

**Remarks for Holy Redeemer Parish 90th Anniversary Gala
December 5, 2009**

**President Patricia McGuire
Trinity Washington University**

As I was thinking about our common mission this evening to support Catholic education, I recalled the saying that is based on a passage in Deuteronomy: “We are warmed by fires we did not set; we drink from wells we did not dig.”

We who are both the beneficiaries and stewards of Catholic education today had our thirst for knowledge quenched at wells dug in the past century by some pretty remarkable people --- women, quite a few women, and some very good men as well --- people who committed their entire lives to the idea of sanctification and salvation through education. We are still warmed tonight by the fires of those passionate individuals who created Catholic schools out of nothing so much as their faith and imagination and the labor of their hands and hearts. We have come together here tonight to celebrate 90 years of that fire at Holy Redeemer, to recommit ourselves to ensuring that the flame is not extinguished in the very heart of our city.

What, indeed, is our responsibility to keep this particular fire burning? Father Bava invited me here tonight to share a little bit of our story at Trinity. This is a story of a great deal of faith, considerable hope, and no small charity, both of the tangible kind and also a true work of love and devotion.

Before I talk about Trinity, though, let me provide some historical context: we can spend a great deal of time wondering how the once-unstoppable wave of Catholic education that swept our nation has become, in too many places, an ebb tide. The reason is quite simple: sociology happened. More specifically, women’s sociology happened. Once upon a time, if a woman wanted to have a professional career, possibly be an executive, become a CEO, run a company, she had only one option: join the convent. Example: In 1970, only 5% of all college presidents were women --- and 90% of that 5% were Catholic nuns.

These were women of profound faith who heard the call to religious life as a spiritual adventure and lifelong devotion. But they were also women with considerable ambitions. Catholic religious women were pioneers, trailblazers, revolutionaries and radical agents of social transformation. Behind the self-effacing, cloaked humility of the sisters were some tough-as-nails business minds who knew how to start corporations, raise capital, organize and supervise construction projects, hire the labor force, design the curricula or service programs, create the accounting system, build the boards, run the company. They built massive systems in education and healthcare. The late author Abigail McCarthy once wrote that Catholic religious women “built the largest, most far-flung system of education the world has ever known.” (Abigail McCarthy, in her essay “A Luminous Minority”)

They did it for free. They contributed their services to make these great ventures possible. And, then, they were gone. The winds of change that blew through religious life after Vatican II, combined with the changing sociological landscape for women generally, resulted in the great

exodus from religious life that diminished the available free labor for the schools. When that labor was gone, the institutions faced catastrophe.

The decline in religious labor after Vatican II, the same force that had such a harsh impact on K-12 Catholic education, also devastated the Catholic women's colleges. But even more, these unique institutions found themselves drowning in the tsunami of social and political change borne on the fires and storms of the 1960's. In 1960, nearly 300 women's colleges flourished across the United States, and about 190 of those were Catholic women's colleges bursting at the seams with increasingly large student bodies in the baby boom. Today, there are just 16 institutions remaining that identify as Catholic women's colleges, including Trinity. What happened? Massive migration to public education, big time college sports, Title IX – all contributed to the erosion of the once-strong bases for Catholic women's colleges like Trinity.

Trinity was founded in 1897 by the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur who were encouraged by Cardinal Gibbons --- yes, the same Cardinal Gibbons who encouraged the founding of Holy Redeemer Parish --- because Catholic University, then just 10 years old, refused admission to Catholic women at that time, and those women were --- *scandale!* --- then going to the other new women's colleges like Bryn Mawr, Wellesley and Vassar.

The SNDs already had a century of tradition in education. They were founded in 1804 in France to educate the girls orphaned by the French Revolution. Like Saint Katharine Drexel whose influence is still felt at Holy Redeemer School, Saint Julie Billiart who founded the Sisters of Notre Dame had a passion for the education of the poor, especially girls.

The Sisters of Notre Dame came to the United States in the 1850's. Here in D.C., they established Notre Dame Academy at North Capitol and K Streets, not far from the future site of Holy Redeemer Parish. When they attempted to found Trinity in the summer of 1897, a great controversy broke out because some conservative elements in the Church thought that establishing a college for women so close to Catholic University was part of the heresy of Americanism that was a hot topic in those days. The SNDs persisted, appealing for approval all the way to Pope Leo XIII, and they won. The first students arrived in 1900. Over the next seven decades, they cultivated a very small, very elite student body drawn from the top Catholic families all over the country. Because of our location in the nation's capital, a number of those women were the daughters of political figures --- Nancy D'Alessandro, daughter of the mayor of Baltimore, enrolled in the Class of 1962; she is now known as Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi. Kathleen Gilligan, daughter of the governor of Ohio, was in the Class of 1970; she is Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius.

But Trinity in the early 1970s, when I was a student, was already in the throes of the crisis resulting from the decline in religious vocations and flight to coeducation. Nearly 1,000 traditional-aged young women were enrolled at Trinity in 1968, the zenith of its life at that time, but five years later, by my senior year, enrollment was less than half of that, fewer than 500 students. The downward trend continued for the next two decades, with an occasional good year to keep hope alive, but by the time I became Trinity's president in 1989, the enrollment of full-time traditional-aged students was fewer than 300.

Fast forward to Trinity present: today we have more than 2,000 students in our small university. More than 800 young women are thriving in our historic women's college, the College of Arts & Sciences. We have coeducational undergraduate and graduate programs in our three professional schools --- the School of Education, School of Professional Studies, School of Nursing and Health Professions. Perhaps, most significantly, more than 90% of our students represent historically under-served populations --- African American students and international Black students, Latina and other Hispanic students, students of many different races, ethnicities, languages, beliefs. About 40% of these students are from the District of Columbia; these are students with large financial needs; the median family income of our freshmen is \$30,000.

How did we achieve this turn-around in Trinity's fortunes, and what does this story have to offer by way of instructive example for Holy Redeemer's community and Catholic education today? While the programmatic opportunities available at the collegiate level are certainly different, I think there are some transferable "lessons learned." Let me suggest five:

1. Focus on Mission: this work is too hard if we don't understand mission and live it with fervor every single day. Sometimes, though, we confuse mission with characteristics, especially the characteristics of students. I am sometimes confronted with this question: how can Trinity still be "Catholic" when a majority of our students are not? My answer is very clear: we are Catholic not because of our students' faith, but because of OUR faith. We live the Gospel every single day in our ministry in education.

Catholic education *is* the work of evangelization, but not through the rote memorization of catechism responses among only those who believe already. When we teach children or students of all ages to read critically, to write persuasively, to calculate accurately, to reason logically, to speak as advocates unafraid of argument, to interpret the needs of others so as to provide effective services, to put the other first, to recognize lies and to choose truth, to advance the cause of life not just as a political slogan but as a matter of justice from conception through salvation, to cultivate a deep life of faith through prayer and spiritual devotion --- when we do all of these things, we are sanctifying the lives in our care, we are making it possible for these human beings to live with dignity and economic security, and we make them evangelists for human dignity and worth in their families and communities. This is real Catholic education.

Catholic education is not about a placid state of being, but a force for action, an impulse to achieve social justice for the communities we serve, to be beacons of hope in the darkness of ignorance, greed, cynicism and oppression that infect and debilitate too many citizens of the earth and children of God.

As we considered Trinity's mission in the early 1990s, members of the family had a rough-and-tumble conversation about what really constituted mission --- was it about SAT scores, the race or religion of our students, social class or family pedigree? Some constituents were very disconcerted by the changing racial composition of the student body. Others worried that a rise in the population of Black students meant a diminishment in the number of Catholics. I remember one letter I received after I was quoted in the Washington Post as saying that the Sisters of Notre Dame had a mission to serve poor girls; an alumna wrote to me with exclamation points, "I was NOT POOR!" In this tricky landscape of emotion and nostalgia and

culture wars, the Sisters of Notre Dame on our board became very clear: why are we trying so hard to reclaim a population that is now lost to Trinity, they said, meaning the historic white Catholic population from east coast enclaves, when there are thousands of women who need us at our doorstep? Trinity's mission was and is clear, they said: to educate students, especially women, who might not otherwise have access to higher education.

When we became very clear about mission, we began Trinity's long period of renaissance.

2. Self-Reliance and Resilience: There are many days when I tromp around our venerable old Main Hall at Trinity, looking up through the soaring open Well in the center, or out across the many angles of the red-tiled roof, and I ask myself two questions --- what *were* they thinking, those SNDs who built this place? --- and, more pertinent, if they could do this with so little, can't we keep it when we have so much? More than the value of contributed services lost, I think the greatest loss that Catholic education suffered when the religious women disappeared were the values of self-reliance and resilience. One of the hardest parts of my job is helping my colleagues to understand that choosing to be a private, Catholic school means that we choose to be self-reliant. There is no bailout for Catholic education. To figure out how we keep what those great women built, we have to go back to their stories, understand what it took to build and sustain these places in the first place. Vision, yes. Imagination, no doubt. Faith, of course. But also: resilience in the face of rejection and doubt, and self-reliance when no help was coming from elsewhere.

Nobody's going to bail us out. We have to figure this out ourselves.

3. Form Effective Partnerships: While recognizing the need for self-reliance, we also need to make the case for great assistance from partners who have much to offer. The partnership of the University of Notre Dame with Holy Redeemer School is a remarkable example of this kind of life-giving partnership. More Catholic colleges and universities need to have partnerships with Catholic schools, and here at Trinity, we strive to be an effective resource for the schools in the Archdiocese. At Trinity, our own strategy for growth and change included finding partners with whom we shared a great deal of compatibility --- the Girl Scouts, the Women's Sports Foundation, and many other similar organizations. Partnerships also helped us to leverage resources --- we received great affirmation and support from our community partners when we went in search of major grants to help us build the Trinity Center for Women and Girls in Sports. Through that new facility, we were able to attract other partners and programs whose good work raised our visibility.

The broad support of our community, thanks to extensive partnerships, gave us new life and helped Trinity to find new ways to live our mission. We learned the value of leveraging opportunities over and over again.

4. Stewardship of Scarce Resources: I once sat in a meeting with the president of one of the large public universities in this region, and he was talking about a project that he wanted the other universities to join, and joining would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. The other presidents nodded and said it was reasonable. I, however, spoke up and said that Trinity could

not possible afford this thing he was describing. He turned to me with a snarl on his face and said, “If you can’t afford to do this, you shouldn’t be in business.” His statement was stunning not only for its rudeness, but for his presumption of rightness about the need to spend massive sums of money on a dubious project. That was 15 years ago. Trinity is still in business.

Catholic schools have never had much ‘stuff’ save for the great dedication of teachers and administrators to student success. What else is necessary? Stewarding our resources carefully so that we can do what really matters --- teach our students very well --- must be our central concern. A big challenge for us is to recruit colleagues onto faculty and staff who share the understanding that careful stewardship of resources is a part of making our mission happen. Or, as I like to remind Trinity’s faculty, “Poverty is one of our grand traditions.”

5. Recognize Success. As Trinity evolved into the new American urban university we have become, we have had to recast our ideas about how we measure success. Trinity today is immensely successful by any number of measures. We educate more D.C. residents than any other private university in the nation. We have the best persistence/completion rate for D.C. residents at 61%. We have rebuilt our old women’s college with new populations of women who profit mightily from this form of education. We have expanded our reach to include working women and men who cherish Trinity’s highly personal form of education. We are thriving. Most important, our students find in Trinity a source of affirmation and fulfillment that, in many cases, they have never had previously in their lives.

U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan has said on numerous occasions that reforming public education so that the most marginalized citizens of our nation can enjoy better economic opportunities is one of the great civil rights issues of our time.

In fact, the Second Vatican Council recognized the fact in 1965 when the Council issued the Declaration on Christian Education, recognizing the universal right to education as a matter of human dignity. The Council called upon “...all those who hold a position of public authority or who are in charge of education to see to it that youth is never deprived of this sacred right. It further exhorts the sons [and daughters] of the Church to give their attention with generosity to the entire field of education, having especially in mind the need of extending very soon the benefits of a suitable education and training to everyone in all parts of the world.” These words were prophetic. Today, this passage speaks to us, the Catholic educators who are relentless in pursuing educational opportunity for all as a matter of social justice.

We certainly have our challenges, at Trinity, at Holy Redeemer, in Catholic schools throughout the District of Columbia. But rather than feeling beleaguered, let us rejoice in the precious opportunity of stewardship that is ours. We work in the long shadows of those creative, imaginative, bold women and men who made the first great century of Catholic education possible. If they could light those fires and dig those wells in times when they had few resources save their own labor freely given, then surely today, with so much more available to us, we can keep the fires burning and the wells replenished through the resourceful, generous and faithful stewardship of this essential ministry for our faith.