

**Inaugural Address**  
**Delivered by Thomas Kunkel, President**  
**De Pere, Wisconsin**  
**October 10, 2008**

Thank you, Mike, for that most generous introduction. And thanks to all my colleagues for their words of welcome and counsel. Bishop Ricken, Abbot Neville, Chairman Kelly and the esteemed members of our Board of Trustees and emeriti, our Norbertine brethren, Mayor Walsh, Dr. Wegenke and my fellow college presidents, Dr. Dose and the faculty, staff and student body of St. Norbert College, family members and friends.

What a privilege it is for me to be standing before you as the seventh president of this storied institution. Let me say at the outset how thankful I am to the inaugural committee and to everyone who has been involved in preparing and delivering this afternoon's festivities, today's meals, and the beautiful Mass we've just celebrated at the Abbey. Deb and I are especially pleased that our daughters Katie, Claire, Helen and Grace could all be here today, and that my mother and father, my sisters and their husbands also are with us. My thanks as well to our many friends who came up for a little northern exposure to help send me off on this journey.

And while I'm thanking people, I'd be especially remiss for not acknowledging the fifth and sixth presidents of St. Norbert College, Drs. Thomas Manion and William Hynes, who have done so much to make this the prestigious institution it is today. Please join me in thanking Presidents Manion and Hynes.

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Whenever I find myself working on remarks of any consequence, I think back to the first time I was challenged to deliver a genuinely public address. This was in my hometown of Evansville, Indiana, where one of the local service clubs was sponsoring a speech contest for high school students, and my principal had invited me to represent our school. The theme of the contest was a broad one: "This I Believe."

Now, any of the Hoosiers in the hall today can tell you that even as a teenager I had something of a contrarian streak. The five or six other kids in the contest stuck to fairly predictable and comparable scripts; it won't surprise you that, according to their remarks, they believed in such staples as God, the flag, the Constitution, Creation. But my speech was... "This I Believe: The Pass-Fail Grading System."

Well, judging from the reaction of the assembled club members that afternoon, I might as well have said I believed in Greater Inter-marriage Between Earthlings and Klingons.

Their chilly reception immediately made me wonder how the speech had gone over with my principal, sitting somewhere out there in the back of the large room. Courageously, he

had not asked to see my draft beforehand or even inquired of my topic. And needless to say, my school was *not* using the pass-fail grading system. Had I perhaps outsmarted myself?

But returning to our table, I found that in fact he was delighted! So much so that when we got back to school, he had me tape-record the speech in order to share it with the faculty.

It was only years later that I really began to appreciate what a marvelous educational transaction had occurred here. It would dawn on me that, yes, this is precisely what a good teacher does: inspires confidence, encourages critical thinking and originality, conveys trust, leads the student to connect the lessons of the classroom with the challenges of the world—and just maybe in the process helps produce a better person.

Now fast-forward three and a half decades. Word goes out to the world that I am to be the next president of St. Norbert College. The various notices include a lovely introduction in the pages of our St. Norbert Magazine, which goes to alumni and friends of the college.

A few weeks later, magazine editor Susan Allen forwards me a congratulatory e-mail she has received from one particular reader in Indiana who just happened to see the article about me—Brother James Bluma, a member of the Congregation of the Holy Cross, who was my principal at Memorial High School, who invited me to give that speech—and who, it turns out, is an alum of St. Norbert College, 1952!

Coincidence? In one sense, of course, it's a fantastic, *Twilight Zone* kind of coincidence. But on a deeper level, if you really think about it, it's anything but. That's because I have no doubt whatsoever that when he was a student here all those years ago, young James Bluma had devoted Norbertine and lay teachers who sparked in him a quest for independent thinking and self-exploration. Later, as an educator himself, Brother Bluma would pass along those values, as I in turn have tried to do as a journalist, a manager, a teacher and a father.

I'm pleased to tell you that Brother Bluma is with us today. Please join me in welcoming him back to St. Norbert College.

So it's less a coincidence, I'd say, than a connection. And really, aren't we all connected? For one thing, we are all strivers. Some of us are striving to produce world-caliber research and scholarship. Some of us are striving to obtain first-class educations to prepare ourselves for lives beyond college. Some of us are striving to *pay* for those educations. And *all* of us are striving to be better human beings, the endeavor that never ends.

In the process, many of us are striving too for excellence. This might surprise you, but at heart I am a rather shy person. Yet my whole life I have been pushing myself, challenging myself, and in very public, un-shy ways. Why? Because I believe everyone has a moral obligation to make the most of the Creator's gifts. And as those gifts are

seldom self-evident, unearthing them is part of God's challenge for us. It is part of the process of becoming fully human.

Early on I felt one of my gifts was journalism, but it soon dawned on me that a shy journalist is something of an oxymoron. Later in my career I began to appreciate that I might have contributions to make as a manager, then as a writer of books, then as an educator. Yet similarly, a manager or author or teacher who avoids other people is by definition self-limiting. So I adapted my personality in order to confront these new challenges. In my pursuit of excellence I have far, far to go, but my quest continues and has now brought me to this inviting place on a beautiful river.

Now, it hardly takes a trained journalist to recognize that there's not one but two patron saints in these parts. The official one is St. Norbert of Xanten. The unofficial one, of course, is St. Vincent of Lombardi. I related this anecdote during my campus interviews last February, but with your permission I revisit it now since it's germane to the topic of today's sermon.

That visit to St. Norbert occurred just after last February's Super Bowl, and as usual our holy day of football obligation prompted many stories about Lombardi. But I came across one in Parade magazine, told by Bart Starr, that I hadn't read before. It had to do with the then-young quarterback and the ragtag Packers' first encounter with their determined new coach, just arrived from New York. The team had lost all but one of its 12 games the previous year, but Lombardi promised them things were going to change. "Gentlemen," he said, "we are going to relentlessly chase perfection, knowing full well we will not catch it, because nothing is perfect. But we are going to relentlessly chase it, because in the process we *will* catch excellence." I think just maybe you know the rest of the story.

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The pursuit of excellence.

You see that phrase on the cover of your program, and you're going to hear it so often this year that you'll think we've made it a mantra. In a sense, we will.

What does it mean, to be a truly excellent college?

As you know, ours increasingly is a discipline of assessment, and in terms of assessment "excellence" is rather readily benchmarked.

For starters—because everything at a people-centric organization begins with talent—excellence means you have an outstanding faculty: highly accomplished teachers and scholars who in turn are shepherding the next generation of teachers and scholars, who themselves have recently arrived after training at the finest academic institutions. Together they create an effervescent intellectual environment, one marked by innovative

and influential scholarly pursuits married with teaching so attentive that it is really mentorship.

A truly excellent school means you have state-of-the-art facilities that are the envy of your peer colleges.

It means you draw the best, most thoughtful students from your immediate region, augmented by a healthy number from other parts of the country and even the rest of the world who seek you out. These bright-eyed students steep themselves in research and community service, graduate on a timely basis, and go on to well-paying professional positions or advanced study at prestigious graduate schools.

It means you innovate in your co-curricular activities and pay as much attention to the 85 percent of your students' waking hours spent *outside* the classroom as the 15 percent spent inside.

It means you have creative administrators and staff who are full partners in the mission.

It means that in a nation one of whose glories is higher education, St. Norbert must be known literally everywhere as a model of Catholic and liberal arts education.

Yet as educators we also understand that assessment has its limitations, and that true excellence is not so readily benchmarked. That's because true excellence means we are succeeding without exception in our commitment to building great people—shaping their intellects and expertise, yes, but also their character. It is difficult to quantify such endeavors, yet we surely know success when we see confident young men and women striding across the commencement stage and right into the world, more than prepared to meet it head on.

You may have noticed in the front of our program an observation from Abraham Lincoln that I am fond of. He said, "Character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing."

Hoosiers tend to be rather proprietary of Abe, who spent his formative years in my home state. In fact, my wife's family resides in that part of rural southwestern Indiana where Lincoln lived as a young adult, and it's no real stretch to imagine him traversing the fields and hardwood stands of that very property as he visited friends and conducted his business in the small communities then emerging around there.

It was a tough frontier environment that did much to build Lincoln's character—a world where people worked the land, grappled together with adversity and tragedy, made good their promises, prayed to their God. They could not afford to be distracted by the shadows.

I scarcely have to tell you that *our* world is one where the popular messages are somewhat different—that image is everything, that it's style over substance, that it's

someone else's fault, that rules are for suckers, that it's less how you play the game than if you win. It is, in Lincoln's terms, a veritable landscape of shadows. So: Are we meeting Lincoln's implicit challenge? Are we helping our young people differentiate the trees from the shadows? Are we building people of character? Those seem to me to be apt questions for liberal arts colleges, and especially Catholic liberal arts colleges.

And more questions: What does it mean to be a truly educated person in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Are we paying enough attention to our collective history? To the ability to think critically? To the ethical implications of our private and professional choices? To personal responsibility in a digital environment? To the life of the mind and the spirit in a material world? Few industries are more change-averse than higher education, but in fact as educators we have a moral imperative to confront these fundamental issues.

Inaugurations are fitting occasions to contemplate such lofty questions, but we should likewise devote a little time to possible answers. I can already tell you that a president's days and nights are a continuum of activities, meetings, calls and obligations, all ostensibly advancing the cause of the institution. Still, it's useful to remember that, at the end of the day, there really are maybe three paramount things any leader can do alone. You can inspire people. You can articulate your organization's vision and standards. And finally, you can try to create a positive environment where people are motivated to realize that vision. The president can't make the vision happen. Only you can.

Put more succinctly, my job is to help you make St. Norbert great. Period.

Toward that end, here are a handful of primary, overarching goals that as president I will be focusing on, both in this important first year and into the future.

**Fundraising and stewardship.** When I interviewed here last February, literally every constituency I spoke with said development was St. Norbert's top priority, and so it is. While we are in an enviable financial condition, we must have greater flexibility to ensure that any qualified student who wants to come to St. Norbert *can* come here, regardless of means. We need similar flexibility to pursue institutional priorities and keep St. Norbert a state-of-the-art educational environment—a conspicuous example being the need for a top-quality science facility. We also need to be able to pay our people competitive wages and help promote the kind of scholarly and creative work equal to our talents. Our current economic uncertainty only reinforces the need for external support.

**Recruiting.** We will press our quest to attract the very best people to St. Norbert, be they faculty or facilities specialists, students or staff.

**Living our values.** In a world marked by relativism, St. Norbert College still stands for the same values it did when Abbot Pennings founded it in the waning days of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In recent years the College has renewed its commitment to the Norbertine mission and heritage, and that will remain a priority for as long as I'm privileged to serve as your president. And it's imperative that we model that commitment by truly living our values. In recent weeks we have been having a candid campuswide dialogue about how

to exhibit more tolerance toward one another, how to promote a fuller sense of gender equity, and how to bring a healthier diversity to all our endeavors and populations. While these can be complex, nuanced issues, in truth we are simply talking about applying the Golden Rule in the workplace—not to mention living our college’s motto: *Docere Verbo et Exemplo*: To teach by word and example.

**Shining a brighter light.** I have come to think of St. Norbert as something like a prized pearl—a thing of beauty but one that spends entirely too much time tucked away in a drawer. It needs to be brought out so it can be appreciated by all. Too few people outside our core enrollment area know about St. Norbert. That must change—not only out of fairness to the great work you’ve been doing for decades, but to lure more of those outstanding people here I’ve been talking about.

Besides, look at all we have to celebrate. Without breaking much of a sweat, one can run down our faculty list and cite example after example of world-class scholarship and creative endeavor. Biologist Jim Hodgson is a revered authority on the ecology of our region’s lakes. The expertise of economist Sandy Odorzynski is regularly called upon to help nations that are transitioning to market economies. Anthropologist Sabine Hyland is currently helping the National Geographic Society produce a documentary film on a newly discovered Incan burial site. Wolfgang Grassl’s field is business administration but his scholarly breadth is such that one of his recent books is on the Catholic intellectual tradition and another is on multiculturalism. Paul Wadell is an internationally respected theologian and cherished campus sage.

Or look at our student-scholars, like Ryan Pavlik, a triple major studying computer science, math and Spanish who is interning for Google, writing code for open-source software, and studying abroad in Valencia, Spain—all while operating his own computer consulting business! Or note that 100 percent of our spring chemistry graduates are receiving more than \$25,000 a year for post-graduate studies—most of them already pursuing Ph.D.s at top national institutions. Or consider Rochelle Barina, who just received our Founder’s Day award earlier this week. A religious studies and peace and justice double major, Rochelle has participated in or led more faith programs, campus lectures or service projects—including a recent mission to Hungary—than I can count. And in her “spare” time she is an NCAA All-Midwest academic selection in women’s soccer.

On a programmatic level, this caliber of achievement can be seen in such initiatives as our *Communio* first-year experience; our new, cross-divisional Center for Community Service and Learning, one of many signature programs here that focus on experiential learning; and an international program so innovative that a few years ago it was honored alongside those of Duke and North Carolina—company I think we can live with. Indeed, all these programs underscore our challenge to St. Norbert students, formally articulated by our Student Affairs Division, that they change themselves, change their community, and change their world.

Certainly this achievement is alive as well on our playing fields, where true student-athletes work with coaches as demanding as they are dedicated. A football team that under Jim Purtill has won a record 29 straight conference football games. A women's volleyball team that under Bethani Thibodeau has won its first 18 games this year. A women's basketball coach, Connie Tilley, who in her 33<sup>rd</sup> season will likely see her 500<sup>th</sup> victory. And lest we forget a consistently outstanding hockey team that under Tim Coughlin this year won the national championship!

And all this activity plays out on a glorious campus where a brick-and-stone heirloom like Main Hall can reside comfortably beside a high-tech masterpiece like the Mulva Library now rising in steel across Third Street—all of it maintained with immense personal pride by a facilities and grounds staff without peer.

I realize I'm starting to sound like a braggart, but here's my larger point: Examples of excellence are all around us—if we just take the time to look.

At the end of the day, excellence simply means we are holding high the bar. Think of that compelling statue of our patron St. Norbert, out on the north end of campus in the yard between Bemis and Cofrin. It's the image reproduced on the cover of your inaugural program. Take special note of how Norbert, this avatar of peace, holds aloft the olive branch that with his staff forms the cross. He does not set the bar at his waist, or at his chest, or even at eye level. He holds it high, a fellow striver, aiming to meet the heavens. Here, he is saying, this is your goal. If you are following me, this is your obligation.

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I want to say again how overwhelmed Deb and I have been by the warmth and enthusiasm of our reception. As soon as my appointment was announced we were inundated with emails and letters and calls from the community, both folks who are here and those in the great diaspora of St. Norbert alums.

One particularly welcome note came from the associate dean of the University of Maryland Law School, in Baltimore. His name is Michael Van Alstine, and he is a member of one of those wonderful extended St. Norbert families. As many of you perhaps have guessed, Michael's dad, a St. Norbert alum himself, is Larry Van Alstine, a longtime teacher, coach and athletic director here. His mom, Kay, works in our Admissions office. Mike's two sisters went to St. Norbert, as did two brothers—as did those brothers' wives.

So you might say the Van Alstines have a stake in St. Norbert.

Michael and I had lunch a few weeks after he sent me his letter. He is a delightful and thoughtful man who is out there building up the excellence of another fine educational institution. He is, in short, precisely the kind of person a president likes to point to when asked, "Who are your alumni?"

When I asked Michael what was the most important thing he felt St. Norbert offered him as an undergraduate, he thought for a moment and said simply, “Values”—the values overlaid on the education, the experience, that extra element of his growth as a human being.

When I asked him what was the most exciting thing about St. Norbert today, he thought again, then said, “Its unlimited potential.” And I thought to myself, *yes*, it’s almost as though he knew I had just started writing this speech!

Then Michael told me something I didn’t know, and in fact I bet most of you don’t either. In Prague, one of the world’s loveliest cities, there is an especially beautiful spot, the historic Charles Bridge that spans the River Vltava. The signature aspect of the bridge is that both sides are lined with marvelous statues of saints, peering down on the pedestrians as if to ensure safe passage.

Michael said he and his wife were walking across that bridge, checking out the saints, when they were suddenly stopped in their tracks. Who do they find smack in the middle of this holy avenue, occupying a place of honor, but St. Norbert of Xanten!

As a writer I am delighted to have such a wonderful metaphor with which to conclude this celebration of our future and the pursuit of excellence. As St. Norbert our patron stands so prominently on the Vltava, so will his namesake college, founded 110 years ago on this idyllic bend of the Fox.

My thanks to you, every single one of you in the room today, for helping us achieve that excellence.

May we summon the wisdom and judgment to meet our collective mission.

And may the Lord our God carry us all in His warm embrace.

Thank you.