

FUS Founders Talk

What a joy to be back here at an institution that profoundly shaped our family; not only me and Jane, but every one of our children. I think the last time we were here it was to attend the memorial Mass for Fr. Michael Scanlan of blessed memory. The standout impact of that event was the homily delivered by Fr. Dave Pivonka, whom I knew when he was a student at Franciscan back in the late 1980s. After the homily Jane and I noted that Fr. Mike's mantle clearly had fallen on Fr Dave; like the mantle of Elijah on Elisha. This was some years before Fr. Dave was appointed President. Yet God is faithful and in due time cleared the way for a friar after His own heart to lead this remarkable institution.

It is only fair to tell you how unlikely it is that I could be considered a founder of anything connected to religion or higher education. I have sometimes remarked that I am a witness of both God's mercy, and His sense of humor. In my junior year at Notre Dame I was suspended for drinking, which I confess was a well deserved punishment. A condition of my return was that my father, a saintly man, had to go to South Bend and meet with the Dean of Discipline. He was told that I was one of the five worst men on campus (a campus of 5,000 men). Nevertheless, I was let back in and graduated. Thereafter, not knowing what I wanted to do in life, but finding the prospect of hard work and the discipline of a job unattractive, I decided to go to law school, thereby putting off the evil day for three years. Despite poor grades, I did very well on the law school aptitude test and was accepted at a top law school. However, the lack of study habits and unwillingness to give up the bar scene, resulted in my almost flunking out the first year. I was in the bottom 10% of the class. Then I met Jane, a woman of character and virtue. I was so smitten that in the wild hope she might actually marry me I began a painful reform. Over the next two years I made it to the top 10% of the class and received several honors. One was "Most improved student". A slam dunk! Next year, God willing, I will celebrate two anniversaries: sixty years of marriage to Jane and fifty years of continuous sobriety in AA.

I became a very successful maritime lawyer, thriving in the rough and tumble world of Greek shipowners and other great rogues. Then in 1980 I was asked by a group of British ship liability underwriters to take over their claim management in the

United States. I agreed and this too was successful. But then a small but significant thing happened. Jane and I heard a tape by Ralph Martin in the course of which he said "If you have children ready to choose a college to go to, you should consider the College of Steubenville in Ohio". This was probably 1981 or 1982 and our oldest daughter was already planning to go to the University of Notre Dame, and might actually already have been a student there. However, our second daughter Katie was now looking at colleges and she did not have the academic credentials for ND. She visited a couple of others, including Boston College and Holy Cross, but was turned off by the smell of booze in the dorms. So we said how about looking at the school in Ohio that Ralph Martin recommended. She agreed. We flew to Pittsburg, rented a car and drove to Steubenville. There are probably not many here who remember what that meant in the early 1980's. There was no by-pass, so the only route to Steubenville was through Weirton where one's eyes were assaulted by rusted factories, smoldering slag heaps and boarded up businesses and homes. The stench from the coke plants on the Ohio river was almost unbearable. By the time we arrived on campus Katie did not want to get out of the car. Yet students were expecting her and we practically forced her to stay -- stay just for one night we said, and if you're still miserable you can join us at the motel. She was treated so warmly that she stayed the planned two nights. We met with Fr. Scanlan who affirmed unapologetically FUS's commitment to teach Catholic morals. We were sold, and Katie was too.

Her experience of FUS was so positive that I started supporting the school. I was then asked to join the Board in 1984. Even though Fr. Mike had been President for 10 years, the scale of problems when he arrived was so daunting that even after 10 years there was still a long way to go. When he first took charge was no endowment, only debt. The faculty were not sure from month to month whether their paychecks could be cashed. There were fewer than 200 resident students on the campus. Some of the internal roads were still unpaved. Steubenville itself was then a dying city. How like God to choose such a down-and-out place to lead a renewal of Catholic higher education! To me, being asked to be on the Board was a great honor, despite the institution's material poverty

Through a mutual friend we met Dr. Alice Von Hildebrand. We were captivated by her deep and exuberant love of the Church. Our daughter Mary was free at the time and offered to help edit a book she was writing. It was the beginning of a life-long friendship with the whole family.

I brought up with Fr. Mike the importance of FUS embracing the intellectual life as a priority. Shortly afterward he asked me to lead the search for a new dean of the faculty. I of course accepted and relied heavily on Dr. Von Hildebrand for leads. She knew and greatly respected Dr. Michael Healy and after a couple of lengthy phone interviews I wound up proposing him as my first choice; despite the awkwardness of the same last name. Fr. Mike approved and thus a new era began (I think it was 1986). Dr. Healy, a dear friend and trusted collaborator through some difficult years, deserves the main credit for transforming FUS from an institution known mainly for its joyful piety to one of serious academics; without losing the piety. Sadly, many Catholic schools today have neither.

All this helped student recruitment and retention, and tuition revenue was growing at over 10% per year. Yet there were major gaps, such as the absence of a stand-alone library, some of which put in doubt our ability to retain accreditation. Members of the Board of Trustees personally provided much of the needed funding and the library was added. Yet another major deficiency was the absence of a field house, both for indoor sports and to house the growing summer conferences which could no longer safely be held in tents. During one conference a severe thunderstorm had destroyed a tent and the conference attendees had barely escaped without major injuries. A new capital campaign was approved. It began in 1988, managed by a major fundraising firm out of Pittsburg.

In the meantime, my life had taken a dramatic turn. While enjoying the perks and prestige of running a company, a slow dissatisfaction set in. My experience on the Board of FUS brought home the perilous state of most Catholic higher education. The general situation was exemplified by the story appearing in an education journal of a Jewish student attending the Jesuit University of Seattle. When she was a junior she walked into a classroom and noticed a crucifix on the wall. She asked a friend "What is

that doing here?" The friend answered "Well, this is a Catholic university", to which her blurted reply was "It is?"

I began to think, maybe I should be doing more for the Church, instead of trying to achieve more security and prestige in building a company. The final trigger was something Fr. Mike wrote in his book "Let the Fire Fall". He told of someone posing the question "What are we going to do in heaven". His answer was "One of the things we will do is tell "war stories." Of course he was talking about the spiritual war, raging then and still raging. But the very term "war stories" held a special meaning for me. I was seven years old when World War II ended and what your father did in the war determined your status as a boy. Was he in the service? Overseas? In combat? Wounded? What was his war story?

As I reflected on Fr. Mike's talk I realized I didn't have any war story. I was already very well-to-do and just trying to get richer. So after a year of discernment with a Franciscan Friar, we decided it would be right to leave the business and make myself available to God, in whatever way He might choose to use me. Selling my interest in the business was a difficult process but it was accomplished by the fall of 1987. We were then living in an upscale suburb of NYC. We sold our home there and built a new one in New Hampshire, partly to start a farm. I started helping a Catholic girls high school there as my first effort. I didn't need a job since we could survive for years on what was coming in from the sale of my interest in the company.

Then the unexpected happened. The University's capital campaign was floundering. Fr. Mike called an emergency meeting of the Board in August of 1988 to determine what could be done. He announced to the assembled Trustees that the campaign managers were costing the University \$15,000 per month, but had not secured any major gifts; that the contract could be cancelled, but the University had no one on staff qualified to take over the campaign. As soon as I heard this I knew I was supposed to do it. During a break I told Fr. Mike "I have never done fundraising in my life but that I understood what FUS represents and its importance to the Church, and I think I can persuade others of that". After a quick consultation with a couple of key Trustees he offered me the position. Jane and I moved from our beautiful new home in New Hampshire to a small apartment in Wintersville in October 1988.

It was supposed to be for a year or two when it was hoped that the campaign would be over. As it happened, through illnesses and other circumstances there were several senior staff departures. I was asked to take over the Development Department and then also the whole of Christian Outreach: Journeys, Press and Conferences. I happily took on these responsibilities, for which I had never applied. The Capital campaign was successfully completed, using mainly the same principles I had conveyed to Fr. Mike; Let people know what FUS represents and its importance to the Church. One key to successful fundraising is to see it as a form of evangelization.

I confess I used to think of myself as the founder of the Austrian campus but I heard a remarkable talk a few years ago that changed my perspective. It was given by a man who many considered the most successful lawyer for religious liberty cases; a man with a near 90% win record, including several notable US Supreme Court decisions. He said "People credit me with all these victories. They were not my victories; they were God's. God does not need me to win cases but he let's me help Him." That is an aspect of God's love for us. He lets us mortal and frail human beings help Him even though he does not need the help. The speaker asked us to think about the boy with 5 loaves and 2 fish when Jesus fed the 5,000. Imagine when that boy went home and his mother asks him "Samuel, did you have a good day?" Samuel answered "Yes mom" we fed 5,000 people. Well Jesus did most of the work, but He let me help Him!"

When it comes to Gaming, I am that boy. It was September of 1989. Jane and I had gone to Rome with Dr. von Hildebrand. We had an audience with St. John Paul II. Jane asked the Pope to pray for FUS and he nodded his consent. The next day we were in Liechtenstein at the International Academy of Philosophy to meet our daughter Katie and son-in-law Jules, who were studying graduate philosophy there. Our plan was drive them to Holland, where Jules' parents were to host a reception for the newly married couple. They asked if we could give a ride to Dr. Joseph Seifert, the founder of the IAP and a leading scholar of the work of the late Dietrich von Hildebrand. We agreed. It was a ten hour drive. I doubt many people have ever had ten hours with Dr Seifert. He spent most of that time in lamentation. For years he said he had been struggling to achieve accreditation from Austria, which would then make accreditation

easier in other European countries. He had finally achieved it. And he had also been offered a magnificent campus in Austria, his native country, at a former Carthusian monastery in a little village west of Vienna called Gaming: the Kartause Maria Thron. He described the deep associations with the founding of the Habsburg dynasty, how it became the spiritual home of the first Habsburgs to live in Austria; the successful defense against the Turkish invaders, the closing of the monastery (one of 900 closed) by Emperor Joseph II; its desecration by the Soviet army toward the end of World War II and finally its miraculous resurrection by a German architect, Walter Hildebrand, who was eager to give over its use to a Catholic institution such as the IAP. However, Seifert had just been informed by the Austrian Government that if he moved the IAP to Austria they would cancel its accreditation. This he could not risk so he had to tell Hildebrand that the IAP would remain in Lichtenstein: he then added “Nick, perhaps your university would be interested in the Kartause Gaming? Only years of playing poker kept me from shouting “YES”, and I simply conveyed that it was possible, so perhaps he should call Hildebrand and see if he would even consider an American institution. This was before all cell phones, so at the next stop for gas he called from a pay phone. Hildebrand said he would be willing to meet with representatives of an American university.

Jane and I were planning on a long weekend in Bruges, Belgium before returning home to Steubenville but by now the Kartause Gaming was such an intriguing prospect that we quickly changed plans. Immediately after the reception in Holland we drove 14 hours east to Austria, met Walter and took a lengthy tour of the Kartause. While much of it was still a ruin, the transcendent beauty of the restored sections and the deep romance of its storied history convinced us that it was surely a gift from God. We said we would like to pursue the possibility of use of the Kartause by FUS. Hildebrand said he needed to call high level friends in Rome to learn if FUS was really what it claimed to be: a faithfully Catholic university. The call was made and Hildebrand confirmed to us that FUS was indeed what it claimed to be.

Yet once back in Steubenville I could not imagine how such a wild idea could be accepted. Programs in Rome were common; but Italy was a NATO country and no Soviet troops were on its border. Austria had committed to neutrality as a condition for the withdrawal of Soviet troops in the 1950's and was not a NATO country. The “Iron

Curtain” was still firmly in place in neighboring Hungary and Czechoslovakia. Less than 100 miles from Gaming the borders were marked by towers containing machine guns.

Again God intervened. Two days after our return I was asked to accompany Fr. Mike and John Green, the Executive VP, on a trip to Columbus for a meeting of the heads of private colleges and universities in Ohio collaborating on certain fundraising. On the 2-1/2 hour drive to Columbus I think I took 2 hours to describe the whole story of the Kartause Gaming, its history, its connection to the Holy Roman Empire, its architecture and ongoing work of renovation. At the end I simply posed the question: should I take the next step? I was afraid of, but expected, a response such as “Let’s take it up at our next Executive Council meeting” or “Let’s refer it to the faculty for study” or “Let’s ask a committee of Trustees to consider it”. But he simply answered with a firm “Yes”. And of course John Green, who controlled the University’s budget, a man of unmatched prudence and fiscal caution, heard him. No chance for this insane idea to be throttled at birth! Less than three months later we returned to Gaming. In those three months the Berlin Wall was demolished. Czechoslovakia and Hungary removed their machine gun towers and announced their borders were open and Americans were now welcome to enter without a visa. An era was ending and a new one beginning. Negotiations with Hildebrand for a lease of part of the Kartause for FUS could and did begin.

Of course having a suitable facility was only part of the need. Who could be trusted with establishing and running a study abroad program 4000 miles from Steubenville? God had also arranged this. The then Academic Dean, Michael Healy, already knew Seifert and the IAP and of their plan to move to Gaming. He also knew Jim Fougerousse, who for years had run the Rome program of the University of Dallas. He had since become the IAP’s de facto head of operations and had planned the move to Gaming. Already himself entranced by the Kartause, fluent in German and an admirer of Austrian culture, he was the perfect choice to head a the new “study abroad” program of FUS. He happily took the offer of a job. Another critical connection was not public. Walter Hildebrand’s English was not particularly good and he could be quite difficult to deal with. But his wife Primrose was Irish and she and Jane became

fast friends, which greatly facilitated Walter and I through some rough spots over our pronged negotiations.

One of the first add-ons to the academic program was the result of Walter's plea that we help the "East People", by which he meant the persecuted Catholics of the former Soviet Bloc countries, many of whom had been denied university education because of their faith. Just in time Madeleine Rivest, the Canadian sister-in-law of an FUS board member was retiring from years of work teaching English to those of different languages and she volunteered to head up a new language program in Gaming. Once we added a Catechetics element it was supported by the USCCB. I asked a young auxiliary bishop of Vienna, Most Rev. Christoff Schoenborn, to be the spiritual advisor to what was now the LCI and he agreed, beginning a decades long collaboration with Franciscan's Gaming program. Madeleine Rivest brought in two assistants. Bobette Huzovic and Jennifer Healy, who devoted 30 years to the "East People", including scores of bishops, and which has profoundly helped and influenced the Church in Eastern Europe

Fr. Mike's "Yes" led to still other unplanned blessings. For example: through contacts made in Gaming I was introduced to Piet Dirksen, the Dutch mega philanthropist and told him about FUS. He then provided provided the first six scholarships for LCI students. He also selected FUS to play a leading role in a major project of youth evangelization, leading to the hiring of Marcus Grodi. Another significant blessing was Cardinal Schoenborn asking FUS to help the Austrian Bishops respond to Saint John Paul II's request to take over a Pontifical Institute in Holland which became the ITI, (International Theological Institute) originally based in Gaming; and Fr Werenfried Van Stratton, Founder of Aid to the Church in Need, personally committing to a gift of \$200,000 to launch the ITI; And many others too numerous to mention.

So my dear friends and colleagues, I gratefully accept this honor while acknowledging it belongs to God. This is a time of crisis in our nation and in the Church. Let us all pray that we rightly discern the Father's purposes and that He lets us help Him achieve them. I have no doubt he has prepared FUS to help in a major way!