

Remarks for Honors Convocation Founders Day 2010

President Patricia McGuire

Congratulations to all of our honorees this evening! Your achievements now become part of our grand Trinity tradition, your names inscribed in our permanent institutional records of accomplished women stretching back across 113 years. You are now exemplars for other students, role models for academic persistency and intellectual excellence.

But beyond this celebration, what will your achievements mean later on --- next week, next month, next year, five and ten years from now? Once you have hung your framed certificates on the wall and posted your photos on your Facebook pages, what will remain from this day and these achievements to give meaning to your lives in the future?

The answer to this question is entirely up to you. You can take your Kappa Gamma Alpha Delta Phi Theta Pi Sigma Beta Chi Si moment and move on, leaving no fingerprints on the pages of history. Or, you can take this moment as a genuine lifelong challenge to be as good as you are today on all of the days to come.

The world needs you to take up this challenge affirmatively and enthusiastically. We must have your brains, your talent, your commitment, compassion, fairness and integrity. We must have your wit and your wisdom for the hard, intractable challenges of contemporary society.

The late great Dr. Dorothy Height, whose funeral is tomorrow – and that will be a grand celebration of a life so well lived – famously said that, “I want to be remembered as someone who used herself and anything she could touch to work for justice and freedom.... I want to be remembered as one who tried.”

Will you be remembered as one who tried to improve justice and freedom for others?

A Trinity education has never been about just making yourself happy, or wealthy, or content. Indeed, contentment is the antithesis of Trinity’s values. Our Founders, who we venerate today, were hardly women of contentment. They were radicals and revolutionaries, women who took as their cause the necessary disturbing of the peace for the cause of justice as a means to salvation.

Of course, Sister Julia McGroarty, 70 years old in 1897, would not have used words like “radical” or “revolutionary” or “feminist” to describe herself. She had already founded several schools for the Sisters of Notre Dame, and was well past what at that time would have been a likely retirement age when she undertook her greatest work of all, the founding of Trinity College. But Sisters of Notre Dame really don’t retire; they just find new ways to live out their mission in education to women and girls, children and the poor of this earth.

Back then, in Washington, women could not go to college in this town. Catholic women who applied to the then-new Catholic University were rejected simply because they were female.

Sister Julia McGroarty and her co-conspirator in this whole business, Sister Mary Euphrasia Taylor, believed that women had every bit as much right to go to college as men, and they set about establishing Trinity. They had some help from a few good men, notably, Cardinal James Gibbons who was then the Archbishop of Baltimore --- Washington was not a separate diocese yet. Cardinal Gibbons wrote to the sisters that it was ‘an embarrassment’ that women were denied admission to Catholic University because of their gender, and he encouraged those brave SNDs to proceed with their plans.

But, as we know, some things never change, and those great Founders of Trinity encountered attitudes toward women and economic conditions for their enterprise that echo even to this day.

Some men in the Church believed that women should not be educated, and they caused a lot of trouble, claiming that a Catholic women’s college was evidence of a heresy they called “Americanism” back then, meaning anything with progressive views. Some things never change.

Not only did the Sisters of Notre Dame encounter right-wing opposition to women’s rights in education they also encountered something we have lived with as a Trinity tradition ever since: poverty. The sisters had little money to establish this college, and they launched a fund raising campaign at the very start that produced just about enough to buy this land and build the first wing of Main Hall, the south wing. The largest sums of money supporting Trinity’s early years and development came from the Sisters of Notre Dame themselves, from their own resources and also the tremendous value of their free labor, euphemistically called “contributed services.” Like many great Catholic institutions, we came into existence because of the free labor of selfless women, and those of us who have reaped so many benefits from this remarkable education at Trinity must never forget the debt we owe to them.

These were not women of contentment. They did not let political opposition or a lack of funding get in their way. One of my favorite stories of the founders came in the long, hot summer of 1897. It was August. The conservative monsignors over at Catholic University had kicked up a great fuss about this potential heresy called women’s higher education. Even the Pope heard about it. Sister Mary Euphrasia, fearing that the mother superior in Belgium would pull the plug on the whole thing because fighting with the Vatican was never a winning strategy --- even then! --- decided to take matters into her own hands. Wearing her full woolen habit and a heavy traveling cloak in the middle of August, Sister Mary Euphrasia and another sister companion boarded a train at Union Station and headed to Atlantic City where the Pope’s representative (we call him the Papal Nuncio) was enjoying summer breezes at the beach. Mind you, there was no Acela in those days, no air conditioning, and the nuns certainly could not kick back and enjoy a cold beer on the train. Chances are that they did not eat or drink anything, since they rarely went out in public and observed very strict rules when they did so.

Arriving in Atlantic City and finding the Nuncio’s home, the Sisters spent enough time with him to plead their case to be allowed to proceed with the founding of Trinity. The records tell us that the Archbishop was quite alarmed to see the sisters so heavily dressed in the middle of August, and he even invited them to take off their veils, but of course, they refused. They made their case directly to him, went back to the train station and returned to Washington that very night.

I wonder how many of us would find it convenient to make a one-day round trip to Atlantic City by train even today. Even by car. Even with air conditioning and rest stops along the way....

The SNDs persisted and won, and we are here today because those great women cared about us so much that they ignored their own personal discomforts and safety to make Trinity a reality.

If they could do so much in the conditions and circumstances of their cloistered lives at the end of the 19th Century, how much more can you do now, the heirs of their vision and great passion?

What would they say to you if they were here today? They'd be quite pleased for your accomplishments, of course, but in the grand style of the SNDs over the years, they would not allow you to be self-satisfied or content. They'd give you just enough praise to encourage you and then just enough admonishment about the work that remains to keep you humble.

They would tell you that they went to all that trouble to establish Trinity so that you could take the fire of this education out to light up the world.

They would tell you that your Trinity education is more urgent than ever.

They would ask you to look around the world and see the places where you could take this fire: you could shine your light on the people of Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan and so many places torn apart by war and violence and tyranny and poverty and ignorance. Your light could expose the great human tragedies of Darfur and Rwanda and Congo. You would illuminate the dark rainforest floor stained by the blood of Sister Dorothy Stang and so many others who gave their lives in the cause of justice.

Our Founders would then ask you to look around this nation and see the urgent and ever more perilous conditions of people who suffer discrimination and violence, poverty and injustice every day. You would raise your torch high as a beacon for immigrant families in Arizona and along the southwestern border, in Florida and Virginia and all the states where simple justice demands that this great and wealthy nation treat every human life with dignity and respect. You would take the light of your knowledge to children in this city whose schools remain disgraceful in too many neighborhoods, whose uncertain lifelines are too often cut short by the prevalence of guns and drugs that run like a toxic river through our meanest streets. You would remember another phrase of Dorothy Height: "We've got to work to save our children and do it with full respect for the fact that if we do not, no one else is going to do it."

You could take that torch down to Capitol Hill to light up the sky with your righteous advocacy for the people of this city who remain uniquely and deeply disenfranchised. Along the way you might just ask Senator John McCain what he was thinking yesterday when he introduced legislation to repeal DC's ban on semi-automatic guns on our streets. Seems that Arizona politicians are specializing in outrageous acts these days.

The great educational leader Johnetta Cole, former president of Spelman and Bennett Colleges and now director of the Smithsonian Museum of African Art, once said, "*An education that*

teaches you to understand something about the world has done only half of the assignment. The other half is to teach you to do something about making the world a better place.”

Trinity has taught you to understand the world, and, I pray, we have equally well taught you about your privilege and obligation to do what you can to make the world a better place, to be like Dorothy Height, using everything and every person you touch to work for justice and freedom. Your honors today prove that you have the knowledge and talent to do just that. But only in the record of the lives you will live will we see the full measure of your ability to put this knowledge to the best possible use in the improvement, perhaps even in the transformation of our society.

You will make our Founders proud. You are the heirs of their vision, the bearers of their wisdom, Trinity's message of hope to future generations as yet unseen. May the power, wisdom and love of the Trinity be with you on all of your journeys yet to come.

Congratulations to all honorees!