



## **Remarks Accepting the Ignatian Solidarity Network Holstein Award**

*May 10, 2017*

**President Patricia McGuire  
Trinity Washington University**

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Many thanks to the Ignatian Solidarity Network for this marvelous award! Thank you, Father Fred Kammer, Chris Kerr and all the board members, sponsors and friends of the Ignatian Solidarity Network who made the award selection and supported this evening so generously. Many thanks to my large group of Trinity friends, students and colleagues here tonight, and special thanks to Sr. Seton Cunneen, SND for the opening prayer; to Sr. Camilla Burns, SND for your generous introduction; to Brenda Alonso '18 for your very kind words and our other great students present tonight (Sadhana Singh '18 and Karen Tituana '18); and many thanks to my great colleague Ann Pauley who worked with Chris Kerr on all of the details.

When I read the list of prior recipients, I am quite humbled, not sure I measure up to those great women and men, true champions and role models of action for justice. I accept on behalf of our entire community at Trinity who are the real heroes of social justice. I am especially pleased to share this award with the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur whose mission commitment to action for social justice, and global focus on the poor, especially girls and women, has animated Trinity's commitment for 120 years.

Of course, I must also thank Georgetown Law Center, my academic and professional home for so many years. At Georgetown, I met awesome champions of justice whose influence on me continues to this day, notably the late and still so great Father Bob Drinan, SJ. Georgetown also introduced me to the D.C. Public Schools through a program called Street Law that placed law students into senior high schools in DC to teach about law and the legal system. I had never set foot inside a public school. The experience was transformative, and after graduation I became the project director, a position that gave me insights into the deep problems of public K-12 schools and equally, insight into the high ambitions and grit of DC students who could do so much better than what the schools afforded them at that time. That experience with the D.C. Public Schools followed me to Trinity, and helped with our institutional transformation.

Trinity today occupies a somewhat unique position in the landscape of American higher education. "Unique" is a word of some hubris when discussing one institution among thousands. But from our founding, Trinity has always been countercultural. As Sr. Camilla Burns noted in her introduction tonight, when the SNDs founded Trinity in 1897, there were no Catholic colleges for women. Those intrepid nuns struggled to assert women's right to education in the face of virulent conservative clerical opposition that deemed the idea of a college education for Catholic women tantamount to the heresy then called "Americanism."

I should note, as our Distinguished Professor Sr. Mary Johnson, SND pointed out on our Founders Day recently<sup>1</sup>, that Trinity is truly the legacy of immigrant women, particularly Sister Julia McGroarty, SND revered as Trinity's primary founder. Julia was an Irish immigrant who built SND schools all over the east coast. She stared down the conservative opposition and prevailed in establishing Trinity, and the college flourished for the first seven decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the intellectual and socially conscious launching pad for such great national leaders like Nancy Pelosi and Kathleen Sebelius.

But when the wave of coeducation in the 1960's and 1970's overwhelmed the small women's colleges, leading most to close or merge or go coed, Trinity was one of few that chose to stay the course to keep the undergraduate education of women as our primary mission. The Sisters of Notre Dame had a large role to play in making that choice; some alumnae and trustees urged coeducation to keep Trinity elite and safe from the dangers of "too much feminism." But the SNDs on the board demanded that we turn our attention to the women of Washington --- "We founded Trinity to provide access for women who could not otherwise get a great college education and they are at our doorstep in the thousands," said one SND trustee during a meeting in the early 1990's that set our course for the next two decades.

In turning Trinity's face to our city, we embraced a paradigm shift in our student body that fostered a true revolution of soul and spirit for the institution, a transformation that continues to this day. Asserting our countercultural nature once again, Trinity today is about 95% African American and Latina, with about 85% of our first-year students eligible for Pell Grants. We educate more DC residents than any private university in the nation, most from the eastern wards of the city where poverty runs high and opportunity is often too scarce. All of our students are "post-traditional" in that virtually all are working, many are single mothers, most are the first in their families in college. There's a big debate in higher education today about who will educate the poorest among us; I find that conversation bemusing because Trinity has been doing just that for almost three decades.

In his recent [TED talk](#), Pope Francis spoke of the essential social justice principle of solidarity, a word you place in the middle of your name at the Ignatian Solidarity Network, an "inconvenient word" the Pope says because it requires so much transformation in our attitudes and behaviors toward each other. "Solidarity is a term that many wish to erase from the dictionary,"<sup>2</sup> he said, and I found myself thinking about the debate over who has access to higher education and who has access to the immense resources of our nation --- the immigration question.

Pope Francis went on to retell the parable of the Good Samaritan --- citing the priest and Levite who ignored the robbery victim on the roadside, and then, along came the Samaritan, "a very much despised ethnicity at the time" who took the time, spent his own money, went out of his way to care for the victim. I found myself thinking that Trinity tries to emulate the Good Samaritan in higher education, reaching out to those who have been overlooked by a wealthy, powerful nation that rewards prestige and status with more of the same while claiming a scarcity of resources to support the needs of those who live on the margins. We live in solidarity with

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<sup>1</sup> See Sr. Mary Johnson, SND, [Remarks on Sr. Julia McGroarty](#), Founders Day April 26, 2017 at Trinity

<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis, [TED Talk](#), April 25, 2017

our students at Trinity; our mission aims to move our students from the margins to the mainstream through the power of education, the most transformative of all human endeavors.

Trinity's deep sense of solidarity, that commitment to action for social justice that is our SND legacy, is what led us to embrace Dreamers as well. When Don Graham, the founder of TheDream.US, approached me about having Trinity be the first private nonprofit college partner in a new program for undocumented students, he did so knowing our long devotion to the neediest students in the District of Columbia. We had worked with Don and the programs he launched at D.C. TAG and D.C. CAP for years. But TheDream.US was a longer stretch, and I hesitated at first, wondering how we could possibly afford to take on another whole level of human need when we were already doing so much. Fortunately, there are many Good Samaritans in this world and a private anonymous benefactor helped us to move past hesitation to a robust embrace of these amazing students--- 45 this year, we'll probably double that number next year. Along the way, we learned so much about the Dreamers and their families, and the genuine crisis of justice that is a large gash through the soul of American society today. To think that these amazing women, campus leaders, many mothers already, future pillars of many communities --- to think that the wealthiest nation in world history cannot find it in its deep pockets to support their higher education, to ensure their security, to welcome them as equal wayfarers on the road to the Good Society we all claim to desire --- to think all of this is to see the deeply ugly, evil face of grave injustice.

Too many American citizens, too many politicians, use the word "justice" as a selfish epithet meaning vengeance, often equating it with denial of rights, and even with death, as in the euphemism "administering justice" when the state puts someone to death, or achieving "justice" by deporting people back to conditions of violence and poverty. That's not justice. Justice is not about taking away the slender protections of life in our free society. Justice is not about killing for vengeance. Justice is not about arresting and deporting people who came to this country in a desperate quest for a better life for their families and children. The popular misuse of the word justice makes a travesty of true social justice in its full meaning as a Gospel imperative.

Justice is what we owe to others because of God's gift of life to us. According to the themes of social justice in Catholic teachings, we owe others the protection of their own gift of life, shared in communities and families; active participation in political and social processes to ensure protection of all human rights; assuring the rights of workers so that economic justice prevails for all and not just a few; paying particular attention to the needs of the poor; upholding the care for the environment as an essential part of caring for life. All of this is bound together with the idea that we must live in solidarity with each other, respecting our fundamental equality as human beings, working as best we can to reduce the suspicion and hostility toward "the other" that inflames too much of our political and social discourse today.<sup>3</sup>

In his TED talk, Pope Francis recounted his own family's immigrant experience to frame the discussion of solidarity, and it echoed my own family's story --- I never knew my grandparents, they were young people from Ireland and Italy who came to this country to seek a better life; they were impoverished and wracked by the ill effects of discrimination and the many social ills that befall people treated as "the other." They died at relatively young ages, but their heirs, my

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<sup>3</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, [Seven Themes of Catholic Social Justice](#)

parents, persisted in seeking the American Dream for their own children. Here I am, now, two generations later, a college president who has so much privilege --- and yet, I cannot but help but think about those young people I never knew, voyagers in steerage whose grit and fortitude despite many disappointments made my life possible today.

The dreams of my grandparents were no different than the dreams of our students today at Trinity and the hundreds of thousands of other young people who came to this country on perilous journeys in search of safety and security, yearning to live their lives free from fear and oppression. How tragic that our very wealthy, powerful and immense nation, once the bright hope for generations of ardent dreamers, should now become a place that foment the very fear and oppression we were supposed to relieve.

I stand with our Dreamers at Trinity and will fight for their rights and the rights of immigrants in this nation because we are all part of the great human family. And none of us --- not one of us! -- can say that *I* have a greater right than *you* to be here, that *I* am more valuable than *you*, that *I* have a greater claim to freedom and dignity than *you*. This is truly, in its essence, a human life issue, and we must stand strong and united for our future generations; it's about the dignity and worth of *all* human beings, not just the privileged few.

In the face of threats of appalling discrimination and injustice against immigrants, as Newark's [Cardinal Joe Tobin](#) said last week at an interfaith gathering in New Jersey, we must be "...the 'No' that God scrawls on the wall... We are the 'no' to a nation who is heartless, who would deport people separating them from their families and their loved ones simply because they are victims of a broken system."<sup>4</sup>

Not only on matters of immigration but on so many issues that are, at root, about the fundamental dignity of human life, we must confront the grave injustices, often state-sponsored actions or omissions, that devastate too many lives in this nation and throughout the global village. In remarks accepting the Profile in Courage award at the JFK Library in Boston the other night, [President Barack Obama](#) paraphrased Dr. Martin Luther King that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice "...but it does not bend on its own. It bends because we bend it, because we put our hand on that arc, and we move it in the direction of justice and freedom and equality and kindness and generosity."<sup>5</sup>

None of us can bend that arc alone. Our hands and our reach at Trinity are so small. But when we join our hands and hearts in solidarity with all others who share the cause of justice, such as our brothers and sisters who are with us tonight in the Ignatian Solidarity Network, we feel that tremendous collective power flowing through each hand raised as one to bend that arc more deliberately and ever more urgently in the direction of justice, hope, and peace for all of God's children on this small planet. Thank you for this award that expresses your solidarity with us, that encourages and affirms the value of our work at Trinity.

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<sup>4</sup> Cardinal Tobin at [http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/05/archbishop\\_tobin\\_embraces\\_clergy\\_movement\\_for\\_immi.html](http://www.nj.com/essex/index.ssf/2017/05/archbishop_tobin_embraces_clergy_movement_for_immi.html)

<sup>5</sup> President Obama at <http://time.com/4770353/barack-obama-profile-courage-speech-transcript/>