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Is this class making history in the way it is straying from Commencement tradition?

Rachel (Gonnering) Sonnentag '06

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June 2020

Question:

Dear Abbot Pennings:

Serving as our alumni board vice president, I found it so fulfilling to welcome the Class of 2020, virtually, into our alumni ranks this year. It felt so different, though. Is this class making history in the way it is straying from Commencement tradition?

Rachel (Gonnering) Sonnentag '06

Answer:

My dearest Rachel,

Your eloquent question reflects my own, very similar, feelings as we negotiate this strange season at our beloved college. I feel so inspired by the courage and resilience of our entire campus community. It warms my heart to see the outpouring of support they have offered to the Class of 2020, whose graduation celebrations are taking such different form.

Commencement ceremonies are a time of reverence, celebration and reflection. Indeed, I look forward to our own observances each and every year. Though our community has persevered through many historical events, this is the very first time that our celebration has been postponed from its usual date. In that regard, this newest class to join our dear alumni is certainly a ground-breaking group. Certainly, they may add this, ahem, “first” to the many others that will earn them a special page in the book of history.



Ask the Abbot

As the founder of St. Norbert College, and having a prime seat in the center of campus throughout the years, I, Abbot Bernard Pennings, hold the answers to many of your burning questions about the college.

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That said, I must acknowledge that there have been some Commencement ceremonies that veered from the norm for differing reasons.

The most recent such departure that I now call to mind was on account of a most joyous occasion. Since 1977, without interruption, our Commencement ceremonies had been held in Schuldes Sports Center. However, in the spring of 2016 we were looking forward to completing the transformation of Schuldes into our new and most beautiful Mulva Family Fitness & Sports Center. With our gymnasium – our largest indoor space – temporarily unavailable due to these building works, we decided on an outdoor ceremony to be held in the quad. Dear me, this was quite the production! In fact, our very dependable Paul Mashl, theatre director, was quoted in our local newspaper as saying “It’s like we’re building a rock concert.” But it was not a rockstar who was planning a visit, not at all. We were preparing to celebrate with even more important guests: the families of our graduating Class of 2016.

Weather can be fickle this time of year in our fine state. And predictions showed that Mother Nature would not be on our side in the spring of 2016. The forecast called for partly cloudy skies and a chilling high temperature of only 50 degrees. Thankfully the actual conditions proved finer than those forecast. Our first outdoor Commencement in recent memory was a success.

A more somber event forced an earlier Commencement to be very different from the one anticipated. In 1944, our nation was locked in World War II. It is well documented that in 1943 our civilian student body – of course, all men at that date – dropped to just 50 students. Consequently, the 1944 Commencement ceremony saw only 11 students cross the stage to receive their diplomas from myself. In 1945 our number of graduates at the annual ceremony would drop further still. In fact, only seven students walked the stage to conclude their St. Norbert College careers at Commencement that spring. Though we were living in dark days, we felt it was critical to celebrate these students’ grand accomplishments. (As an aside, you can imagine my gratification in 2019 when I learned that a member of the Class of 1944 would finally receive his degree, awarded posthumously.) [*Readers of Ask the Abbot can enjoy this story.*]

It is with great anticipation that I look forward to celebrating with the Class of 2020 at their own, if somewhat delayed, Commencement ceremony. I eagerly await, too the return of

our continuing students to campus for their fall semester, along with our brand new Class of 2024.

Responses to “Ask the Abbot” questions are penned by St. Norbert College staff in the name of Abbot Bernard Pennings, who founded St. Norbert College in 1898.

St. Norbert College

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