

Commencement Address
Saint Xavier University
December 19, 2009
Sister Mary Aquin O’Neill, RSM, Ph.D.

“Everything worth doing hurts like hell.” Not my line, though I wish it were. It was borrowed from novelist Tim Gautreaux.¹ I think it a good line for this occasion. During these few golden moments, your pain is over. No more rushing to class, taking exams, writing papers, working in the lab, juggling family, work and study. You have run the race, achieved your goal, earned your degree and will shortly leave here with a diploma. I congratulate you and thank those who helped you on the way. For all of you, it is a great day.

Still, this is a commencement, a beginning, and there are many milestones ahead. Against all the cultural promises regarding the good life, I urge you to continue dedicating yourselves to the things that are worthwhile--to achievements that require sacrifice and pain and heartache and risk and, sometimes, failure. I am not thinking only of the heroic achievements that make the headlines and the movies. In this age of celebrity, it is important to emphasize the heroism of the ordinary and the achievements that sustain a family, a community, a nation.

I have in mind parents who know that the very words “mother” and “father” are implied promises, and who will endure suffering to offer the

young the shelter of their maturity, their wisdom, their labor. I think of neighbors willing to take on the burdens of others when disaster strikes or death comes calling. I'm talking about teachers who refuse to give up on students, trying one thing after another until they find the key that unlocks the desire for learning, the drive for what is true and good. My mind goes to the writers, artists, musicians whose works urge us to go beyond, to imagine ourselves better, more compassionate, more thoughtful. I think of doctors whose concern is for the whole person and who stay with patients when a cure is not on the horizon. Politicians willing to sacrifice re-election for the common good, public servants who accord the powerless the same respect for their dignity as they do the powerful. If you know someone like this, ask them. It will be a gift if they tell you what it cost them to become what they are today.

Who am I to speak to you like this? I wager that if someone asks you next week who your commencement speaker was, you won't know my name. And that is fine with me, as long as you remember that it was a Sister of Mercy. For I stand here today in the place of every unnamed and unsung Sister of Mercy who has given herself to the holy ministry of education. We work at every level, from elementary to secondary to college and university and even in seminaries. Many of those very institutions, Sisters of Mercy founded. If you took the quiz that was published recently in ***Saint Xavier Today***, you know that the Sisters of

Mercy who came in 1846 not only established Saint Xavier Academy, which became Saint Xavier University, but are also responsible for founding the Catholic grammar school system in the city of Chicago.

Today, Saint Xavier University, the oldest Mercy institution of higher education in the world, is one of sixteen colleges and universities for which the Sisters of Mercy are responsible. This makes the Conference for Mercy Higher Education the second largest network of Catholic colleges and universities in the United States. Though the number of sisters on each of those campuses has dwindled, our passion for education has not. We teach and administer, we conduct research and write books, we engage in the arts, and we carry on the saving mission of the Catholic Church in the spirit of our foundress, Mother Mary Catherine McAuley of Dublin, Ireland.

This work is by no means ours alone. The lay and religious colleagues who have joined us in this educational mission—Catholic, Protestant, Jewish, Muslim, other religion or no religion at all—make it possible for this work to endure, to adapt, and to engage minds and hearts in the 21st century. We are indebted to all of them.

I speak to you today of worthwhile endeavors because you are our gift to the world, our legacy. I speak with the voice of the Sisters of Mercy when I pray that here, in this Mercy University, you have progressed in love of learning, critical reasoning, just action, open-hearted compassion,

desire for what is good, and a capacity to be inspired by what is true and beautiful. I hope that you have increased in spiritual strength in your time here—spiritual strength understood as “a fearless investigation of reality.”² I pray that you will continue to undertake worthy endeavors, even if it hurts like hell.

For the privilege of addressing you and receiving an honorary degree, I am deeply grateful and thank the Board of Trustees of this University, Dr. Angela Durante, and Dr. Judith Dwyer--under whose presidency I was nominated. I will treasure the bond with this institution and with the winter class of 2009.

Let me leave you with a blessing in the form of a poem by Marge Piercy:

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
and work in a row and pass the bags along,
who are not parlor generals and field deserters
but move in a common rhythm

when the food must come in or the fire be put out.

The work of the world is common as mud.

Botched, it smears the hands, crumbles to dust.

But the thing worth doing well done

has a shape that satisfies, clean and evident.

Greek amphoras for wine or oil,

Hopi vases that held corn, are put in museums

but you know they were made to be used.

The pitcher cries for water to carry

and a person for work that is real.³

May that blessing be yours.

¹ "Interview with Tim Gautreaux," *Image*, No. 632:48.

² Elizabeth Lesser, *The New American Spirituality, A Seeker's Guide*. (Random House, 1999):43.

³ Marge Piercy, *The Art of Blessing the Day: Poems with a Jewish theme*. (Middlemarsh, Inc., 1999).