

I received a call from my wife Wednesday around noon telling me that Tom Dillon, our College's President for the last 18 years, had died in an auto accident in Ireland. It will be a long time before I can believe that he is gone. He has been a fixture in my life since I came to the College as a 17 year old freshman 26 years ago. At the time, Dr. Dillon was the Dean of the College, and also a full-time tutor. He led my freshman seminar, a weekly evening class devoted to discussions of Greek literature and history. We had the class in a spare room in St. Joseph Commons, the only permanent building on campus. The room was not air-conditioned, so we frequently left the doors open, allowing the lowing of the cattle and the cat-calls of the peacocks to remind us of the pastoral setting for our introduction to the roots of civilization.

Visitors to the College today will see the external fruit of Tom's work during his 18 years as President. No longer a trailer park in the midst of a pasture, Thomas Aquinas College boasts one of the most architecturally beautiful campuses on the West Coast. God willing, Tom will be remembered centuries from now for being the man responsible for the transformation.

But he likely won't be remembered for the man he was. Having been his student, then his colleague as a teacher and a collaborator, though never his peer, I can say that he was a man of faith, principle, reason, clarity, devotion, indefatigable energy, and far-sightedness, a formidable opponent when necessary, a loyal friend. He was methodical and clear in the classroom, always attentive to developing the powers of mind and expression in his students as much as to their learning particular matters before them. He believed that greatest good he could give his students was to set them on the path to becoming life-long learners. He encouraged our desire to learn by letting us spout off our opinions, yet formed clear thinking by insisting that we account for them. He lived in the classroom the fundamental tenet of a Great Books program – the books are the real teachers. He was in principle and practice the Socratic midwife who allowed Sophocles and Plato, Aristotle and St. Thomas, to beget great ideas in our souls. I asked him to advise my senior thesis, not because of his expertise, but because I knew that he would help me make my own ideas deeper and clearer – and he did.

Tom's preeminent care for students was a model for me and others. He not only cared for us in the classroom. He ate lunch with students, showing us that the classroom was only the beginning of the learning process. He frequently had students over for dinner and extra seminars. One time, he invited interested students over to try out a reading that he wanted to add to the freshman seminar. After leading a good discussion, he asked for our opinions on the work and its possible inclusion. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is still a part of the curriculum.

Not many people will realize Tom's importance in forming our current faculty. During his Deanship and as President, he always insisted that hiring and cultivating the teaching faculty was the most important work he did. As Dean, foreseeing the tripling of the student body that he brought about as President, he encouraged top students to consider returning to their alma mater after graduate studies and teaching elsewhere. In his typically forthright way, he would say: "I'm not giving you any guarantees. I think you

might make a good tutor here. But, you never know, you could turn out to be terrible in five or ten years.” He stayed in contact, and now many of us are ready to shoulder the responsibility of continuing the College’s great work. As President, he took the time necessary to thoroughly go over applications; he was present for all the applicant visits and committee discussions. Until his fundraising duties became overwhelming, he would make sure to stay close to newer tutors, helping them and judging them during the critical early times. His attention has shaped the character of the faculty.

In every faculty discussion, whatever the topic, however minute it seemed in the big picture, Tom was always careful to connect it to the principles of the College, of the faith, of the moral and intellectual life. That always deeply impressed me, and I learned so much from participating in those discussions. I was also deeply impressed by Tom’s commitment to his task; the light in his office never seemed to go out day or night. His reasoned faith was always evident: “Act as though it all depends on you; pray knowing that it all depends on God.” Tom lived that publicly as well as privately – novenas for various fundraising efforts formed a regular, though not overburdening, part of the College’s devotional life.

I wish he had been able to stay more involved in campus life over the past decade. I even was bold enough to suggest that the College needed him more as a tutor and faculty leader than as President. He replied, with his customary forthrightness, that the College had desperately needed his fundraising abilities when he started as President, and that he hoped to be able to ensure that future Presidents would not have to worry about money as he had to. No doubt Tom understands now the words of Homer we discussed in my very first classes at Thomas Aquinas College, “Part He granted; part He denied.” With the magnificent Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel, Tom fundamentally completed the campus; the endowment he hoped would make the College financially independent will have to wait on the Lord’s good pleasure.

Thomas Aquinas College has been a tremendous blessing for thousands of students, teachers and staff members, and we owe Tom a tremendous debt of gratitude for that. At the very beginning of his Presidency, Tom faced two great threats to the College’s continued existence. Financially the College faced insolvency at the same time that the accreditation so necessary to successful fundraising was being used as a tool to attack the College’s core mission. Tom showed both his faith and his principle in refusing to budge on the College’s mission, making it clear that he would trust in God’s Providence alone rather than give one iota on that mission. Other college presidents know how difficult a choice that is to face, but Tom never wavered. Rather, he spent untold hours with several colleagues rallying opposition to the accrediting agency, turning the dire threat into a great victory for the College that also helped raise the funds necessary to save the College. I don’t believe he foresaw this double success. But he knew clearly what he had to do and gave his all in doing it. God blessed him and us for that.

I didn’t always agree with Tom, but I always admired his forthrightness, commitment and dedication. It will be a long time before I can really believe that he is gone, and the College will face a great challenge in the near future as we move on. But I am confident

that the College he devoted his life to will continue strongly to fulfill its mission and to serve the Church, thanks in large part to his example and his prayers.

Andrew Seeley