

Remarks for the Sodality Union of the Archdiocese of Washington

October 6, 2018

President Patricia McGuire

Congratulations on your 100th Anniversary! What a great occasion for you.

Let me say just a word about Trinity. We are the oldest Catholic women's college in the United States, now a small diversified university that still has our daytime women's college but we also have coeducational graduate and professional programs. We serve a majority of women from DC and Prince Georges County, and our student body is 95% African American and Latina, very low income. We have many academic programs, and the most popular are nursing and healthcare, education and counseling, business and communication. I'll be happy to talk more about Trinity after the luncheon if you'd like to learn more.

As I thought about what to say to you today, I considered the many issues we face in our current lives. My reflections on the crises of this moment might be somewhat different from yours --- I am an educator, trained as a lawyer, steeped in Catholic tradition but not a theologian or spiritual advisor, but rather, a pragmatic administrator. So my remarks focus more on the pragmatic than the spiritual, but I hope they are useful for thinking about today's challenges.

Sodality's theme is reaching Jesus through Mary. What does that mean for women trying to understand and work with the conditions we encounter in 2018 America and Washington? Let's focus on Mary through the lens of today. Do we think of Mary as a blue-clad figure high on a pedestal, gracing us with her smiles as she glides easily above the frenzy of modern life?

Or is she the mother of a son, a boy tempted by the myriad dangers and distractions of boyhood today? Think of the teen Jesus as a kid with earbuds moving to rap rhythms as she tries to make sure he did his homework, or as she interrogates him on why he came home late last night. Think of Mary as the worried mom looking at the seedy friends her son brings home, guys he picked up at the wharf... her exasperation when he brings home a less-than-stellar report card, or her joy when he surprises her by cleaning his room. Think of her concern as she sees him growing into a young man with all of the emotions and impulses and irascible desires of teenagers and young adult males.

Like many mothers in our region, she co-parents this youngster with a man she loves who is not the father of the boy, but who wants to be a good parent to him. Joseph is a skilled carpenter, he works hard, goes off to his jobs at dawn, comes home tired and dirty and still there's more work to be done around the house. Maybe he gets short with her at times. Maybe he is hard on the boy. Sometimes stepfather and stepson work together, sometimes they get into rip roaring arguments. Mary sometimes needs to intervene. So it is with families growing together.

How would Mary talk to her son about the terrible headlines we see today, about priests abusing children, about rampant sexual violence, about leaders who seem to spew hatred and venom toward those with whom they disagree, about social media and its power to deceive and hurt? What would Mary discuss with Joseph about how to raise their son to do the right thing, to be truthful and respectful, to resist the temptation to do the "boys will be boys" things that seem so much part of the rituals of teen life in America?

Did Mary have daughters? The Gospels are silent on so many dimensions of the Holy Family story, so we don't know if Mary had other children, or if Jesus encountered girls in his formative years, and yet, through the millennia we have assumed that she is the perfect mother, so let's think about the possibility that maybe she had more than one child. Think of Mary monitoring her daughter's time online, checking out her Instagram feed, chiding her on sharing too much information on Facebook, standing in the doorway to her room saying in that mom voice, "You're not going out wearing THAT, are you?" Think of Mary sitting with her daughter and Jesus watching the evening news and trying to talk to them about the headlines blaring so much bad news about people who should know better, people in positions of trust, religious leadership, political power. How would Mary explain the news about former cardinal McCarrick, or the bitter hearings for a Supreme Court nominee, or the significance of a guilty verdict in Chicago in a case of a white police officer shooting a black teenager.

If we think of Mary as a mother, a parent, a teacher trying to shepherd her children through the complexities of this moment in history, we can come to an understanding of the courses of action we, too, must take in facing today's challenges. What should we Catholic women do in response to the crises of our time? There are many things we might do, but let me suggest just three vital steps we must take, thinking of them as steps that Mary, herself, would take as the mother, teacher and protector of her son, Jesus.

1. We must redouble our efforts to teach our children how to live lives of goodness, purpose and meaning, in service to others. And when I talk about "our children" I mean not only the mothers individually, but all of us, we as a community of women who are committed to building a better society through the power of our own teaching and example. We need to work together, in solidarity, to express to our children in myriad ways our expectations for them, and equally important we must also express our expectations to the institutions that influence and shape our children for better or worse – the Church, the schools, corporations and government. What are those expectations? The basics are well known, and yet, too often disregarded – respect for others, devotion to truth and integrity, how to make good moral choices, develop a disposition of service to help those in need, generosity of spirit and a willingness to stand up for what is right. These are not hard rules to teach or to learn, and yet, too often, these essential parameters for social and moral conduct are mocked by public leaders and represented in our entertainment as only qualities for losers. The soundbite that makes the evening news is not praise for someone who helped another, but rather, belligerence and ugly taunts, macho bravado exalted over kindness and decency.

Which leads to my second point:

2. We must be fearless in speaking out about the wrongs we see all around us --- whether in the Church, or in Congress, or the White House, or the local civic association, or in our workplaces, or in media and entertainment. If Mary were raising her son in America 2018, she would hardly be a passive bystander. She would speak out about injustice in our community. She might even be a community organizer today. Remember, Mary and Joseph were working class; they surely knew of, and probably talked at home about, the power dynamics of their town and country. We can imagine them having quiet conversations over dinner about the latest cruelty of Herod, or the demeaning treatment of laborers and carpenters by some of the wealthy people who employed them, or the threats made against the poor by the Roman soldiers carousing through the towns after nights at the local pub. If Mary were here today, she might be an advocate for mothers

seeking better child care in the city, or volunteer to work with Catholic Charities to help the homeless and those in need. She would surely march for life. She might speak out against police brutality, about the racism that remains the profound sin of American life, about the greed that leads to tax breaks for the wealthy while diminishing healthcare and Medicaid support for those who are so marginalized already. She would decry the wealth gap between white families and black families in the nation's capital and demand that our lawmakers and leaders do more to make opportunity truly equal for all.

She would remind all of us about the centrality of social justice in our faith commitment. From lived experience we come to know and understand more completely why the fundamental premise of social justice is respect for human dignity, and why the other social justice tenets flow from that --- expressing solidarity, upholding civic responsibilities, standing up for the rights of workers, taking the option for the poor, participating actively in building our families and society, caring for the environment. These are the central pillars of the Catholic teachings on social justice.

With Mary's example and the strength of our faith and informed by our knowledge of Gospel justice, we must speak out about the conditions that demean and destroy human life; that increase poverty and oppression; that jeopardize human rights whether at work or in the community and including the very health of the planet.

And now we get closer to the flame:

3. As we speak out about the issues that affect human life and social justice, we must insist that our leaders share these values, that they exemplify the lessons we teach our children.

I have to think that Mary, the mother of Jesus, would be appalled, angry and motivated to take action by what's been going on in the Catholic Church. She would certainly raise her concerns to the hierarchy. Mothers of sons have a very special and deep concern about the clergy child abuse scandal. My own mother, also Mary, mother of five sons, was haunted by the thought that maybe one of her boys --- all altar boys --- maybe one of them was afflicted by a priest. The boys denied it, there was no evidence to back up her fear, but she went to her grave with this constant nagging concern.

For far too long, women have done the hard work of the Church while being the silent servants cleaning altar cloths in the sanctuaries or shepherding children in the schools. We simply cannot be silent now that we know the scope of the scandal. WE are the Church, and we need to hold the priests and bishops accountable for the deep and lasting pain they have caused to so many. Mary is surely doing so in her own way even now.

We need to insist on the full engagement of women at several levels of the Church in the days ahead:

a) there needs to be an independent lay board or council in every diocese and at the national level with the bishops, to be a serious place where the voices of laity, male and female, can be heard and taken seriously on the full range of matters affecting the organization and governance of our Church --- not just about sex abuse cases, but also about all matters affecting the organization, how the Church is evolving with contemporary life and social structures;

b) bishops and the Vatican need to make it a point of genuine effort to spend time listening to women, to get to know women's concerns and how we interpret the issues --- while not subscribing to any idea that we are all that radically different from men, we do have different perspectives and ways of knowing the world, and the men in leadership need to hear us;

c) we need to insist on an end to the culture of clericalism that has fostered so much of the bad behavior, and we need to stop feeding into it by pandering to the "father knows best" notion; priests are like the rest of us! Priests and bishops have heavy responsibilities, yes, but they should not be on such high pedestals that they become distant or that they begin to believe that they have powers that make them above reproach; they have the same temptations and failings we all have, they need a more human level of engagement with the rest of us so that they can live more balanced and complete lives. Mary would sing out the words of the Magnificat: "...*he has scattered the proud in their conceit. He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the humble.*"

Pope Francis addressed this very issue in his Letter to the People of God concerning the sex abuse scandal after the Pennsylvania grand jury report:

"It is impossible to think of a conversion of our activity as a Church that does not include the active participation of all the members of God's People. Indeed, whenever we have tried to replace, or silence, or ignore, or reduce the People of God to small elites, we end up creating communities, projects, theological approaches, spiritualities and structures without roots, without memory, without faces, without bodies and ultimately, without lives.[2] This is clearly seen in a peculiar way of understanding the Church's authority, one common in many communities where sexual abuse and the abuse of power and conscience have occurred. Such is the case with clericalism, an approach that "not only nullifies the character of Christians, but also tends to diminish and undervalue the baptismal grace that the Holy Spirit has placed in the heart of our people".[3] Clericalism, whether fostered by priests themselves or by lay persons, leads to an excision in the ecclesial body that supports and helps to perpetuate many of the evils that we are condemning today. To say "no" to abuse is to say an emphatic "no" to all forms of clericalism."

Toward the end of that same letter, Pope Francis turned to the image of Mary as the best example possible for the strength and moral conviction necessary to move beyond the crisis. He wrote,

"Mary chose to stand at the foot of her Son's cross. She did so unhesitatingly, standing firmly by Jesus' side. In this way, she reveals the way she lived her entire life. ...She, the first of the disciples, teaches all of us as disciples how we are to halt before the sufferings of the innocent, without excuses or cowardice. To look to Mary is to discover the model of a true follower of Christ."

We look to Mary, not as an ephemeral icon, but as a true exemplar of the real work of women in our Church and society. We and all generations call her blessed.

Thanks for listening.