



***From Occupying to Inciting:
Leading the Historical Dynamic of Change***

**Remarks for the Fall Convocation
September 29, 2013**

President Patricia McGuire

In an extraordinary [interview](#) in *America* magazine, Pope Francis said many important and revealing things of interest to people of all faiths. I hope you take the time to read and reflect on the full interview. But there was one passage that struck me as particularly appropriate for Trinity seniors and all of us today. Listen to his words:

We won't find God by complaining about how bad things are today, Pope Francis says. We have to seek and find God in the real world of everyday life. To find God, he goes on, "*We must not focus on occupying the spaces where power is exercised, but rather on starting long-run historical processes. We must initiate processes rather than occupy spaces. God manifests himself in time and is present in the processes of history. This gives priority to actions that give birth to new historical dynamics. And it requires patience...*" (Pope Francis I, interview in [America Magazine](#), www.americamagazine.org, September 30, 2013)

In so many ways, this brief passage sums up the call of your Trinity education. The caps and gowns you have received today are signs and symbols of your power to create a new historical dynamic, to create new life-giving spaces for your children, your families, your communities and places of work. Your Trinity education is not about merely occupying spaces where others exercise power. A Trinity education rejects passivity in this or any historical moment; Trinity women and men earn their degrees with the high expectation for your exercise of the true servant leadership of working for social justice for our neighbors and communities.

A few weeks ago, we observed the 50th Anniversary of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Many of you were there on the Mall to mark this anniversary; a few of you were there 50 years ago. A half century has passed since Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., gave his historic address lifting up his dream for America. In sharp contrast to so many contemporary political grand gestures that have no durability beyond today's blogs and headlines, Dr. King did not merely occupy space, he truly initiated a long-run historical process that continues to this day, and that will continue long beyond our memory. Dr. King did not make a grand gesture and then

walk away to a lucrative television contract. He did not fold up his tent and go home when things got very rough. He and others put their very lives at risk. He led a massive movement of courageous people, a dynamic process full of heroes most of whose names we may never know. The civil rights movement is one of the great historic change processes in all of human history, and we people of faith must surely be able to see God's presence in that movement.

What are the new historical dynamics that you will lead, you who are now vested in the robes of intellectual and spiritual strength that is the foundation for Trinity's work in the world?

We live in an era beset with profound challenges for human life. World peace is in grave jeopardy at the hands of rogue states and independent terrorist actors. Domestic peace is disrupted continuously with mass shootings and street violence. In the last few weeks we've had a robust debate in this country about whether to combat heinous actions ---- the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons against its own people --- with more violence --- a potential missile strike from the United States. The debate is not unlike our domestic debate about whether we can stop the bloodshed here with more guns or a more courageous showing of collective willpower to regulate guns while also addressing the root causes of the violence.

Last week, after the shootings at the Navy Yard, a friend of mine, [Dr. Janis Orlowski](#), chief medical officer at the Washington Hospital Center, spoke the unvarnished truth from the emergency room where victims lay bleeding from this latest carnage:

"There's something evil in our society that we as Americans have to work to try and eradicate. I would like you to put my trauma center out of business. I really would. I would like to not be an expert on gunshots. Let's get rid of this. This is not America." ([Dr. Janis Orlowski](#), September 16, 2013, as quoted on [The Atlantic Wire](#))

What is the historical dynamic we need to create to put the trauma centers out of business, to purge the evil of our savage instinct for violence from the soul of the human community?

Will you be part of a new historical dynamic that finds a way to restore true peace, that confronts the impulse to violence in so many places with the urgent imperative to stand down from seizing weapons, to use God's gifts of intellect and speech to negotiate, mediate, advocate and persuade our fellow inhabitants of the global village of the wisdom and necessity and urgency of peace?

The dynamic of peace requires the fire of justice. Violence is the evil fruit of injustice; injustice abounds in a society where the gap between rich and poor widens each day, where members of Congress eagerly vote to de-fund food stamps while lacking the political courage to have even the most modest controls placed on gun sales; where legislators would rather shut down the government than work cooperatively to find ways to improve government service to the people who need help the most, the sick, the elderly, children living in poverty; where 30 percent of the children in the capital city of the richest nation in history cope with hunger; where one-third of their parents cannot read; where politicians scoff at poverty as "an excuse" while approving plans to fire teachers whose pupils cannot learn because they come to school frightened, exhausted, sick and hungry.

A remarkable Trinity alumna, Marie Dennis, Class of 1964 and president of Pax Christi International, a global organization working for peace, spoke at last year's winter commencement. In her remarks, she crystallized the challenge and imperative of changing the current historical dynamic:

“Increasingly, we can see interconnected roots to many of these major global problems. Endemic poverty, war, climate change and other ecological problems are often “of a piece.” And the nightmare so many people are living has not just happened – like a bad storm or fire or random illness. Far too often its roots are planted in our own values, lifestyles, laws, trade agreements, domestic and foreign policies.

“You know that decisions made on Capitol Hill, in the White House, on Wall Street, in corporate board rooms, in voting booths, in shopping malls – even around our kitchen tables – can have a significant positive or negative impact in our own neighborhoods. ...The good news is that we can make a difference. We can, for example, all be peacemakers in a violent world. The struggle to overcome violence in our own society – so much on our minds these days – is connected to overcoming violence in [other places]. ...The struggle to overcome violence in our own society is connected to our local and national budget priorities; is connected to our capacity for national and international cooperation; is connected to the virtues we cultivate in our families, our schools, our neighborhoods – and to the virtues we apply (or not) in the public arena and political debates.” (Marie Dennis, [Winter 2013 Trinity Commencement Address](#))

Where did a Trinity Woman ever get such radical ideas?

Before Julie Billiart was a saint, she was a troublemaker. She believed that the power of education could not only change lives on this earth, but that in fact, education brought students closer to salvation. She braved everything from the torches of French revolutionaries to the ire of her bishop in pursuit of her calling to instigate a historical dynamic that is still changing lives today, including yours, including mine. She did not let paralysis, threats or petty sniping stop the process she set in motion with her co-conspirator Françoise Blin de Bourdon to establish schools for poor girls orphaned by the French Revolution. Her heirs among the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Sisters Julia McGroarty and Mary Euphrasia Taylor, did not let a lack of money or opposition to the idea of women's education stop them in their determination to create Trinity College. Their heirs among the SNDs who led and enriched the lives of thousands of Trinity alumnae and alumni for the last 100 years could not be stopped by the long years of obscurity, poverty and obstacles placed along the pathways of each historic moment for Trinity.

We are now the heirs of these courageous, radical, visionary women, women who are exemplars of the meaning of Pope Francis's meditation on the difference between occupying space where others wield power versus initiating historic change processes.

Tonight we announced the creation of a center in her name, the Billiart Center for Social Justice, which has incitement as its real purpose: to incite you, our current and future generations of Trinity students, alumnae and alumni, families and friends, to action for social justice, to be leaders for justice and peace in your families and schools, workplaces and communities, nation and world.

Trinity today advances the legacy of Julie and the Sisters of Notre Dame across three centuries, and our stewardship of this legacy demands that we take every action necessary to be sure that Trinity does more than merely occupy space in the marketplace of higher education; we must be the disruption, the force for change, the initiators of the historic processes that will improve the human condition generations hence.

For Trinity to be able to do this as well in the future as she has done in the past, we need goodwill, yes; we need devotion and loyalty, of course; we need the hard and persistent work of our faculty and staff, always; we need the earnest and challenging dialogue with our students every single day. But beyond all of that, we also need resources, because to sustain our vitality in the modern world we must have the essential tools of contemporary higher education.

Two weeks ago, I was so pleased to [announce](#) that an extraordinary Trinity alumna has become our latest exemplar of the great historical dynamic for Trinity. Joan Payden, Class of 1953, has made an extraordinary gift to Trinity, a \$10 million donation that will make it possible for Trinity to create the new academic center that we have long desired, with new science laboratories and labs for nursing and health, new classrooms and study spaces. As we have announced her gift and talked to media about the project, Joan Payden has been adamant in her message: “It’s not about me,” she has insisted with customary humility, “it’s about Trinity’s future,” it’s about the good and great work that Trinity does in this world and the imperative of making sure that Trinity has what she needs to continue this historical dynamic for generations to come.

Joan Payden and Trinity’s other great benefactors are also exemplars of the idea that Pope Francis articulated, the difference between merely occupying space in powerlessness versus seizing the historical dynamic to create change for other lives, communities and society.

Tonight, let us offer our profound thanks to all of Trinity’s benefactors who have joined forces with the legacy of the Sisters of Notre Dame to ensure that Trinity will endure and thrive far into the future. And tonight let us all renew our pledges to be stewards of these great gifts in the best ways possible: to use the power of our Trinity education to be agents of social change, to incite and lead those historical processes that will move more lives from poverty to prosperity, from ignorance to intellectual fulfillment, from fear to hope, from violence to peace, from oppression to justice.

Seniors in the Green Class of 2014: you give the latest witness to the wisdom of our founders. Your robes vest you with the symbol of Trinity’s mission in intellectual achievement, not for its own sake or your own enrichment, but truly for the power of advanced learning to incite the change we seek in this world. As you go forth from this convocation, may you walk ever more confidently with the strength of the Trinity supporting you along the way, the wisdom of the Trinity as you make your life’s choices, and the hope-filled light of the Trinity guiding you along the pathway to graduation and the bright days of even greater achievement that await.

Congratulations, seniors!