**Remarks for Emmanuel College Commencement**

May 14, 2016

*President Patricia McGuire*

*Trinity Washington University*

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Thank you! Sister Janet, Mr. Hynes, Reverend Walker, distinguished guests and graduates in the Class of 2016 of Emmanuel College: thank you for this great honor, which I accept humbly not so much for myself but for the great community of your sister school, Trinity.

Sr. Janet Eisner, you have long been one of my great role models and mentors, and congratulations to you on your many accomplishments here at Emmanuel! I would like to recognize and thank members of the Emmanuel community and Sisters of Notre Dame who have been so vitally important to me and to Trinity: Trinity’s own Board Chair Sister Patricia O’Brien who is here today; Sister Karen Hokanson, SND, who is on our board as well as on the faculty here at Emmanuel; Dr. Mary Hines, who served two terms as chair of Trinity’s board in a period of great transformation.

St. Julie Billiart, founder of the Sisters of Notre Dame, was eminently pragmatic about the commitment of her sisters to social justice through education. “Teach them what they need to know for life,” she instructed her sisters. What would Julie expect you to know today as you graduate from Emmanuel?

Surely, you must possess the knowledge of the disciplines you have studied, standing strong on the deep foundation of liberal learning that has shaped your intellectual framework for the work you will pursue in the years to come.

But Julie’s exhortation expects so much more of you than the mere possession of many facts and the appearance of cultural literacy in social situations. What do you really need to know?

You need to know how to put the needs of others before your own. What we need to know for life is that true justice is what we do for others as our expression of gratitude for God’s gift of life in us.

But gratitude is not enough, and simple charity is insufficient. You need to know how to take the risk of demanding justice for others, not merely through polite suggestions in a timid whisper of truth to power, but, when circumstances so require, through truly robust advocacy and even opposition when justice demands that risk.

You need to know how to persuade and motivate others to follow your lead to do what is right.

You need to know how to organize in solidarity with those on the margins and to move from expression to action in securing the minimal conditions of living for human dignity, decency and security. President Obama said it well at Howard University last weekend: to make effective social change, you need more than passion, you need a strategy. You need to know how to achieve true transformation of law and policy for the sake of those who need the great wealth of the richest nation in human history to alleviate the grievous deprivations suffered among those our bishops call “the least, the lost, the left out among us”[[1]](#footnote-1) too often as a result of invidious discrimination, racial hatred and religious bias.

In “The Emmanuel Promise” you declare that you believe that “education is the greatest work on earth” because “education will create a just and better world.” Like the Sisters of Notre Dame across two centuries, you need to know how to take the power of education to those who do not have your same privilege.

Two weeks ago, the voice of one of the greatest advocates and exemplars of the Catholic social justice tradition was silenced. Father Daniel Berrigan risked so much --- his freedom, his comfort --- to work for peace and justice. Berrigan once said:

*“We*  are … willing to suffer for our beliefs in the hope of creating something very different for those who will follow us. It is we who feel compelled to ask… how [our] communities are to form and to exist and to proliferate as instruments of human change and of human justice; and it is we who struggle to do more than pose the questions --- but rather, live as though …the kind of tomorrow one prays for and dreams about is not completely unobtainable…”[[2]](#footnote-2)

This is the life of social justice, to live as if justice and peace *are* possible in every place we find ourselves. This is what you need to know to bring hope to communities of need throughout the global village, a vast interdependent family that yearns for the passion, fresh perspective, powerful intellects and creative spirit that you, Emmanuel College’s Class of 2016, will take far beyond the Fenway to touch, teach and transform generations yet to come.

1. U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, 1986, Paragraph 27, p. 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Daniel Berrigan and Robert Coles, *The Geography of Faith: Underground Conversations on Religious, Political and Social Change*, 1971, pp. 42-44 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)