2. Once again, in January more than 200 Thomas Aquinas College students traveled to San Francisco for the 14th Walk for Life West Coast. 3. Teams battle during March's Ultimate Frisbee tournament. 4. Ingrid Beers ('20) plays the cello at the spring Schubertiade. 5. On March 17 the relics of St. Padre Pio, which are on tour throughout the country, were displayed for veneration in Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel. 6. For their 2017 play, the St. Genesius Players performed Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream. 7. Students make music for faculty children at this year's St. Patrick's Day celebration.

This Mother's Day ... *Honor Thy Mother* with a Novena of Masses!



Beginning on Mother's Day, May 13, and ending on May 21, the chaplains of Thomas Aquinas College will offer a novena of Masses in Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel. Each mother enrolled in the Novena will receive a beautiful, personalized card from the College.

(Cost: \$5 per card, includes shipping and handling. All names must be received by May 11.)

thomasaquinas.edu/mom

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Santa Paula, CA 93060-9622
ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED



For Calendar of Events and Mass Schedule ...
See thomasaquinas.edu/calendar and thomasaquinas.edu/masstimes

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