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## Saint John Fisher College: What's the Connection? (First Friday Lecture, October 3, 2008)

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### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"In the year of our Lord 1535, at 5:00 on Tuesday morning, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Lieutenant of the Tower of London awoke the sleeping John Fisher to deliver a message from King Henry VIII: the Bishop of Rochester was to be put to death that day before noon. Because the recently created Cardinal did not recognize Henry's claim to be supreme head of the Church in England nor the validity of his marriage to Anne Boleyn, John Fisher was judged a traitor. In late May 1535, when the King was informed that Pope Paul III had created John Fisher a Cardinal, he wise-cracked that he would send Fisher's head to Rome to receive the red hat. The imprisoned Bishop had been suffering a long physical illness, not at all helped by long hours of interrogation and a lengthy mock trial, when the news of his execution arrived. He turned over to catch some additional sleep asking the messenger to, "Awake me in an hour or two because I did not sleep well last night not for fear of death, but because I have been sick and am weak." When the lieutenant arrived back at 9:00, the ailing Bishop was putting on his clothes. He asked the lieutenant to hand him his fur neck scarf to keep him warm for his ride to the place of execution. He did not want to become any sicker."

**Saint John Fisher; Saint John Fisher College:  
What's the Connection?  
(First Friday Lecture, October 3, 2008)**

*Rev. William Graf*

In the year of our Lord 1535, at 5:00 on Tuesday morning, June 22<sup>nd</sup>, the Lieutenant of the Tower of London awoke the sleeping John Fisher to deliver a message from King Henry VIII: the Bishop of Rochester was to be put to death that day before noon. Because the recently created Cardinal did not recognize Henry's claim to be supreme head of the Church in England nor the validity of his marriage to Anne Boleyn, John Fisher was judged a traitor. In late May 1535, when the King was informed that Pope Paul III had created John Fisher a Cardinal, he wise-cracked that he would send Fisher's head to Rome to receive the red hat. The imprisoned Bishop had been suffering a long physical illness, not at all helped by long hours of interrogation and a lengthy mock trial, when the news of his execution arrived. He turned over to catch some additional sleep asking the messenger to, "Awake me in an hour or two because I did not sleep well last night not for fear of death, but because I have been sick and am weak." When the lieutenant arrived back at 9:00, the ailing Bishop was putting on his clothes. He asked the lieutenant to hand him his fur neck scarf to keep him warm for his ride to the place of execution. He did not want to become any sicker.

As he waited at the bottom of the place of execution, John Fisher, out of weakness, leaned against the wall looking for some sign that he was doing God's will. He took out a copy of the Latin New Testament and randomly opened it to the lines in John's Gospel which are translated: *This, however, is eternal life that they know you alone to be the true God and that you sent Jesus Christ. I have made you known more clearly on earth; I have finished the work you gave me to do. Now glorify me, Father, as I come into your presence, as I have glorified you.* These words strengthened him as he slowly climbed the stairs to the place where he was beheaded. His final words blessed the king and the country. John Fisher, the Bishop of Rochester, was beheaded. His head was boiled and put on a lance hanging from a wall of the city of London so all would know his death; his body was dumped unceremoniously into an unmarked hole near the execution site. Later it was exhumed and buried in the Church of Saint Peter in Chains near the body of his friend, Thomas More, who was similarly beheaded for the same reason two weeks later.

Certainly Cardinal John Fisher, Bishop of the Diocese of Rochester in England, earned his place in the ranks of the saints of the Roman Catholic Church because of his strong beliefs and integrity that led to his martyrdom. Similarly Doctor John Fisher, Chancellor of Cambridge University, can be numbered among the great educators in the history of England. His Christian humanist vision of a university education was rooted in a rich Catholic Heritage: the use of faith and reason in pursuit of Truth. One might even argue that this same vision played an indirect role in the history of University education

in the United States. Some Cambridge graduates were instrumental in the foundation of Harvard University, the premier university in this country. John Harvard, a Cambridge graduate, provided the basis of the new college's library and a monetary gift from his will. He died at an early age. In gratitude for the gifts the founders named the college, Harvard. Additionally, Bishop John Fisher was the pastor of an impoverished small diocese where he ministered to all, especially, to those whose lives were steeped in poverty and neglect. Unlike many other bishops at the time, John Fisher did not seek promotion to a richer and more prestigious diocese.

Better to understand this 16<sup>th</sup> century martyr and the educator, we return to his childhood in Beverly, a small town in northeast England. His family was financially secure so he had access to a good education in preparation for his undergraduate degree at Cambridge. The study of Latin, in preparation for college life where Latin was the language of instruction, also allowed him to explore the writings of many poets, philosophers, and ancient historians in their original language. He joined the student body at Cambridge in 1483 at the age of 14 to earn, in rapid succession his Bachelor and Master of Arts degrees that demonstrated his mastery of philosophy, grammar, literature, geometry, music and astronomy. As a resident of Michael House, and later as one of its masters, he found a home to read and study in preparation for his doctoral degree in theology which he earned in 1501. Before earning this degree that crowned his academic studies, John Fisher was ordained a priest at the early age of 22. To be ordained at such a young age (the ordinary age for ordination to priesthood was 24 years of age), he received the necessary dispensation. His life as an ordained priest and, later as bishop, reflected a deep commitment to the well-being of the varied communities he served for the next 41 years.

As a young priest John Fisher met Lady Margaret Beaumont, the mother of King Henry VII. This pious and well-educated woman was attracted by Fisher's holiness of life and the gentle wisdom for such a young person. Then she chose him to be her personal confessor and spiritual director. Fisher's commitment to make Cambridge University academically stronger (it had fallen into hard times academically and Oxford far outshined it) prompted Lady Margaret to help him to build and endow Saint John's College as well as refurbish Christ's College including Michael House. Fisher wanted to provide England with the best of theology and a better educated laity. At the time it was mainly through preaching that the laity was educated in matters of faith and morals. Fisher's purpose was to provide an educated clergy who would preach more effectively and model that which they preached. These new licensed preachers would have an endowment so they would not be dependent on devious financial schemes to provide their sustenance. Fisher was well aware of the ignorance and immorality of some of the preachers on the Continent who were sparking a theological revolution that demanded a reply not just by learned articles, books, and debates, but also by a proper mode of life required of those who were church leaders and teachers. The wise young priest knew that a clergy's lack of good education, its immorality of lifestyle, and a misuse of preaching to finance civil and ecclesiastical projects would damage the life of the church if not reformed. He chose education as a way to reform.

To assure that the undergraduate and graduate students would be able to read and research the texts effectively, Fisher employed Desiderius Erasmus, the famous Dutch humanist, as a professor of Greek and Hebrew. At the age of 48 the Chancellor-Bishop asked Erasmus to tutor him as well as the students in Greek. He was not a person who would make demands on others and not on himself. Inspired by his own progress in Greek, Fisher would later successfully pursue learning Hebrew. During his lifetime John Fisher also collected and studied many of the original texts. The collection of books developed into one of the largest and finest private libraries in England. In his final will and testament the learned bishop left the collection to Cambridge library. Unfortunately many of these rare books were lost or stolen when his property was seized after his execution.

During this entire period, as Chancellor at Cambridge and Bishop of Rochester, John Fisher would continuously read, study and reflect upon the contents of the books he had so carefully collected. He would write books of polemical theology, as well as devotional tracts, which would influence the religious debates even on the Continent. Many in Europe judged him as one of the greatest theologians of the time. As the Shepherd of souls in his own diocese, his lifestyle was most simple. He would provide a decent meal and warm hospitality for the many people who would stop at his drafty house on the way to or from London. Even if the visitors were at odds with their host theologically, they would find an open mind and a gentle heart. His attitude was: I might learn something new and change my mind. Even his method of dealing with those who had lapsed into heresy or dissolute lifestyle was firm, but gentle. This tireless shepherd's ministry to the poor and hungry was exceptional. The food at his table was simple so that more food could be given to those who had less. He would send blankets from his own bed to families who suffered from the cold. Parishioners who were sick and dying would know that their Bishop would visit them and sit with them long into the night to comfort and support them with his presence and prayers. Erasmus would define him as "the one man at this time who is incomparable for uprightness of life, for learning, and for greatness of soul" (Davies, 14).

When I finished the first drafts of this talk, I came upon a brief biography of John Fisher written by Fr. John Cavanaugh. What struck me was that both of us began our text with John Fisher's death. I thought it curious. Then I began to reflect: one's willingness to die for one's beliefs depends on the building blocks of those beliefs. John Fisher spent his life preparing for his death.

## **Part 2: Saint John Fisher College**

Bishop Bernard McQuaid, the first bishop of the Diocese of Rochester in America, dreamed of establishing a Catholic college for men in Rochester. It would be much like Seton Hall University he had established in New Jersey in 1856 when he became its first president. As bishop, in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, McQuaid's name was synonymous with Catholic education in the United States. This strongly determined bishop had already established and promoted Catholic schools for students in

elementary and secondary schools. His visionary efforts when he established Nazareth High School, helped to lay the ground work for Nazareth College, a college for women. It opened after his death in 1924. With the overwhelming support of the people of the diocese, McQuaid built 2 model seminaries. St. Andrew's Preparatory Seminary was named after the patron saint of the Diocese of Rochester in England. Shortly, thereafter in 1893, he blessed the newly constructed Saint Bernard's, a major theological seminary and graduate school for students to the diocesan priesthood. His dream for an outstanding graduate school of theology was not too different from Saint John Fisher. Both wanted well trained priests to serve the people. In McQuaid's case it would forge a Catholic and American identity in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He dreamed, but failed to establish a men's college in Rochester.

The seed for the men's college, however, was watered and nurtured later in 1936 when Archbishop (later Cardinal) Mooney invited the Basilian Fathers from Toronto to staff Aquinas Institute. With specific conditions the contract between the Diocese of Rochester and the Basilian Fathers gave the priority to the Basilian community to establish a men's college in the Rochester area at a later date. Until that time, beginning with the school year of 1937, they would be the core faculty of Aquinas Institute.

The dream of a men's college would become a reality about 38 years after McQuaid's death. Fr. Hugh Haffey, a Basilian priest and teacher of chemistry on the faculty of Aquinas Institute, developed the vision of a possible men's college under the auspices of the Basilian Fathers. Ten years later, with the avid support of Cardinal Mooney's successor, Bishop James Kearney, and a diligent and very competent 2 person diocesan staff: Fr. John Randall and Zelda Lyons, Fr. Haffey became the central driving force to establish Saint John Fisher College.

Bishop Kearney had been present in Rome in 1935 for the canonization of Saint John Fisher and Saint Thomas More. The event must have made a deep impression on the young bishop who, at that time, was Bishop of Salt Lake City. His classical education and historical awareness probably played a role in his fondness for the two martyrs. Given the similar names of the two dioceses and the connection that Bishop McQuaid had already established with Saint Andrew's Seminary, the naming of the new college flowed rather naturally. Both Fr. Haffey and Bishop Kearney championed the naming of the college because of John Fisher's support of a quality college education and his connection with the Diocese of Rochester in England. Bishop Kearney would later name Saint John Fisher as one of the primary patrons of the Diocese of Rochester in America.

Saint John Fisher College was born in February 1948 (and we celebrate its 60<sup>th</sup> birthday during this Alumni Weekend) when the Diocese of Rochester and the Basilian Fathers conducted a major \$1,000,000 Fund Drive. The largest drive the diocese had yet seen. Three years later the first major building was opened to the first class of an all male college. In 1958 to celebrate Bishop Kearney's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a priest, the building received its name; Bishop Kearney was also elected the college's first chancellor.

In special ways we remember aspects of our connections with Cardinal John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester. The college celebrates the various sports teams as well as our school newspaper, Cardinal Courier, with the name “cardinal” more the person of Cardinal John Fisher rather than the birds whose colors are cardinal red. In his hurry to sign his extensive correspondence, John Fisher would pen: Jo Roff (Joannis Roffensis, John of Rochester) and, hence, the name of the college’s popular yearbook. At first the residence of the priests and students for the Basilian community, Michael House, much as Cambridge’s Michael House was for the young John Fisher, has continued to be a center of learning, discussion, and the performing arts. Connections with the name and the life of John Fisher, the Bishop-martyr of the Diocese of Rochester in England are still alive and well.

### **Part 3: The College and Fr. John Cavanaugh, CSB**

In 1985 Fr. John Cavanaugh, Dr. Tom Cromback and Judy Reynolds provided the campus of Saint John Fisher College an opportunity to celebrate the 450th anniversary of the death of Saint John Fisher (it was also the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the canonization of John Fisher and Thomas More). Fr. Cavanaugh had been a faculty member from the college’s early days; Dr. Cromback one of the college’s earliest students and eventually (and still) a member of its faculty; Judy Reynolds was in charge of publicity. She was a motivating force to promote the life of Saint John Fisher and his connection with the college. I am sure, for all three, it was a celebration in gratitude for the blessings they received and shared as members of the Saint John Fisher College community.

If I know Fr. Cavanaugh, it was especially a celebration of love. He researched the life and works of the martyred cardinal bishop and published a short biography of the college’s patron. The stories of John Fisher’s pastoral goodness and warm hospitality demonstrated so often towards the poor, his colleagues at the University and in the House of Lords, and even his enemies must have touched the heart of Fr. Cavanaugh. Himself a scholar, a musician, wonderfully pastoral, and ever hospitable, Fr. Cavanaugh appreciated the constant search for knowledge and the extensive scholarship of the patron of the college. To express that goodness and knowledge in a positive and life giving way required a thoughtful discipline of mind and heart. These special qualities Fr. Cavanaugh had discovered within the daily life of John Fisher. They also were perfectly mirrored in the motto of the Basilian community that founded Saint John Fisher College: Teach me goodness, discipline, knowledge.

The motto, emblazoned on the college’s coat of arms, articulated the spirit of words found in verses 65-70 from Psalm 119 in the Hebrew Scriptures. They are words that Jesus probably sang as part of his training as a young Jewish male for a liturgical service of praise. The psalm sang of a way of life: to ponder and to discover the real meaning of life. The lengthy hymn additionally offered prescriptions to deal with life’s challenges. If any student contemplates the way of life that God offers: a life of goodness,

right decision making, and knowledge, that student is better prepared to participate in and later transform the society around him or her as alumnus/a. The psalmist encourages the singer to choose a life that will be creative in the diversity s/he meets along life's journey. Personally, I have found it interesting that our Catholic Heritage celebrated in the Basilian motto has its roots in an ancient Jewish hymn. We do celebrate diversity.

No doubt Fr. Cavanaugh often meditated often upon the motto of his religious community. It helped form him and the college community he helped form in over 50 years of service at the college. Always the dedicated professor, he spoke often of the desire to keep alive and promote the rich heritage of Catholic studies and education. The art and practice of living a good life that enriches many is deeply rooted and expressed in the vast literature of a multi-cultural world. Philosophy, the queen of the arts and sciences, reflects the thought that articulates ways of understanding many of life's mysteries. We still use the title Ph.D., Doctor of Philosophy, as a way to celebrate the various academic disciplines that seek out those mysteries. History recounts and interprets our common, yet diverse, journey through time and cultures. Languages communicate not just ideas, but also the deepest urgings of the heart. Math and the other sciences, natural and social, allow us to stand in wonder of the universe and study its millions of voices that speak of an evolving creation. Our Catholic heritage utilizes the arts and sciences to articulate a living (thus, changing) faith seeking solid reason and understanding. Religious studies offer a systematic venue to study the theologies of various religions and, in the spirit of ecumenism and interfaith experiences, seek ways that can respectfully dialogue about differences. Rooted in the arts and sciences that liberate us from ignorance, a diverse and pluralistic community like Saint John Fisher College can and does create an atmosphere in which we openly encounter others and promote the well being of all humankind.

To employ and promote the broad spectrum of what it means to be Catholic and the college's rich Catholic heritage is core to the mission of Saint John Fisher College especially when it purports to serve as an agent of positive change within the varied communities in which its graduates serve. However, the rich Catholic Heritage of Saint John Fisher College is not restricted solely to the diverse academic programs or to its Catholic name. It is the living spirit of that heritage that was rooted in the daily life and inspiring death of Saint John Fisher: his care for those who were poor and disenfranchised; the hospitality that he offered to guests at his table no matter their rank or title; the willingness to encounter others who profess different beliefs with compassion and openness; the gentle care the pastoral bishop showed those who disagreed with him. The motto of the college, inherited from its founders, asks God to teach a gentle goodness, right decision making, and a knowledge that informs by critical thinking. It is a complete package: mind and heart.

Fr. John Cavanaugh established a Chair of Catholic Studies in memory of his parents William and Helen Cavanaugh to celebrate and continue the intellectual foundations for what Saint John Fisher College has stood for these 60 years. In 2008 the goodness, discipline and knowledge of its patron, its founders, its alumni, and its present community of scholars is still more than words; it is a way of life in the pursuit of Truth.



When Father Haffey later visited Queens College at Cambridge, he asked the rector what advise would he give a young Saint John Fisher College. The rector replied:

The secret of excellence lies in the provision of an environment in which people can truly learn, and above all, in which minds of excellence are laid open to the young. By environment I mean not only books and buildings,  
but  
more important than all these....professors and students.... (Haffey, 79)

In the final pages of his memoirs of the founding of Saint John Fisher College, Fr. Haffey wrote of his wish.

I would single out the notion of compassion as the necessary  
distinguishing  
and continuing feature of the great college: compassion on the part of  
administrators and teachers towards the students; compassion on the part  
of  
the students for each other. (Haffey, 74)

Saint John Fisher College has been, and continues to be, faithful to its Catholic Heritage by its excellence and compassion.

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