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From The Morning Call

DeSales' first 40 years rest on vision, talent, region

As we celebrate our 40th birthday this year, DeSales University is greatly blessed. We honor our patron, Saint Francis de Sales, and we have many individuals to thank for our brief history. The beauty of the Lehigh Valley, the dynamic energy of the people of the region, the geography of Center Valley, the strong faith of the community and its rich diversity of educational, governmental and civic institutions all point to the loving hand of God. We are truly fortunate to be in a community where families flourish and people care for one another.

DeSales University is the product of two parents, the Catholic Diocese of Allentown and the religious congregation of the Oblates of Saint Francis de Sales. The inspiration for our existence came from the founding bishop of the diocese. On Jan. 28, 1961, Pope John XXIII created the Diocese of Allentown out of the five northern counties of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia (Lehigh, Berks, Carbon, Northampton and Schuylkill). Bishop Joseph McShea, an auxiliary bishop to the Archbishop of Philadelphia and pastor of St. Francis de Sales Church, became the leader of this new diocese. The Philadelphia Archdiocese has more Catholic colleges and universities than any city in the world, except for Rome. Bishop McShea knew that the Lehigh Valley had a rich tradition of religiously affiliated institutions of higher education. For him, a Catholic college in the Lehigh Valley was a must.

The Oblates of Saint Francis de Sales were well-known to Bishop McShea. We were one of the largest religious congregations in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. We conducted Northeast Catholic High School, at one time the largest Catholic high school in the world, Father Judge High School, Archbishop Wood High School, and many parishes. Bishop McShea approached the Very Rev. John Conmy, provincial of the Oblates, to see if we might be interested in pursuing his grand idea. Within a year, a handshake sealed the partnership. Rev. Conmy went to the Catholic University of America, where one of our priests was teaching physics. Soon, the Rev. J. Stuart Dooling was packing up his few belongings and heading for Center Valley.

In an age when many were finding it difficult to believe, this was an act of incredible faith. Rev. Dooling, Rev. Conmy and Bishop McShea had chosen one of the most challenging periods in the history of the American church to launch this new adventure. Many Catholic colleges were experiencing declining enrollments. Dissent from formal Catholic teaching was emerging. Lesser men would have hesitated. But, on Sept. 22, 1965, Allentown College of Saint Francis de Sales, with only two buildings completed, opened its doors and welcomed 156 male freshmen.

I came to DeSales University in 1974. I had just completed my theological studies and received ordination to the priesthood. I came as an instructor in philosophy. It has been my delight to participate in this enchanting story in many ways: teacher, administrator, colleague, adviser, planner and minister. I attribute our success to three phenomena.

First, the Diocese of Allentown has embraced DeSales University with an enthusiasm that is rare in American higher education. Bishop McShea was a visionary. He insisted that the new college be independent from both the diocese and the religious order, so it was incorporated as a separate entity. Its board was established with ownership rights and responsibilities. Committed and dedicated laypeople, primarily from the diocese, have overseen the growth and development of the university. This combination of affirmation from the clergy and dedication from the laity is essential.
Second, the extraordinary talent and dedication of the Oblates of Saint Francis de Sales is crucial. When the scriptures speak about a temple built of living stones, they clearly point to these valiant men. Their legacy is everywhere on the campus. The spirituality of Christian humanism developed by Saint Francis de Sales also speaks powerfully about collaboration between the clergy and laity in the ministries of the church. This spirit of communion is so needed in our age.

Finally, the fertile soil of the Lehigh Valley produces great fruit. DeSales University has taken root in the Lehigh Valley. We have a modest and humble mission. We do not seek to be a national or international university. We are here for the people of our region. Our ACCESS program began because people asked us to provide an opportunity for working adults to complete an undergraduate degree. Each of our masters degrees is a result of a request by segments of the community.

DeSales University does not live in an abstract universe. The ability to respond, quickly and professionally, to present needs is a hallmark of DeSales University. We love this region. We are here to serve in excellent and caring ways. This is our honor and our joy. And, we have only begun.