

A President reflects as he leaves office

(Photo by UIW Central Photo)

Prior to leaving the office of President after ten years to begin a sabbatical, Fr. Norm Choate sat down with *Update!* editor Rob Donelson on May 3, 1989. What follows is the text of that interview.

Update! How do you feel as you begin to make ready to leave the College?

Choate: Well, not surprisingly, I have very mixed emotions. On the one hand, I am absolutely convinced of the rightness of the decision to go. It's the right time for the College, for me, and for the Congregation. I am delighted with the prospect of Doug taking on the job. But this place has been my home for fifteen years, and I have gotten to know a lot of people and have come to care very much for them. I've seen a lot of really nice things happen in their lives, so that the feeling of leaving is kind of sad.

Update! When you look back on your years as President, Chaplain and teacher, what gives you the most satisfaction?

Choate: Campus Ministry was the best job I ever had. I had fun in that job. It's physically exhausting work, but it's work in which you are involved with people and significant human issues. You have the chance to present a welcoming, human face of the Church to people who are doing a lot of searching and questioning. And of course I have some paternal feelings, so campus ministry gave me a chance to be a little bit of a father. Not every problem that a student comes and talks to you about is world-shaking. People fall in and out of love around here with the regularity with which the sun goes up and down, and to them it's a critical piece of business. I must have listened to the story a thousand times about "she doesn't love me anymore." What they don't know and what I know is that they'll get over it. They will hurt for a little while then there will be somebody else.

Update! What are some of the highlights that come to mind when you think of your years as President?

Choate: The easiest things to identify are the physical things. We undertook construction of the new classroom and office wing, including Siegfried Hall auditorium. The College is financially sound and with that financial foundation we have been able to take on other initiatives. I think that the Roman Catholic identity of this College today is unquestioned and unquestionable, and I'm very proud that we have been able to do that. When I talk about "we" that's not a royal "we", that's all of us together. A President tries to make it possible for other people to do things and many have done so. We have a lot of creative and energetic people here, and I have always tried to create an atmosphere and provide the resources for them to be creative and energetic. And for the most part that has worked.

A constant theme for me ever since I've been here is students. I always wanted to be



Doug Letson presents Fr. Norm Choate with a Peter Etril Snyder painting "Riding to Help a Neighbour".

associated with students, and I have. Even as President I've been able to maintain some contact with students. I like them.

Update! How do you think the College is different today from when you first became President?

Choate: I think it's more academically sound. We think a little bit better of ourselves as an academic institution. I think that in the past we were a little too humble about ourselves. We have a maturing faculty, many people who teach well and who are doing their research and providing service. Certainly, the visibility of this College has increased enormously in the last ten years. Our outreach into the community through efforts like the St. Jerome's Centre, *Grail*, the various summer institutes and high school liaison have expanded enormously.

"I have always tried to create an atmosphere and provide the resources for faculty and staff to be creative and energetic."

Update! How are you a different person today as a result of your experiences as President?

Choate: I'm tired. (laughter) I think I've learned a lot in this job. When I first started I thought that there was a certain amount of paranoia in the air because things were tense between the College and the University. My axiom became "you have to speak to the best in people, you have to assume the nobility of people and act on that assumption". I still

believe that if you speak to the best in people you will get the best response. Ten years of experience have taught me it's not always quite that simple; things get a little complicated sometimes. This may sound odd for a man my age to say it, but I've gained a lot of confidence in myself, because when I started this job I was very frightened.

Update! Why do you think you have become more confident?

Choate: Because we have been lucky, a lot of things we tried have worked. As you well know, universities are very conservative institutions, so anytime you propose a new idea you face resistance. I spent a lot of time campaigning for various initiatives. Some of them worked, sometimes I got assent and sometimes I didn't. I realize you can't do anything unless you have the support of the people around you. I always thought "let's try it, if it doesn't work, we'll stop doing it". Most everything has worked. As I said, we got lucky.

Update! That good fortune, though, has posed it's own problems because in a sense we are sometimes victims of our own success.

Choate: That's true and that's a major problem. I was thinking about that yesterday. We're doing X percentage more than what we were doing ten years ago with, in fact, fewer people. We have a smaller faculty now than what we had ten years ago, just by a couple. You are right, it is a problem. I don't want to predict the future on the way out of my office, but this place has to grow because we are just going to exhaust people if it doesn't.