

Xavier Reunion – September 12, 2026

As Henry VIII said to his six wives, I won't keep you long.

To prepare for this weekend, did you take out your yearbook to reminisce and get names and faces fixed in your memory?

It probably wasn't very helpful; lots of us suffer from CRS — Can't Remember Stuff; and anyway, none of us look like those old photos of 60 years ago; thank God!

I find it weird being the same age as old people. When I was a kid, I wanted to be older...this is not what I expected.

We've all heard the lie that things get better with age. Well, if things get better with age, then we must be getting close to freaking magnificent.

Inside every one of us "seasoned citizens" is a young person wondering, "What the hell happened?" This gathering is another chance to explore that question, "What happened?" This weekend together is a precious opportunity to reminisce and remember, to tell stories about the years between 1966 and 2026, and to dream of days still ahead.

In a Calvin and Hobbs strip, Calvin's dad says "I don't think I'd have been in such a hurry to reach adulthood if I'd known the whole thing was going to be ad libbed."

Well, life is a performance for which we were never given any chance to rehearse. And to get to a good place, sometimes you have to go through a number of bad places.

In passing, I find it ironic that Paul Rossi tapped me to give a talk; I'm probably the least well-known of the class, and I'm certainly the youngest; sorry, Neal. Blame him!

But even if the paths chosen for Michael McFarland and myself have been markedly different from most of you, I think we all resonate with the words of that song by Louis Armstrong, *Hello Brother*:

A man wants to work for his pay

A man wants a place in the sun

A man wants a gal proud to say

That she'll become his lovin' wife

He wants a chance to give his kids a better life

Well hello, hello, hello brother.

So, brothers, my few minutes up here are an attempt to stir up the memories, open the taps and let the stories flow.

While making no claim to speak for anyone but myself, here's what I think we started to learn sixty-four years ago.

First, going to Xavier, we learned that the world was a lot bigger than our hometown.

Before Xavier, we walked or rode our bikes to grammar school; but in September 1962 we boarded buses that took us away from our familiar haunts, out Route 2, to a new and largely empty building, our new home for the next four years.

And our new classmates weren't the neighborhood kids; now they came from such exotic places as Natick, Watertown, Waltham, Woburn, Lexington, Wellesley, Newton Center, West Acton and South Acton, Maynard, Chelmsford and North Chelmsford, Burlington, Wayland, Hopkinton, Arlington, Littleton, Dover, Ayer, Winchester, Belmont, Bedford, Framingham, Medford, Weston, Cochituate, Sudbury and Billerica as well as Concord itself.

And the 150 of us who stood together at the dedication ceremony with Cardinal Cushing soon learned an arresting lesson, that getting admitted to the school was only the first, and by far the easiest, hurdle Xavier would throw at us. Within a year, almost half of us were invited to continue the pursuit of academic excellence, elsewhere!

And in our four years there, “we few, we happy few, we band of brothers” learned lessons greater than quadratic equations or the difference between Latin gerunds and gerundives.

We learned that our unity didn’t have to mean uniformity, our differences weren’t excuses for divisiveness, and success wasn’t a zero-sum game; Xavier offered each of us many avenues to thrive and flourish, in the classroom, on the playing fields, in the many clubs and activities, from debating, chess, skiing, radio, and art, to karate, cheerleading, singing and the, sort of, student newspaper, Vox.

We learned the thrill of unexpected delight, when little Xavier knocked off vaunted BC High in hockey AND basketball.

And we also learned that our youth, our privilege and our unique community couldn’t protect us from life’s tragedies, as we lost a classmate in our freshman year—Kevin McMichael; and then we joined in our national grief for John Kennedy, fellow Catholic, fellow son of Massachusetts.

Concord’s own native son, Henry David Thoreau, wrote “I’ve traveled much, in Concord.” So did we. And in due time our world grew larger than Concord. The ensuing years stretched us and continued to teach us the poignancy and the possibilities of human living.

Over these sixty years, we have resided in so many cities and towns across the country and around the world, we've explored so much of the beauty of our fragile blue planet, we've tasted so much of the poetry, the passion and the pain, of being human—just read the autobiographies on our website.

In 1966 we could only guess that the delights would become more pronounced, the flourishing more variegated, and the heartbreaks sharper and longer-lasting.

We stepped out of ourselves, into a world, at turns more amazing, more bracing, more unsettling yet more welcoming of our best selves.

And when we paid attention, we found ourselves filled with wonder and awe, and on occasion even ecstasy—that is, *ek-stasis*, standing out of ourselves into Mystery; and that's the stuff of our stories.

In 1966, the next thing we had to learn was that the only thing worse than the difficulties of growing up are the difficulties of being grown up.

Immediately on leaving Xavier, we were engulfed in the dramas of the sixties—the Viet Nam war, civil rights marches, assassinations, riots, marijuana and acid, the moon landing.

More personally, do you remember your first day, or better maybe, your first weekend, at college? Or when you got your first paycheck? The first time you fell in love? You saw colors you had never noticed before, and walked several inches off the ground, and found yourself unable to keep from smiling.

My own journey took me to Cambridge, Central Africa, California, Indiana, Jerusalem, Australia, New Zealand, D.C., Philadelphia and Connecticut. I've taught---often by bad example-- at both the high school and university levels, served as campus minister at both, done lots of hospital chaplaincy and some prison ministry, and been superior of two Jesuit communities. Details at 11.

And it's all been a steep learning curve. And each of us I think can identify with the words of Bob Dylan: "I was so much older then; I'm younger than that now." Or as poet Mary Oliver wrote, "I have become older, and cherishing what I have learned, I have become younger."

As pastor of two different churches, I have learned that it's impossible to please everyone; not even God can do that. But pissing off everyone is a piece of cake.

I've learned to accept that we all get heavier as we get older, because there's a lot more information in our heads. That's my story and I'm sticking to it! Brain cells, hair cells and skin cells all die constantly; but fat cells seem to have achieved eternal life.

You know, when you buy a bag of salad and it gets all brown and soggy? Cookies don't do that. And chocolate is God's way of telling us He likes us a little bit chubby.

I have kept in close touch over the years with Jimmy Mason.

Recently, Jimmy shared with me his own advice for dealing with the health challenges of being chronologically challenged.

He said, "For better digestion, I drink beer. In the case of appetite loss, I drink white wine. In the case of low blood pressure, I drink red wine. In the case of high blood pressure, I drink vodka. And when I have a cold, I drink peppermint Schnapps."

I asked him, "Jim, when do you drink water?"

He replied, “Oh, Paul, I’ve never been that sick.”

More seriously, about a year ago, I penned a set of reflections on what I’ve learned as a man, a Jesuit, a priest and a pastor. I’ll spare you all that; if you really are interested, they can be found on my parish website.

But here I’ll recount just three:

First, all creation is shot through with the presence of the Divine, offering to stir in each person a sense of wonder and awe.

Even if you aren’t quite sure about the claims of religion, even if you and the Catholic Church now have only a nodding relationship, you have touched, and been touched by, Mystery; you have known wonder and awe.

For me, the invitations have come in the forms of: October foliage in New England; the panoply of stars and meteors stretched across the night skies in Zambia; glowworms silently illuminating the caverns at Waitomo, New Zealand; delicate butterflies and colorful lorikeets that fill the skies of Australia; but also the heart-breaking poignancy of losing a beloved young one.

In all these ways of touch and taste, sight and smell and sound, Mystery---God---stretches open our hearts, and often in the process breaks them, to make them more able to receive ever more life and love, human and divine, that God continuously pours out upon us.

What would be on your list? The birth of a child? The passing of a parent? Struggles with health challenges? What has disclosed to you the reality that you live in the presence of Mystery? What has called out of you awe and wonder and, finally, gratitude?

Second: Psalm 149 says, God delights in His people.

So many people picture a god they wouldn't want to spend a weekend with, never mind all eternity. But God delights in His people; and it's much more liberating and affirming that God delights in you, personally. God desires friendship and union with you, God creates you in order to share with you that intimacy.

Third: My mission is to help folks fall in love with God, who has fallen in love with them. That love doesn't remove the suffering or heal the scars, but it does begin to re-orient the meaning and value of everything;

it begins to offer new words to explain our life stories;

it doesn't make everything easy, but everything becomes new and real, everything becomes gift.

In each person, under the surface struggles and successes, beyond boredom or distraction, there is a deep and abiding hunger for God, for encountering God's grace and love. That hunger for God has been planted in our hearts, and echoes God's own deepest desire for our friendship.

Well, I'll spare you the rest of the homily.

Instead, let me finish with this: on the last page of the yearbook, the editors quoted William Butler Yeats:

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book
And slowly read, and dream.

We are indeed old and grey, at least those of us lucky enough to still have our hair; but by living, loving, longing, even now, sixty years after our Xavier graduation, our stories still go on, unfinished yet, even if our steps are slower, our eyesight a bit dimmer.

We still have stories to tell, to keep alive the memories so that we can in turn hand them on to the next generations. (And remember, old age and treachery beats youth and talent, every time!)

In the sixty years since, we learned—at least when we are at our best—to say thank you, and I’m sorry, and I forgive you, and I love you.

Are we always such people, wise and generous and courageous?

No, not always. But that realization offers us some additional opportunities to say, “I’m sorry,” some more chances to say, “I forgive you,” especially to ourselves.

Do your own stories have more shadows than light, more tears than laughter? No matter, we are all eager to hear them.

And going forward, remember, the one thing you can rely on is that there will always be uncertainty.

For all of us, in shadow and in light, in celebration as well as in sorrow, it’s been quite a ride!

To our families, our friends, those who went on before us, those who supported us, those to whom we entrust our stories, we will, each in his own way, say, “Thank you, I love you.”

One day, likely not all too distant, there will be another reunion—and some of our classmates have gone ahead, to set the table and open the wine: Kevin, Ed Barron, James Callanan, Mark Olivo, Adam Rakiey, John Costello, Bruce Cotney, Michael Gudzinowicz, Jed Healy, Peter Houlihan, David Lindh, Tony Martignetti, Larry Monks, Charlie Sheehan, Chip McWhirter, Edgie Cronin, Shawn Donovan, Jody Antinerelli, Judd Rousseau, Peter Nolan, Ted Moores, Tom Neville, Mark McKenna, John Dzerkacz, John “Fatty” Curran. Andy Linial, Bob Ryan, Bill Sollows, Joe Belotti--and they are ready to share the welcome and the stories.

After all, the reason God created people is because God loves stories.

Thanks for listening. Stay wonderful.