



Holy Cross Fr. Robert Dowd speaks at his inauguration as the 18th president of the University of Notre Dame in Notre Dame, Indiana, Sept. 13. (OSV News/University of Notre Dame/Peter Ringenberg)



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After months of careful planning for the inauguration of its new president, the University of Notre Dame was undoubtedly rattled Sept. 12 when Holy Cross Fr. Robert Dowd, its new president, tested positive for COVID on the first day of inaugural activities.

But Dowd, who reportedly experienced only mild, cold-like symptoms and planned to wear a mask at some indoor events, delivered his inauguration address Sept. 13 with a raspy voice and received plenty of cheers from the Notre Dame community.

"Every inauguration is an opportunity to build a bridge from one era to the next," Dowd said in his speech. He pointed out that "while every era has its own challenges, we gather at an especially difficult moment. We see war and terrible suffering all around the world — in Gaza, in Israel, in Sudan, in Ukraine and elsewhere. For all the promise of technological connection, more than half of Americans are lonely. Religious disaffiliation is on the rise. And trust in institutions at an all-time low."

In the ceremony at the university's large athletic convocation center, Dowd said that many problems today are linked to "either-or" thinking that "objectifies people and oversimplifies problems. ... As a political scientist, I find this dynamic fascinating. As a human being and a priest, I'm concerned. And now, as president of Notre Dame, I take it as our call to action. The world needs Notre Dame to take thoughtful action."

One way to do that, he said, is to "develop students who can approach the world with openness, with curiosity, with compassion and with moral courage."

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—Holy Cross Fr. Robert Dowd

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He also acknowledged that "as costs continue to rise, we know that a Notre Dame education still seems closed for many young people."

"So, today I am proud to announce that Notre Dame will go loan-free and need-blind for all undergraduates, including both domestic and international students," he announced to the crowd which roared its approval. "This means, if you are admitted to Notre Dame, no matter how much money your family makes, you will not have to worry about student loans, and no matter where in the world you call home, you will be eligible for financial aid."

The university's new president recalled how his mother, a single parent, took out loans years ago to send him to Notre Dame.

Dowd, who is 59, is a native of nearby Michigan City, Indiana. He graduated from Notre Dame in 1987, majoring in psychology and economics. Following his ordination in 1994, he earned graduate degrees at UCLA, including a doctorate in political science. In recent years, he'd served as a faculty member, vice president, associate provost and as member of the President's Leadership Council at the university.

The new president, who spent 18 months as a seminarian serving in East Africa, asked speakers at inauguration events to discuss the topic: "What do we owe each other?"

He had been scheduled to moderate the last afternoon talk, "Advancing Peace in a Fractured World," but instead, John McGreevy, provost and history professor, led the discussion and asked key questions of two special guests. Adm. Chris Grady, vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Joe Donnelly, former U.S. ambassador to the Vatican and former U.S. senator from Indiana. The two men, both Notre Dame graduates, said the university had helped to shape them.

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"Notre Dame opened up the world for me," began Donnelly, who grew up on Long Island, New York, as the youngest of five children in a working-class family. "I had never been west of the Pocono Mountains before coming here. There were people here from other countries and world-famous scholars."

When asked how he visualized the prospects for peace in 2024, Donnelly answered immediately.

"The answer," Donnelly said, "is to tell me first how the United States is going to do, and I'll tell you how peace is going to do. What I realized when I was the ambassador to the Vatican was that the other ambassadors always came to me to ask what the United States was going to do, and how the U.S. could help with issues. The world is looking towards us. ... I actually think that the opportunity for peace in Ukraine comes right after the election when other actors around the world know how that sorts out. Then, they are going to make their decisions about how to move forward."

Grady responded that the world being handed on to the next generation is "increasingly congested, competitive and prone to conflict." But, he quickly added, "I don't think that war is unavoidable. We can get to lasting peace and it is U.S. leadership that will get us there."

He did caution that "the situation in Ukraine should remind the world that threats to the international order are real, that authoritarian regimes are real, war is real and that nuclear weapons are all real. That's the climate that we live in but it is not inevitable that we will end up in conflict."

At the inauguration ceremony, Dowd thanked the thousands of guests, which included his sister Mary Weigand, her husband and sons, and Dowd's first grade teacher, Holy Cross Sister Carmel Marie. He also offered a shout-out to his mother Norma who'd died just a month earlier, saying: "She is very much in my heart and I know that her quiet strength is going to continue to inspire me for the rest of my life."



Holy Cross Fr. Robert Dowd acknowledges applause from concelebrants after the Mass celebrating his inauguration as the University of Notre Dame's 18th president in Notre Dame, Indiana, on Sept. 13. (OSV News/University of Notre Dame/Matt Cashore)

Dowd said Holy Cross Fr. [Ted Hesburgh](#), Notre Dame's most iconic and charismatic president, believed that a Catholic university "should be a bridge across all chasms that separate modern people from each other." Hesburgh served for 35-years and certainly built bridges. Coeducation began during his tenure and Notre Dame's academic stature soared.

Dowd said the university will continue to tackle the most contested issues of the day in a collaboration that transcends classrooms, noting as an aside, that he'd lived as a priest-in-residence of Cavanaugh Hall, a women's dorm, for more than 10 years.

He also praised the work of the school's researchers, noting that one of last year's students who did research with an astronomy professor helped discover a probable planet.

Dowd also said the university was cooperating on projects with the city of South Bend and working to improve local mental health services, but it was also engaged with programs around the world through working with Catholic Relief Services.

The priest, sharing his first Notre Dame memories, said he remembers coming to the campus for football weekends as a kid and being captivated with the golden dome on top of the main building. He said he remembered asking his dad — a 1956 Notre Dame graduate — about the statue on top of the dome and his dad telling him it was Mary.

"Fr. Edward Sorin, the university's founder, named it in honor of Our Lady, to whom he had a special devotion. Mary was someone who knew what it was like to suffer, who never lost her empathy for others, despite what she experienced. She is tender, strong, and true. She is compassionate, resilient, and hopeful. Full of grace, open to God and open to others," the priest said.

"So this is who we are, and who we are called to be," Dowd told the crowd. "We're seekers of truth. Sustainers of hope. Builders of bridges. Extending and expanding these gifts we've been given — to others and to the world."