Ave Maria University begins classes at permanent campus

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Ave Maria University President Nick Healy pointed to a spot at the center of a blue ribbon, reserving a place for the school’s founder and chancellor Tom Monaghan to stand with a large pair of golden scissors. Twenty-three members of the Ave Maria community then grabbed hold and cut the ribbon, officially beginning the university’s permanent existence.

It was the second grand opening in as many months for Monaghan, as his 10-year dream for creating a Catholic institution of higher learning was finally fully realized in its home in the new town of Ave Maria.

Monaghan attended the town’s opening last month, but the university, to which Monaghan pledged almost $250 million of his fortune earned by his founding of the Domino’s Pizza franchise, has always been the primary goal.

“At this point, I think we’re doing pretty darn good,” he said in his opening speech.

Monaghan also came out strong in his speech against the university’s detractors, particularly those who protested the school’s change in location from Ypsilanti, Mich., where Ave Maria College was founded in 1998, to Southwest Florida. Monaghan called them “academic terrorists”, quoting a former member of the school’s board of trustees.

“They did everything they could to stop this move,” he said.

After his speech, Monaghan explained why he wanted to reference the school’s troubles.

“It helped to dramatize,” he said. “It makes the moment bigger when people know what you’ve been through to get here.”

Healy and student body president, senior Joreen Belocura, 21, also presented speeches at the ribbon-cutting ceremony.

Belocura spoke of the university’s importance to its students and the broader impact it hopes to achieve.

“This is a God-given gift,” she said. “It’s not only to us, as we start classes, but to the world.”

Following the ceremony, the day continued with a mixture of both normal opening-day college life and special ceremony.

In Daniel Nodes’ morning Theological Latin class, 12 students twirled pens, bit fingernails and drank from water bottles and coffee thermoses.

One student with an unzipped backpack burst in a half hour late.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know I was in this class until four minutes ago,” he apologized to Nodes.

“It’s the first day, we’re all in a state of adjusting and preparing ourselves,” Nodes replied.

The class then returned to studying a sixth-century Latin hymn.

At noon, the school celebrated an opening mass, led by the Rev. Robert Garrity, the university chaplain. At the end of the mass the school conferred an honorary doctor of laws degree on Robert Thomas, a former chairman of the school’s board of trustees.
The school added 187 new students this year and total enrollment is 601. The students come from 43 states and 12 countries and can earn one of 10 undergraduate and two graduate degrees. Twenty-year goals, Monaghan said in his speech are for 5,500 students — 20 percent international — who average a 1,400 SAT score.

After the morning ceremony, Monaghan pointed to some ivy that was scraping the bottom of the school's library.

"In three years, you'll see, that's going to be all over the walls," he said.