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Behind the Pomp and Circumstance

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Behind the Pomp and Circumstance

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Monday May 23, 2022

By Eric F. Spina

It's easy to spot the University marshal carrying the large, ceremonial wooden mace topped with the University's seal leading the commencement procession.

And I love when our new graduates proudly place a medal over each other's necks that bears the image of Blessed William Joseph Chaminade on one side and the University seal on the other during the ceremony.

These traditions — one old, one new — ground us in our history and represent our hope and faith for the future.

Though I was curious about the president's medallion (pictured below) that my predecessor Dan Curran left for me to wear during graduation ceremonies, I didn't know its history or meaning. When Neomi De Anda, associate professor of religious studies, tweeted after the ceremony, "Please tell us about your medal," I knew I had some homework.

One side of the colorful, enameled copper medallion depicts Madonna and child with the Latin words, “verbum caro factum est.” The other side includes a cross and an inscription, “The touchstones of wisdom and truth are for the man thou has set apart.”

I started with Brother Ray Fitz, S.M., who wore the medal the longest, for his insights. “I inherited the medal from Father (Raymond) Roesch,” he wrote in an email. “The medallion was designed and executed by Louis Weber, a member of the art department and a former Marianist. I believe the Latin words mean, “The Word was made flesh.”

Turning to the Marian Library and the archives, I learned even more.

Sarah Burke Cahalan, the library’s director, confirmed Brother Ray’s translation and noted the text can be found in John 1:14. “It’s about the Incarnation of Jesus as a human, so it is particularly appropriate to an image of Mary holding him as a little boy. Interestingly, we have some statues in the Marian Library that show Mary holding a book. It’s really the same iconography: she is holding the Word on her lap in both cases.”

Archivist Kristina Schulz tracked the medallion’s creation to the 1960s, noting that Father Raymond Roesch, S.M., first wore it during the 1966 spring commencement exercises. The inscription on the back of the medal about “the touchstones of wisdom and truth” are taken from Deuteronomy 33:8 and are “descriptive of the qualities of the University’s highest office,” according to a written description. “The black symbols decorating the text and suggestive of Hebrew script represent the wisdom of the Old Testament. The cross represents the truth of the New Testament. It is the role of the University to combine both Testaments into a unified whole, symbolized by the circular design.”

When I drape the medallion over my neck before future ceremonies, I will close my eyes in silent prayer to our Marianist founders who built our University on such lofty ideals, who gave us touchstones of wisdom and truth.



1/2

Front, presidential medallion