No matter how many times I’ve visited DeSales University since my commencement (eighteen years ago) … no matter how much growth and change there’s been to the campus (there’s probably double the number of buildings now than were here back then) … no matter how many new and unfamiliar faces I might see - it strikes me each time I’ve been back here to visit, that this place still feels very much like home … and that I still really miss this place. So if you would allow me to give a piece of unsolicited advice to you undergrads, it would be simply this: enjoy and maximize your time here. I think back to how my friends I were so often focused on the 'next thing' – what we were going to do this summer, next year, after college - we almost spent more time thinking ahead rather than just embracing the moment. This is something you really don’t realize until later in life: how blessed we are to receive a college education, and especially how incredibly blessed to receive it at a place like DeSales University.

I realize that saying all this makes me sound like “one of those old alumni people” we used to think were cute when they came around and interrupted our daily routines, when we were students at Allentown College. But I hope you’ll indulge me, because as a priest I can’t tell you how much I appreciate, and what a true honor it is, to be able to celebrate Mass and preach for the first time here, in the very place where I offered so many prayers while trying to discern what God was calling me to do with my life. This is such a great gift, particularly as we prepare to celebrate our Patronal Feast of St. Francis de Sales. So I wanted to just take this moment to thank Fr. Dailey for this opportunity and invitation. And to say thank you to all the people who make up DeSales University, especially my professors (many of whom are still teaching on campus), advisors, administrators and staff (some of whom I went to school with or
worked with), as well as the many, many great priests we were blessed by (and that you continue to be blessed by) for all they did for me during my years of college. Again, as I get older, I begin to recognize how important all of these people were to my formation as a young man and as a priest, and I remain deeply grateful for and appreciative to them.

One of the things that was so different for me coming to DeSales University was that this was the first Catholic school I had attended. That was a very unique thing for me. We were able to talk, think, learn and openly share our Catholic faith in an academic setting. We were able to pray together. And we had an opportunity to meet and interact with priests in a much different way than many of us had been able to, up until that point.

For example, Fr. O’Connor, your current president, taught the first class I had as a college freshman: “Introduction to Philosophy.” I know I don’t have to explain how Fr. O’Connor “broke the mold” of my perceptions of what a priest was like. He was one of the most intelligent men I had ever met, and one of the funniest as well, who seemed to find amusement in observing us suffering through the rigors of his classes. Weekly debates, oral quizzes (that he videotaped so you could go back and relive the horror of seeing you make a fool of yourself), papers... it was all so tough. I had never been so challenged like that before. Looking back at those Philosophy and then, later, Theology courses with Dr. Kane & Fr. Dailey and many other professors - they were excellent preparation because they were actually tougher than the courses I took in Seminary/graduate school.

But as a freshman, it was incredibly intimidating. After those brutal weekly seminars with Fr. O’Connor, sooner than I ever expected, his mid-term quickly came on the horizon and scared the heck out of me. Of course, he presented it very casually by telling us he was giving us all the questions in advance so no one should have a problem getting an “A” on it. He gave us a review sheet with a list of eight essay questions. From that list, Father would pick six questions, and then we would have to answer five of them. So, of course, I immediately focused on the fact that I could skip two questions altogether. But that didn’t really make it any easier because basically you still had to memorize and outline your answers to the other ones. So, a question might be something like: “Explain the meaning of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave in relation to Socrates final address; note three similarities, three contrasts and explain how it is related to your college experience” ... ouch! So you basically had to write six mini-term papers, outline them, memorize those outlines - oh, and they had to be correct too - and then be able to regurgitate them the day of the exam in those dreaded blue books. (I so don’t miss those.) I had worked on this review sheet for the whole week and a
half. Trying to memorize and remember it was torturous. To give you some idea, it caused me for the first time ever to pull an “all-nighter”.

So, now it’s the morning of the exam. A fellow student – I’ll call her Allie (because that's her name) – who is truly one of funniest, most random, crazy people I’ve ever met (in the “ha ha;” not “EEK” sense of that word) came along. Simply put she was a theatre major. For those of you who are theatre majors, you know that’s totally not a slam; it’s meant to be descriptive. Allie is dramatic both on and off the stage. Seriously, because of some health stuff she went through earlier in life, she could never take drugs or drink alcohol; so she was completely drug free and sober, but you would have sworn she was on something. Anyway, the morning of Fr. O’Connor’s midterm was really the first time I spoke to Allie. I was pacing in Dooling Hall, outside the classroom, reading through my notes one last time and waiting for the torture session to start. I didn’t really know Allie; I mean, I had heard of her and definitely heard her in some of her more colorful moments in class and in McShea (where the cafeteria used to be). I tended to stay away from the louder types. So she comes up to me that morning, looking like she was just shot out of a canon (hair all a mess); she doesn’t even know my name, but she comes up to me and says, “Yeah - you - you look smart . . . you gotta help me . . . We have a test today? Right? What’s going to be on it, I mean what do I need to know?”

That was the first time in a week and a half I was able to relax and feel reasonably confident I wasn’t going to perform the absolute worst on the exam. I think I just looked at her and said something like, “You’re joking, right?” That’s when she just launched into her speech: “You don’t understand. I didn’t have a choice. I was at Labuda all week. PLEASE – You gotta help me!” That’s when Fr. O’Connor walked in, and she just turns her head and says, “I’ll go talk to him. He’s a priest; he has to be nice.” And that’s when I said, “Yeah, well I know his Boss is pretty nice. And you know what, at this point, you’re better off talking to Him, because Jesus is the only one who can help you now.” I’m not sure what type of prayer she uttered before the exams were handed out, but I do know there were no miracles for Allie that morning.

Looking back on that, I think of how many times I was in this same chapel or Wills Hall with similar types of prayers: “God, please let her say yes to going to the formal with me” … “Please God, you have to fix this computer so that it un-crashes itself and my paper comes back” … “Jesus, you gotta get me into that class next semester; I can’t take 8:00 in the morning Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays.” There were a lot of prayers I said that seemed to go unanswered. There were a lot of minor miracles that I prayed for that never came true, the way I wanted them to, at least. And I bet I’m not the only one who’s been in this building and had that same experience, an
experience that seemed incredibly unfair at the time. Isn’t that what our prayers are supposed to do; isn’t God supposed to get us out of a bind? Perform miracles for us, like all the essays we’re not prepared to write simply flowing out of our pens through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit? Especially when we hear a Gospel like this. Think about it - when you hear the term miracle, you often look at things like Jesus curing someone of a life-threatening illness that isolated the person from the rest of the community, or even Jesus raising people from the dead. Those are miracles. This one we hear about tonight seems a bit odd; it seems to invite us to look for Jesus to bail us out on the next mid-term catastrophe. But let’s look more closely at what’s happening here.

Jesus is at this major party, this wedding. And in those days, there was no honeymoon (no Carnival Cruise ships or Perillo tours yet), so this was the honeymoon, too. It’s something the whole town was at, something they had all been looking forward to - after all, there weren’t a lot of joyful celebrations for the people of Cana in the first century. Things were kind of bleak, so this was a major deal. Jesus and his disciples are there enjoying the party - which is pretty cool in itself, isn’t it? He’s just there, celebrating, eating, drinking, maybe even singing or dancing. Just another guest having a great time with everyone else. Then, all of a sudden, there’s a major crisis. They’ve run out of wine.

Now, probably only this congregation in front of me can fully appreciate what a major problem running out of alcohol at a party is! For most of us - well I probably should take myself out of that list - for a lot of people, let’s say, they’d see running out of alcohol at a party as embarrassing, but, hey, “what’s the big deal?” However, back then it was a big deal. The whole festive atmosphere would have ended. It would have been 'last call' just as the celebration was getting going. For the newlyweds, their moment of joy and excitement and happiness would have turned to embarrassment and even shame as the guests - their friends, relatives and neighbors - kind of look at each other and say, “Well, I guess that’s it. I guess we should just go on back home.”

Because many of us have heard the story before, we kind of imagine that Mary is going to Jesus expecting him to turn water into wine. That’s what I kind of imagined, like when there’s some kid at a party who can sing really well and the kid’s incredibly, and obsessively, proud mother is there going up to her son or daughter prompting them with “Look, the entertainment didn’t show up, you go up and sing, go on.” The kid is like, “Oh mom . . .” and the mom just turns smugly to the guests and says, “Don’t worry everybody, wait till you hear how my child can sing. Go ahead, SING.” So, if you’re like me, and you have that image in your head - you kind of see Mary saying to the wedding guests, “No wine? Don’t worry; wait until you see what my Son can do. Go ahead, Jesus!”
Go ahead and do what?

We can let this story get away from us a bit and focus simply on the temporal need, focus simply on the water becoming wine (albeit, possibly, the coolest miracle ever). Just like we do in our own lives, and in our own prayers. "Jesus, I didn’t study for my exam today; so, go ahead Jesus." Go ahead and do what, exactly? We kind of assume that Mary is going to Jesus simply because they are out of wine and she wants him to be like some magical-wine distributor.

But Mary is not this proud mother looking to show off her son, expecting Jesus to fix this wine shortage. That diminishes their relationship. She is going to Jesus because she loves and cares for the newlywed couple, for the guests, for all the people there. She sees what’s happened; she knows how these things can go, that, sadly, the guests – even family and friends – can be judgmental and gossipy. (Yes, that stuff happened back then too: ‘Did you hear what happened at that wedding last week?’). This day for this newlywed couple, which should be a happy one, could quickly be ruined.

What does she expect Jesus to do? Remember, He hasn’t done any public miracles before, so who knows what she was hoping Jesus would do. Maybe she imagined Jesus would speak a word to the crowds that would diminish the embarrassment people felt. Maybe she thought Jesus could talk to people to get some wine there quickly. It was obvious, by the fact that Jesus already had “disciples” following him, that His words, His presence alone could do a lot; so maybe Jesus “knew a guy” (as we say in Jersey!) who could help them out. She probably couldn’t even begin to imagine what could He do, because he hadn’t done a miracle yet. But she knew in her heart she had to go to Him.

She simply tells of her concern; she points out what has happened to the one person she trusts and loves the most. She tells Jesus the thing troubling her heart: “They have no wine.” In that short statement, all of her concerns were revealed. Jesus’ response to her, “Woman, how does your concern affect me? My hour has not yet come” isn’t a rebuff or rejection, as if it were an embarrassed child who’d been put in the spotlight by a talent-show mom. Jesus is drawing attention to the fact that Mary the mother is also Mary the disciple … and will be the Perfect Disciple. As a disciple, she has to trust Him. Now that she’s shared it with Jesus, will she let go of whatever expectations she had? Will she let go of the concern over this issue, this embarrassing situation that has caught her attention and troubled her, and leave it in His hands?

This is why Mary’s next words are so important. In fact, they are so important that these are the very last words of Mary recorded in Scripture. They are the words of the perfect disciple. She says to the stewards at the wedding the words that we need to bold or underline or highlight in our own lives: DO WHATEVER HE TELLS YOU. Because
this miraculous story, this first of Jesus’ many miracles, tells us that GOD IS ABLE TO WORK MIRACLES, STILL PERFORMS MIRACLES FOR US precisely when we go to him, when we abandon ourselves to him, when we trust him ... WHEN WE DO WHATEVER HE TELLS US.

We all want miracles. Think of the minor, trivial ones we often think we want: “Oh, it will be a miracle of I get a parking space” … "A snow day when I have an assignment due that I’m behind on”- yeah, things that, in the grand scheme of things, are incredibly trivial. And these 'miracles' we want seem even more insignificant when we’re faced with real moments of trial, real moments of crisis, real moments of desperation and hardship when our prayers take on a much deeper, a much more urgent tone. But whether it’s something that’s catastrophic, something that’s been weighing on our hearts and minds for a long time – things like being unemployed, being unsure of what the future holds, worrying about someone who’s really sick – in any difficult situation we find ourselves in, Mary’s example in this gospel makes an important point for us, as disciples, to take to heart.

It’s not about us going to God with our list of demands, looking for answers to our specific problems in just exactly the way we want them fixed, treating God, in fact, like a Cosmic Vending Machine or some heavenly handy man. The Miracle of Cana isn’t just about a party where Jesus becomes, possibly, the greatest guest ever invited (making over 100 gallons of choice wine).

More than a party trick, or a pretty cool miracle, Jesus shows us He is an active listener to our prayers. He cares about us and about what's troubling our hearts. If we can imagine that His ways might just be better than our ways, if we can carry over that concept into our prayer life, if we can enter into prayer not saying to Jesus, ‘hey, here’s my list of problems - fix them for me’; if, instead of just opening our mouths to talk, we can open our hearts and ears to listen to Him ... then we will be astonished at how often God is able to work miracles in our day, in our lives, when we do whatever he tells us to do.

Our great patron, St. Francis de Sales, became a saint primarily because of his willingness to do just that -- listen to God and to be led by Him throughout his life. So, as we enter into this Heritage Week, honoring him for his heroic virtue and asking for his continued intercession on us and on all the work being done here, for the Glory of God, let us remember Francis' words: “We shall steer safely through every storm, so long as our heart is right, our intention fervent, our courage steadfast, and our trust fixed on God.” May you and I continue to take the time and make the space to listen to what Jesus is telling us to do.