



## Remarks Accepting the St. Elizabeth Ann Seton Award of SOAR!

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President Patricia McGuire  
Trinity Washington University

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With humble thanks, I am pleased to accept this beautiful award on behalf of all of the students, faculty and staff, alumnae and trustees of Trinity, and especially for the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur who still animate our lives and work. Many SNDs are here tonight! Congratulations to my fellow honorees Bishop Curlin and John Treseler, I am so honored to be in your company! Many thanks to Sr. Kathleen Lunsmann and Sr. Kate Clancy and the board and staff of SOAR! for selecting me for this award. I am especially grateful to my colleague and friend Sr. Pat O'Brien, the chair of Trinity's Board of Trustees, with whom I have shared more academic escapades than either of us will be willing to say. I am privileged to know her.

I am here tonight because of the vision and courage of great women religious. I am so moved to receive this award named for the great educator St. Elizabeth Seton. Like Mother Seton and her Sisters of Charity, the Sisters of Notre Dame devoted their lives and ministries to education as a pathway to hope, to faith, to salvation. 200 years ago, even as Elizabeth Bayley Seton was establishing her schools in Emmitsburg on the heels of the American Revolution, Julie Billiart, also one of the great educator saints, was founding her order in France and Belgium in the aftermath of the French Revolution. 175 years ago, the Sisters of Notre Dame crossed the pond and put down their American roots, opening schools in Cincinnati, Ipswich, Washington and then on to California. The late writer Abigail McCarthy once wrote that Catholic religious women created the "largest and most far-flung system of education the world has ever known."<sup>1</sup>

I am a beneficiary of these great women --- the Sisters of Mercy, Sisters of St. Joseph and Sisters of Notre Dame all did their best to teach me. But only after I became Trinity's president did I fully understand the scope of the work that accountants coldly term "contributed services." What a strange euphemism for the free labor of women! Even today I marvel at how they did it, women with little to go on but their faith and fortitude, buying land and building great buildings, organizing faculties and curricula, working endlessly without paychecks or "perks" of any kind. No spa weekends at luxury resorts, no golf outings with wealthy donors, no golden parachutes when the time came to transition out. They worked tirelessly without building pensions, without obsessively checking the asset allocations in their TIAA-CREF portfolios. So when they retired, they depended upon the next generation of sisters to support them. Little did they know how it would eventually turn out in when the next generations slowly vanished.

We are here tonight because we believe that the vow of poverty should not mean an elder life of hardship. The sisters who sacrificed so much for us deserve our support. Thanks to all of the benefactors who contribute so much to the work of SOAR!

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<sup>1</sup> Abigail McCarthy, "A Luminous Minority: the Contributions of Catholic Women's Colleges," in *Educating the Majority: Women Challenge Tradition in Higher Education*, eds. Carol S. Pearson, Judith G. Touchton and Donna Shavlik (New York: American Council on Education and MacMillan Publishing Company, 1989) 175.

One final word about Mother Seton and the idea of historical grounding for today's work in social transformation through Catholic education. We had to understand our history in order to build a future for Trinity. Like Mother Seton who changed the world by founding America's first Catholic schools, the Sisters of Notre Dame changed the world for women by founding one of the first Catholic colleges for women at Trinity in 1897. Trinity's Founders Sisters Julia McGroarty and Mary Euphrasia Taylor were powerful change agents, revolutionaries and even radicals in their own way, champions for a woman's right to be educated at a time when some men of the Church called such thinking a heresy. They persisted, undaunted by threats of being silenced by the hierarchy and a chronic lack of money. They succeeded, and Trinity thrived for many years as an elite Catholic college for women.

100 years later, in a much different cultural era, after coeducation at the men's colleges caused years of enrollment decline and grave financial hardship at Trinity, in our crisis of confidence we returned often to the story of our founders and their determination to make a higher education accessible to women who had been denied such access. In the early 1990's as we struggled to discern Trinity's future, with many mourning the loss of the traditional population of Trinity students from among the daughters in the Catholic enclaves on the east coast, a Sister of Notre Dame challenged us at a board meeting: "Why are we trying so hard to reclaim a student population that has moved on," she cried, "when there are thousands of women at our doorstep who could profit from this education so much! We founded Trinity to serve women such as these!"

That bold call to hold fast to the real founding imperative made it possible for Trinity to experience a true transformation rooted in our historic mission while embracing a "paradigm shift" in the characteristics of our student body. Today, Trinity welcomes students who are 95% African American and Latina, a majority from the District of Columbia, women who have known great marginalization and deep poverty, students who are striving to rise beyond these circumstances to make better lives for their children and families. This is the true work of Catholic education for transformation. This is the work that Pope Francis has called us to undertake most urgently when he wrote in the *Joy of the Gospel* that every community is "...called to be an instrument of God for the liberation and promotion of the poor"<sup>2</sup> and to work for social justice.

In his homily at the time of the canonization of St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, Terrence Cardinal Cooke of New York called her "...a saint for our times."<sup>3</sup> In her, he said,

*"We have a woman of faith for a time of doubt and uncertainty..."*

*"We have a woman of love for a time of coldness and division..."*

*"We have a woman of hope for a time of crisis and discouragement."*

She is still "a saint for our times." We still need that faith, love and hope of Mother Seton more than ever today. Her works still call to us, inciting and provoking our best efforts in Catholic education for the sake of social and spiritual transformation each day. Thank you for honoring me and Trinity with this award in her name.

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 2013, Ch.4, #187

<sup>3</sup> Cardinal Terrence Cooke, homily quoted in [Catholic New York](#), February 10, 2000.