



Michael W. Higgins is President of St. Jerome's University.

Photo: Ron Hewson

A weekend of affirmation

by Michael W. Higgins

Things happen at St. Jerome's University in the University of Waterloo. We take some pride in that and so should you as our valued graduates and friends.

Most recently, we've instituted a new ceremony welcoming our first-year class: the St. Jerome's Investiture Ceremony. (Not, as one hard-of-hearing fellow thought, the SJU investment seminar.) This was not designed as some form of especially twisted torture—dragging the students out of bed at the early hour of 4:30 in the afternoon, bringing their parents back onto campus just when they thought they were rid of them. No, we thought it important to highlight this threshold moment in some significant way because our first-year class is entering a community of learning, a company of scholars; they are now part of a tradition that is centuries old. Moreover, they have chosen to join this universal and transhistorical community in a local and historical way: by registering at St. Jerome's University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada. This threshold moment requires recognition.

The ceremony is designed to remind our first-year students that they are in for the long haul. Not that it will take longer for them to get their degree at St. Jerome's University than elsewhere. No, I mean that they have become part of the St. Jerome's family, and that they will carry its values and ethos within them—the enduring friendships and the wisdom.

The ceremony itself is designed to reflect the academic and spiritual values that underpin the educational project that is St. Jerome's University. We began with an academic procession (all gowned appropriately) followed by an opening prayer led by our Chaplains and a word of welcome from me as President. Readings from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, a selection from our own University history, *Enthusiasm for the Truth*, and an address from our Dean, Kieran Bonner, conveyed to the initiates the importance of learning and academic life.

The investiture proper involved a summons by our Registrar, Dana Woito, and a presentation by our Director of Student Services, Andrea Charette, and Associate Dean, Steve Furino, of the SJU pin, which was affixed to each quivering student. Finally, our Librarian, Carolyn Dirks, oversaw the moment when the newly invested student signed a book recording the names of our first-year class for 2003. Three, four, or five years hence each student will sign the book again at the closing Convocation or graduation exercises.

The Investiture Ceremony was not intended to clothe the students with the full splendour and robes of high office in the medieval manner. In fact, we expected the students to come fully clothed beforehand. Rather, the Investiture Ceremony is a partial clothing with the SJU insignia, and it is a privilege. Our students will bear the sign of this company of scholars with pride for years to come.

The Investiture Ceremony—our inaugural one—was part of the St. Jerome's weekend. The first part of the triduum—if you can pardon the blasphemy for a moment—began on Friday night, September 26th, with the third annual St. Jerome's Feast. This year we acknowledged the contribution of the Honourable Allan J. MacEachen as the recipient of the Chancellor John Sweeney Award for Leadership in Catholic Higher Education. Dr. MacEachen, a political legend in this land, was appropriately feted and celebrated at a sumptuous feast full of rich food, rich company, and rich conversation. In honouring Dr. MacEachen we also honoured the university that he has nobly served and championed as an ambassador: St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, a university that is currently celebrating its 150th anniversary year.

The St. Jerome's Feast is about recognition and leadership in the area of Catholic higher education in Canada. But it is also about the values communicated and embodied by a tradition hundreds of years old, by an educational network of like-minded institutions struggling to make sense of an ever-changing world, by a corps of teachers and students who appreciate the critical and indispensable role of the spiritual in the making of the genuinely and fully human. It is what St. Francis Xavier University, King's College at the University of Western Ontario (our sister college that regularly celebrates this feast with us), SJU, and the many other affiliated, federated, and independent Catholic colleges and universities in Canada do. We are a national resource, a treasure. Just a bit like Dr. MacEachen himself.

And so we opened with the Feast and, appropriately, we concluded with the annual St. Jerome's Day Mass on Sunday evening. An exhausting weekend by everyone's reckoning. But also a weekend of good feeling, affirmation, solidarity, and enlightenment.

Not a bad way to spend a late September weekend and a very good way to remember who we are and what we are about. 🍷

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