



**Remarks for the Winter 2015 Graduation Ceremony  
January 6, 2015**

**President Patricia McGuire**

As we gather for this 2015 Winter Graduation ceremony, we find much joy in celebrating the achievements of our newest Trinity alumnae and alumni. Congratulations on your hard work and dedication to excellence! We thank your families and friends who were there for you, supporting you in the tough times, cheering wildly as you raced toward your goal.

Even as we congratulate you and celebrate with you on this happy evening, I must also remind you that your diplomas come with large expectations not only for the work that you will do but, perhaps more importantly, for the leadership and influence you will bring to bear on the larger society. We live in times that yearn for moral clarity and courageous leadership. What will you do to satisfy that yearning?

Social justice imperatives demand the brains and bravery of Trinity graduates across the years.

Consider the imperative of justice for all.

As graduates of a university founded 118 years ago to overcome the pernicious effects of educational discrimination against women --- a university that today takes great pride in its magnificent diversity across all ages, races, beliefs, economic strata and personal characteristics --- you inherit Trinity's long and proud tradition of standing for justice.

At this moment in the United States, our society is experiencing a collective tearing open of the old wounds of racial injustice. Just like the embers of a campfire that flares up long after the tents were folded and packed away, the genteel fiction of a "post-racial" society has had its flimsy scrim go up in flames sparked by the still-smoldering hot coals of racism. What happened on the streets of Ferguson and Cleveland and Brooklyn and elsewhere, what happened in border towns where immigrant children were denied passage to safety and instead sent back to lives of violence and poverty, what happens in all of these places are not just random acts disconnected from history but acts that extend the American narrative of racial injustice. This is a narrative of pain that is full of the courage and heroism of those who fought for justice, sacrificing even their lives so others could live free. But 150 years after the end of the Civil War, a somber anniversary the nation marks this year, we still feel the heat and pain of those bitter flames shooting up from the embers we thought were extinguished long ago. 60 years after *Brown v. Board of Education* repudiated segregation in schools, 50 years after Selma, after the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act became the law of the land, the

smoldering ashes of issues we thought were settled threaten to ignite new conflagrations, forcing communities to take cover when we really should be coming together.

We either react to history, or make history. What will you do, our newest Trinity graduates? Will you simply live in reaction to history, to the pain of the hot coals burning thru your souls? Or will you make history for future generations by going out and finding the biggest reservoirs of healing waters you can possibly harness to douse the fire, taking courageous actions for justice to heal the wounds, to bring communities together, to find the peace we yearn for?

Such a challenge demands truly selfless leadership, the kind of servant leadership I hope you have learned about here at Trinity, a kind of leadership our graduates have exemplified across a century. This is a moral leadership that focuses on the needs of others, that does not worry about your own comfort because servant leaders find comfort in healing others. When you spend all of your time fretting about your own rights and the hurts that have come your way, you run the risk of being narcissistic. But when you spend your time and talent advocating for justice for those who need it most, you are heroic.

May you always use your Trinity degrees in pursuit of justice, exercising the heroism of servant leadership.

Now, speaking of leadership, just last Friday the District of Columbia inaugurated a new mayor. Mayor Muriel Bowser is a young woman who heralds the rising generations of new leadership for our city and nation --- I'm proud to say that she's a graduate of a women's college Chatham in Pittsburgh. She heard the call to public leadership and accepted the challenge, saying in her inaugural address that her goal is to build the government the city needs and deserves. We need to work with her to achieve that goal, for the sake of everyone in our city. The new mayor has a huge agenda that translates into action for justice on issues such as the full enfranchisement of the citizens of the District of Columbia, the right to a great education for our children, relief of the conditions of poverty and violence that afflict too many parts of our city, and greater opportunities for our marginalized neighbors to join the workforce and participate in the great economic benefits that many others in the city enjoy.

Over the weekend, Meet the Press hailed D.C. as the only one of the 50 largest U.S. cities to have women leaders in the top positions --- the mayor, the police chief, the chancellor of the schools. We need more women, and women and men of color in leadership positions in our city, state and nation. This week, as the new Congress takes office downtown, we know that our national legislature, with a composition that is 80% white and 80% male, does not reflect the national profile. In just a few decades, there will no longer be a white majority in our nation, and women have been the majority for quite some time. But getting women, getting African American and Latina citizens able and willing to run for public office, and getting elected to public office, continues to be a great challenge. In an interview recently, our own famous political alumna Nancy Pelosi commented that too many young women feel discouraged from running for office because they see the abuse that leaders must absorb every day.

Don't be discouraged by the negative forces. There's a lot of history still to be made. You must choose to use your Trinity education to write progressive new pages in human history. Paraphrasing Dr. Martin Luther King, we need a new generation of leaders with the moral strength to bend the arc of history even more toward justice. Don't say that's for someone else --- those words are for you.

We seem to spend too much time these days mourning the loss of great leaders from the past. Just last week, we lost Edward Brooke, the first African American elected to the United States Senate, only one of two African Americans to serve in the U.S. Senate in the entire 20<sup>th</sup> Century, and since then there have been only six more. A few days before Senator Brooke's passing, we lost former New York Governor Mario Cuomo.

Now, graduates of a certain age are nodding at those names, and others are saying, who the heck are those ancient figures? We are reminded of the fickleness of time by the news that just this week, when Kanye West and Paul McCartney released a new song, a number of people asked on Twitter, "Who is this Paul McCartney... an unknown new artist?" And they were not kidding.

But if we do not know or remember the past, we will never be able to write a different history for the future. In 1984, Governor Cuomo gave a famous speech at the Democratic National Convention in which he set forth ideas that sound like the agenda for leadership for social justice even today:

*"...a society as blessed as ours, the most affluent democracy in the world's history, one that can spend trillions on instruments of destruction, ought to be able to help the middle class in its struggle, ought to be able to find work for all who can do it, room at the table, shelter for the homeless, care for the elderly and infirm, and hope for the destitute...a proper government should be: the idea of family, mutuality, the sharing of benefits and burdens for the good of all, feeling one another's pain, sharing one another's blessings -- reasonably, honestly, fairly, without respect to race, or sex, or geography, or political affiliation."* (Mario Cuomo, 1984 Democratic National Convention Speech, from [www.americanrhetoric.com](http://www.americanrhetoric.com))

30 years later, this still is the American agenda, and it is our agenda, we who are graduates of Trinity --- not a political agenda but a justice agenda, a leadership challenge to do what we can to move this society forward in unity, justice and the peace we desire so much.

115 years ago, a courageous group of Sisters of Notre Dame and a few hardy young women first set foot on Trinity's campus. The SNDs braved opposition from within the Church, doubt and poverty to establish Trinity College in 1897, and by November 1900, they were ready to welcome the first students. But those students arrived on a cold, rainy day to find their new campus under construction --- mud, sawdust and hammering everywhere. So it is even today, Trinity is an unfinished work in progress, a great institution of higher learning that persists in the belief that this education can only be fulfilled in the good and great service our graduates extend to others throughout their lives.

You, our latest graduates this evening, you join that long line of Trinity alumnae and alumni across more than a century in carrying the light of Trinity as bearers of justice and peace to a world that needs both in abundance. By conferring degrees on you tonight, we honor the courage and commitment of our founders, those brave Sisters of Notre Dame who had the best idea that ever inflamed this campus, the idea of founding Trinity. You are the latest example of their bold inspiration, witness of the wisdom of their hard work and the dedication of those who followed them down through the years. You are the hope of Trinity for decades to come. As you take your diplomas forth from this graduation ceremony tonight, may you go with the strength, the light and the love of the Trinity through all the days of your lives.

Congratulations, graduates!