Discourse of Father James Shea
to the Benedictine Sisters of the Annunciation
upon their re-gifting of the Gift Hill Cross to the University of Mary
17 November 2009 – the 50th anniversary of the founding of Mary College
Our Lady of the Annunciation Chapel

Sister Nancy, Sisters of Annunciation Monastery:

It is with deep emotion and abiding gratitude that we receive from you this beautiful symbol of the spirit of commitment and faith which led you and your foremothers to found and sponsor Mary College, 50 years ago on this day. Ever since then, you have poured so much heart and soul and your daily labor into the flourishing of what is today the University of Mary. Truly, you have been worthy servants and leaders. Like Mary of Nazareth, for whom you named the college, you are beacons of hope and new life.

As you now bless our future and, in the collaborative spirit which has always marked the life of this institution, as you entrust to us your hopes and dream for the future, we ponder this gift that you give us. It is an artifact, a holy symbol the sight of which transports us back to the very first day of our history. And we look upon the shape of it ... and remember that it is a cross. You gift the future to us with the cross of Jesus. Sisters, you have given us a cross to carry, and we think that it is probably a trick.

There is a breathtaking antiphon from the Liturgy of the Hours: See how the cross of the Lord stands revealed as the tree life. The cross of the Lord stands revealed as the tree of life. A cross means sacrifice and love put together, mingled in the same heart. Indeed, it means love purified by suffering and struggle and life laid down in humble service so that others might live.

Oh, Sisters, a cross gets it exactly right – that’s what you have done for us through the years. And though it brings struggle and self-sacrifice, so too the cross is the great banner of victory and triumph. It is the source of life and of joy.

There is, in the Church of the Holy Cross in Rome, a great inscription in the relic chapel there, presiding over all the precious treasures of salvation brought back to the Eternal City by Constantine’s mother St. Helena. The inscription reads: Salve Crux, Spes Unica – Hail, O Cross, Our Only Hope. You place your hope in us, Sisters, you likewise give us hope.

What a beautiful morning!