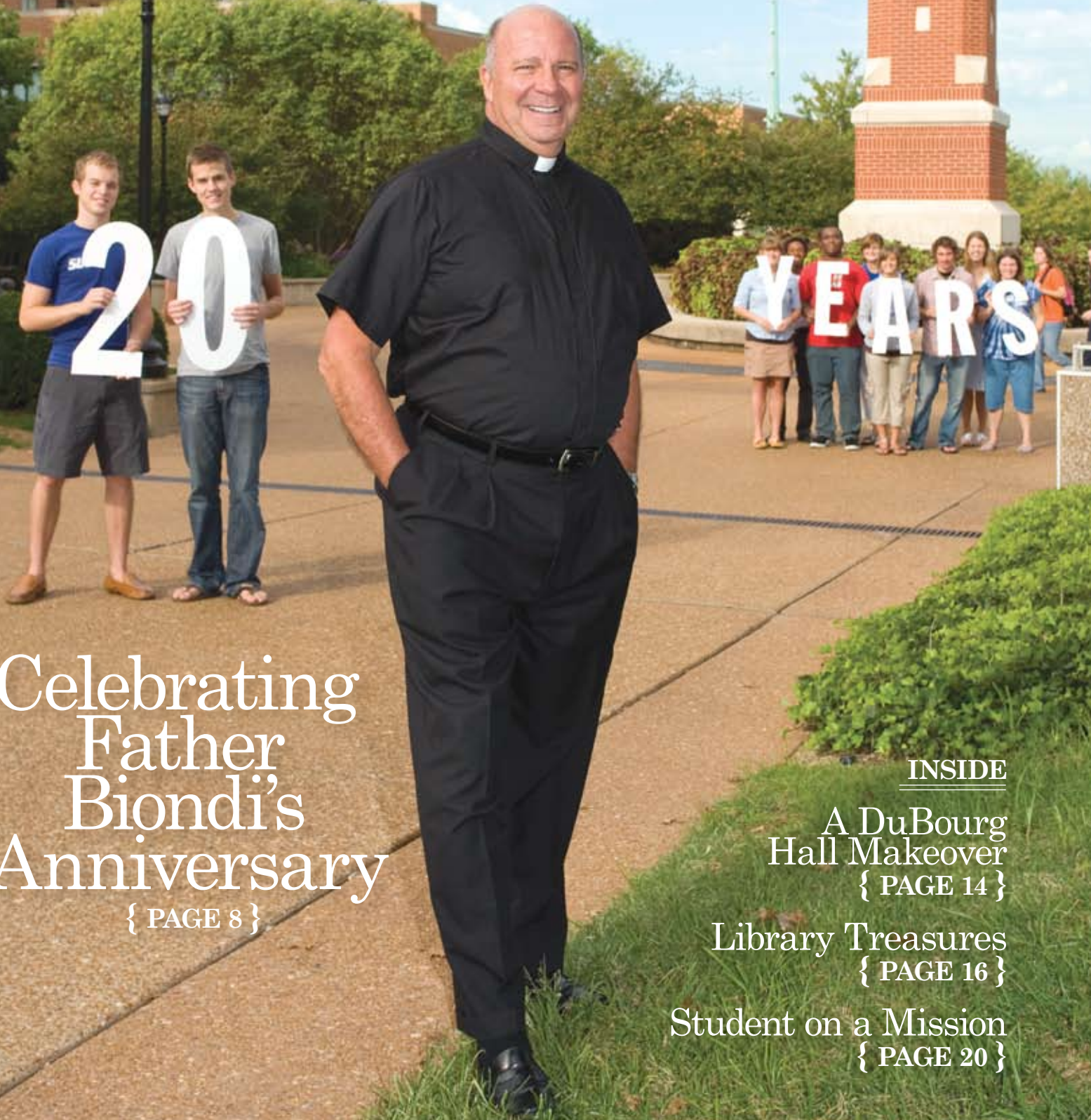


# UNIVERSITAS

S A I N T L O U I S U N I V E R S I T Y

FALL 2007



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# 20 Years



**S**aint Louis University President Lawrence Biondi, S.J., and I have just walked back into his office after a hurried lunchtime interview, and in no time at all, three members of his staff have gathered around his desk.

I'm still trying to ask some questions for this story celebrating his 20-year anniversary as president, but there is immediate business that demands his attention — letters to sign, meeting agendas to adjust and a stack of phone messages to return. Still, I keep firing questions at him, hanging onto the few minutes I supposedly have left. But it's hard to get a word in. He wants to answer me (I think). But he is back in his world now, busy and focused, and I know that the interview is over.

It really comes as no surprise. Biondi is very much in demand. He routinely speaks to groups on and off campus, he travels to visit donors and alumni clubs across the country, and he averages 25 meetings a week. Because most of his meals are really meetings spent discussing the University, it's no exaggeration to say he eats and breathes SLU.

This interview was no different. We met at a new Mexican restaurant on campus named for one of Biondi's dogs, Iggy. We both ordered the "Biondi Burrito." (How could he resist? And, frankly, how could I?) It didn't take long before we were interrupted several times. First by students who wanted to know if he came up with the recipe for the burrito. (No.) Then by the restaurant owner. Then by some SLU staff members dining nearby. When we finally got up to head back to DuBourg Hall, Biondi noticed the owners of the nearby Coronado apartments across the room, so he promptly went over to say hello.

Because he can't talk to everyone personally (though he sure tries), here's a candid conversation with Biondi about his 20 years at Saint Louis University.

*and counting ...*

— By Laura Geiser

PHOTO BY JAMES VISSER  
BIONDI IN HIS OFFICE WITH HIS DOGS GANCIA (LEFT) AND IGGY.

**UTAS:** Did you ever imagine you'd be doing this for 20 years?

**BIONDI:** No, the years have flown by since 1987. This may sound bad, but I never thought that I'd be here this long because, frankly, I'm usually only good for seven or eight years before I get antsy. But there's such variety to this job — every day is a new experience, and I don't think any day has been the same. So I've never been bored. So much of what I have to do every day is actually exciting and, most of the time, rewarding.

Sure there are days when it feels like two decades, but most days it does not. There is still more that needs to be done, contributions that I can make before moving on.

**U:** Has the job changed much in 20 years?

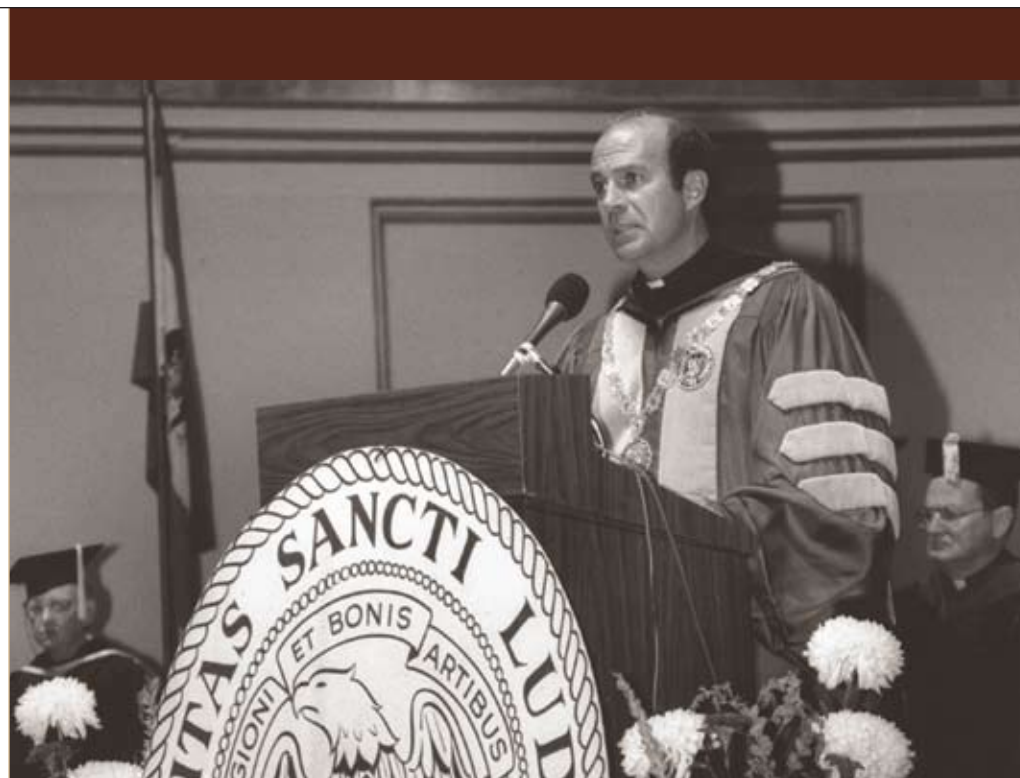
**B:** The issues are different, but the problems are often similar.

I really like the book *Good to Great* [by Jim Collins]. In it there is an analogy of an organization being like a bus, and the president is the bus driver. It's the driver's job to get the right person in the right seat so everybody can do his or her job and get the bus moving in the right direction. You may not know the direction for the first few miles, but eventually you'll figure it out as everybody starts to collaborate, contribute and determine the direction. SLU's like that. The bus hasn't changed. My job of getting the right passengers hasn't changed. But sometimes our routes do vary.

**U:** How have you personally changed?

**B:** Well, my physical changes are evident — I've got less hair, more wrinkles and a few extra pounds. I have less energy, and I can't work 15-hour days without having some time on some weekends to relax, reflect and recoup.

But that's just surface stuff. How I've really changed is that — believe it or not — I've grown more patient with people. I don't get excited about small problems anymore. I like to have them solved, of course, but in the past I would disproportionately spend a lot of time on them. Now I'm trying to concentrate on bigger issues — the bigger picture for SLU to become the best. I can't say honestly that the small things don't bother me, but I'm less focused on them. I think I've learned that only through experience.



Biondi at his inauguration on Sept. 30, 1987.

**U:** How has SLU changed?

**B:** There's a greater openness to creativity, to new ideas and to thinking outside the box. I also think the quality of our faculty and their commitment to teaching and research has improved and that the quality of our students is fantastic. They're much more giving, invested and competitive than ever before, which is a hallmark of a Jesuit education. In fact our whole University community is more dedicated to service, volunteering 780,000 hours last year — and that wasn't always the case.

I think the changes here are due to a combination of several things, including a greater awareness of SLU's mission and vision, plus a greater articulation of what we expect from faculty, staff and students. I think that expectations have been articulated in a way that good-hearted people want to collaborate and to help reach our goal of becoming the finest Catholic university in our country.

**U:** How has the mission and the vision that SLU become the finest Catholic university in the nation changed this place?

**B:** When the North Central evaluation team

[a national educational accrediting group] came here in 2002, they said the vision of the University is not only articulated well, but embraced by the students, staff and faculty. More importantly, the evaluators were surprised to find that our faculty and staff know our mission and our vision by heart and talk about it. They hadn't seen that anywhere else.

Here our mission and our vision have vibrancy — they're not just words. And the vision is becoming a reality.

In fact, I know our vision is ingrained because when students want something significant — for example, when they wanted the expansion of the Simon Recreation Center — they say to me, "In order to be the best Catholic university, you've got to do this." They said the same thing about the renovation of Busch Student Center. So they have adopted our vision, they're aware of it, and they're pushing the staff, faculty and administrators to get there too.

I certainly hope our alums and supporters agree that Saint Louis University has changed for the better. Of course, the physical campus has seen the most visible

changes. I inherited a weak infrastructure, but the financial resources have improved significantly. I'll always be grateful to [former SLU president] Father Tom Fitzgerald, S.J., for making the hard decisions that left SLU financially sound and positioned us to move forward positively and definitively.

But, as I've said before, I am most proud of what is not as visible: the quality of our academic programs, the quality and depth of the research being conducted, the care that we offer our patients, the quality and contributions of our students and alumni, the loyalty and commitment of our faculty and staff, and especially the fact that our Jesuit, Catholic mission continues to be our guiding and driving force.

SLU has undergone a remarkable transformation, moving ever closer to that vision of being the country's finest Catholic university. I am very proud of this, but I know that it took many, many University people working together for years to build the SLU of 2007.

**U:** What have been your biggest successes?

**B:** I'm proud of many things. In particular, I'm pleased with our higher academic standards and reputation, our \$970 million endowment as well as the impressive credentials of our faculty and staff. Our Madrid campus is one of the premier programs in Europe. And overall campus beautification — though I hesitate to focus on it — has really transformed our campus life for our students.

I think the Edward A. Doisy Research Center and the growth in our funded research efforts are setting an excellent standard for even greater success. And the sale of the hospital to secure the future of our School of Medicine is something I look back on and view as a success story.

Of course, I'm proud of our great leadership teams over the years — the vice presidents, provosts and deans — who helped me achieve my goals for SLU.

Also I'm pleased that in the business community locally, and to a certain extent nationally, we've enhanced our image. Business leaders have recognized and acknowledged SLU's growth and accomplishments. We also have a cooperative, strong relationship with the civic leaders in St. Louis. One of the biggest

tests that we've passed is a credibility gap for the University at all levels. In terms of financing, *Standard and Poor's*, *Moody's* and others have acknowledged that we have a very good debt ratio to our endowment. We set goals, and we accomplish them. For example, we said we were going to raise the funds we needed for the Doisy Research Center and Chaifetz Arena, and we did. We're very credible.

**U:** What, if anything, do you wish you could redo?

**B:** I don't think in those terms. You take 10 steps forward and fall back three, but you're still ahead. I make decisions with information and counsel and advice from others. If 80 percent are good decisions, then I believe that I have succeeded.

Although not a redo, I am disappointed that being president prevents me from having more contact with students. I miss those relationships. But there are only so many hours in a day, and I have to devote my time to what will bring about the greatest change. I simply have to make choices. It's hard for our students to understand this.

Students come and go in four years. What I try to do is invest in their future, in the long-term strategic plan, so that when I leave and when they leave, something is left that will continue to attract quality students. I look at this as an investment.

All this building we're going through right now — that's an investment for the year 2010 and beyond. You can't think about just the here and now. It's a strategic investment in the University to maintain it and to strengthen it for the future.

So growing the endowment also is very important. Building up our SLU tradition and culture of values and ethical behavior is also important, as is continuing to attract highly qualified and committed people to teach and learn — and transforming the right kind of leaders to become dynamic champions for social justice.

**U:** When you took this job 20 years ago, were you apprehensive? If so, how did you overcome that fear?

**B:** In a way, I was intimidated by the knowledge that I had full responsibility for SLU and was accountable for it to the trustees, the Jesuits, almost 100,000 living alumni,

Lawrence Biondi, S.J., has been president of Saint Louis University longer than SLU's current freshmen have been alive.

While he's been at SLU, four U.S. presidents have served the nation, five governors have served Missouri and four mayors have served St. Louis.

During those 20 years, Saint Louis University has undergone many changes. Most obviously, the physical campus has grown and greened. But it's the improvements you can't show on a map that really show the impact of Biondi's presidency.

	1987	2007
Average ACT score of entering freshmen	22.7	26.4
Student-to-teacher ratio	16-1	13-1
Endowed chairs and professorships	16	51
Full-time ranked faculty	718	1,297
Total student enrollment	9,869	12,309
Number of freshmen	1,077	1,604
Residence hall occupancy	1,992	3,446
Annual donations to SLU	\$15.6 million	\$66 million
Grant, contract and research revenue	\$8.96 million	\$65.8 million
University endowment	\$93 million	\$970 million
Net assets	\$504.3 million	\$1.4 billion

We didn't ask his favorite color, but we did want to know what makes University President Lawrence Biondi, S.J., tick. So here's a revealing glimpse of the man behind the collar.

**For one day I'd like to trade places with:** Pope Benedict XVI **If I couldn't have my present job, I'd love to be the:** Owner of a Tuscan, Lucchese cuisine restaurant in Midtown St. Louis  
**My dream vacation:** Three weeks on a deserted island in the Bahamas **I'd like to meet:** The Dalai Lama **The best advice my mother ever gave me:** Don't talk so much, and eat your food!  
**My proudest moments:** Training my dog Iggy not to do his business in the house. Seriously, making people happy whenever I can do so reasonably. **Guilty pleasure:** Cigars (occasionally!)  
**Pet peeves:** People who drive slowly in the left lane and talk on their cell phones **Favorite food:** Maryland steamed crabs **A book I'd recommend:** *Good to Great* by Jim Collins  
**Favorite TV show:** *The Sopranos* **A quote to live by:** "Holding resentment in is like drinking poison and expecting the other person to die. It doesn't work."

4,000 or so faculty and staff and more than 10,000 students. I had been a SLU trustee for three years, so I knew there were some significant challenges, but I also believed that there was great potential for SLU.

But, I was never trained to be a president of a major university. And I had to start somewhere. I jumped right into this job from being the dean of the large College of Arts and Sciences at Loyola Chicago, where we had more than 400 faculty. Traditionally, a person is at least an academic vice president before becoming a president, but I skipped that step.

Also, there was a definite learning curve to understand SLU's culture because I was not from St. Louis or a graduate of Saint Louis University. I had only been a SLU trustee for three years, which really gave me a limited amount of knowledge and experience — attending quarterly board meetings did not amount to a lot of time spent on SLU's campus.

Eventually I got over my apprehension by listening: I listened to a wide variety of people and their problems. At that time, there were some people who were jockeying for me to confide in them. I needed to listen, to distinguish facts from fiction, so I decided to give myself more time to understand what motivated them. I listened to distinguish an individual's legitimate concern for SLU from a self-serving one.

Taking on the presidency at SLU was a big challenge. But I had good mentors and role models: Father Tom Fitzgerald, Dan Schlafly, Bucky Bush, Joe Adorjan, Mike Shanahan, Barry Beracha and other SLU trustees and friends whom I learned to trust and in whom I confided.

**U:** After 20 years in St. Louis, you're now something of a celebrity here — a very recognizable face. How does that affect you?

**B:** I don't consider myself a celebrity, but I know some people watch carefully what I do and say. So I'm more careful.

Of course, I try to be as natural as possible. But I think I'm much more on guard with the business community and with people I meet for the first time because they're evaluating me on what they've heard about me as a person or about my role as president of SLU.

But I'm more like myself with students. I like to joke around with them, which sometimes surprises them.

**U:** What are the differences between your public persona and the "real" you?

**B:** I have a reputation for being direct, tough and outspoken with a "take no prisoners" approach to business situations. But those who know me well would probably describe me as quiet, somewhat introverted. I really enjoy time alone with my two golden retrievers [Gancia and Iggy], especially at the end of the day. So believe it or not, I'm actually a bit shy; I have to work at making small talk.

And it would probably surprise people to know that I am very casual and prefer informal to formal. At home, I am most comfortable in a T-shirt, walking shorts and Birkenstocks. I'd rather eat dinner with my Jesuit brothers at Jesuit Hall than in a five-star restaurant.

Oh, and, yes, I'm told I have a weird sense of humor.

**U:** What in your childhood indicated that this is what you'd be doing?

**B:** Nothing. I flunked first grade because I grew up speaking Italian and wasn't as fluent in English as I needed to be as a first-grade school kid growing up in the northwest side of Chicago. I was one of those kids in the shadows.



**Clockwise from top left:** SLU men's basketball coach Rick Majerus with Biondi in April 2007; Nasrallah Peter Cardinal Sfeir, patriarch of Antioch and all the East, with Biondi in June 2006; Biondi with his late mother, Albertina, at the ceremony recognizing Biondi as St. Louis' Citizen of the Year in April 2006; Women's basketball coach Shimmy Gray-Miller and Biondi at the groundbreaking of Chaifetz Arena in August 2006; Biondi talking with students at sophomore dinner in September 2005; Honorary degree recipient Yogi Berra with Biondi at the 2007 commencement; Biondi greeting a family following the 2007 Baccalaureate Mass.

My leadership qualities really came about when I became chairman of the department of modern languages at Loyola Chicago. Prior to that, I just had my values, of course, and the honesty and directness that have gotten me into trouble my whole life.

**U:** How did your parents prepare you for this job? And what did they think when you got it?

**B:** My parents certainly didn't cut me any slack. They certainly kept me in my place.

Once I got this job, my mother would often say, "You're the president of the university. You can do what you want because you are not teaching anymore. So you can come up to Chicago and visit me more often. You have no teaching commitments." She was happy for my success, but I don't know if she ever fully understood my obligations and the

challenges of the job.

I know that both of my parents were very proud of me for my commitment to my priestly life. And I'm sure that if my mother were still alive today, she would continue to chastise me and say that it's inappropriate for a Jesuit priest to go around without wearing socks during the summer!

**U:** Is it possible to separate yourself from your work? Do you even try?

**B:** It is difficult to separate myself from work because I am, for many in the external community, the face of SLU. And since I live on campus, students, alumni and faculty, all of whom expect different things, often stop me when I walk on campus. And I notice everything — so when I'm out, even walking my dogs or driving them around campus in my golf cart, I make

mental notes of things around campus that need attention.

**U:** What do alumni mean to SLU? What can they still do for SLU?

**B:** I hope our alumni are proud of their *alma mater* and rely upon their Saint Louis University education in their personal and professional lives. I hope they value the relationships, the friendships, that helped them become informed and transformed into better individuals.

I also want them to remember that there is still more to be done and that SLU needs their support and involvement.

**U:** You've had a successful career. Do you have any personal goals left?

**B:** I am always trying to find ways to have balance in my life so I can continue to

direct my energies to my work. I want to renew and strengthen my own spirituality, which will help me discern my future. I also need to exercise more and eat less.

When I am tired I fantasize about traveling to places I've only seen and read about in *National Geographic*. But, honestly, traveling to distant places would only give me two or three weeks of enjoyment, because then I'd get antsy.

**U:** You are SLU's second-longest tenured president: to what do you attribute your longevity? What's the secret?

**B:** Italian, Tuscan genetic DNA.

Seriously, I was 48 years old when I became president, a bit younger than many of my recent predecessors — so youthful energy may have something to do with my longevity. God has given me good health, abundant energy and a good team of administrators and deans to help me.

**U:** Do you have a timeline for retirement or perhaps a career change?

**B:** Retirement is not in my vocabulary! I guess a career change is always a possibility. As I remind my staff, Charles de Gaulle once said: "Cemeteries are filled with indispensable people."

Sure, I think about the future. There certainly are days when being a parish priest or teaching high school Spanish are very appealing. But, frankly, I don't have much time to ponder my personal future while I am still so focused on SLU's future.

**U:** When you finally do retire or change careers, what do you hope is your legacy?

**B:** That I leave my successor with a university that is recognized across the nation as the finest Catholic university in the United States. That is my vision for SLU and, I hope, my legacy. ☺