

Laetare Speech 2011

Sr. Mary Scullion, R.S.M. and Joan McConnon

It is truly an exciting experience being in this incredible setting at Notre Dame, a university with such a storied history – including, of course, in college sports.

Which reminds me that I need to talk to Fr. Jenkins about getting tickets. Joan and I look forward to attending the Women's Final Four next spring when Coach McGraw (also from Philadelphia and a graduate of St. Joseph's University) wins it all.

Truly Joan McConnon and I are honored and humbled to share this special day with you the Graduates of 2011 especially Jeannine O'Neill and Elizabeth Furman, your friends and family; and with the ND faculty, professional staff, the Holy Cross Fathers, esteemed guests, Secretary Gates and Fr. Jenkins.

We accept the Laetare medal on behalf of the entire Project HOME community - people from all walks of life and from all faiths. People who believe in the fundamental dignity of every person. Families like the Connelly's, the Klein's, the Connors, the Middleton's, the Maguire's and the Honickman'; intelligent and faith filled ND alums such as William O'Brien class of 81, our committed friends at the Notre Dame Club of Philadelphia; the Sisters of Mercy and most especially the people who have experienced homelessness.

The work of Project HOME is possible because of partnerships, collaborations, and leadership from every sector of society--public and private. We believe that our greatest power is unleashed when people come together across social boundaries to form a community united by a common vision.

As our friend and partner Jon Bon Jovi often says, we are made stronger when we come together and harness "the power of WE." It is through "the power of we" that we come to know the deepest truth of our humanity.

Thinking of you graduates who are on the cusp of forging your place in our world, I am mindful that we live in complex and deeply challenging times. Our society, I believe, is one that most often measures the value of a person by his or her productivity alone and discards the unproductive along the way.

We live in a society so mesmerized by its view of success that it considers only that real which can be touched and weighed, measured and counted, a culture in which human and spiritual values have almost vanished from its consciousness.

Joan and I could share so many stories with you, including that of a seven-year-old boy whom I visited in foster care where he has been placed because of the neglect of his drug-addicted parents who has so lost track of time that they fail to visit him on those few precious days allotted each month, days to which he looks forward eagerly and innocently – yet days in which he is invariably disappointed.

Or the story of the homeless man, a veteran of four-and-a-half years of the war in Vietnam who was honorably discharged, and lived on the streets of Philadelphia a shell of his former person, hating the streets and his hopeless future, screaming out at those who pass him by without knowing or caring or even seeing him, the invisible man.

We invite you to try to picture these two: the innocent, broken-hearted boy or the despairing, non-productive, invisible man of the streets. What is our response to them?

Our faith does not give us answers; it gives us courage. Our faith does not allow us to accept homelessness as an inevitable part of our urban landscape. In harmony with Catholic social teaching, Notre Dame makes it clear that indifference to the plight of those who are poor is not an option.

As Catholics, we are a people of hope. And in our work at Project H.O.M.E., we dare to make the hopeful assertion that we can end homelessness. This hope is grounded in reality: the reality of concrete solutions that have proven themselves for many years; and the reality of a community of persons from all walks of life who come together with a common vision of justice and compassion. That community is a source of tremendous power.

But that community must grow if we are to make greater progress. We invite you to bring your profound resources of faith and intellect to the work of ending homelessness, of building what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., called “the Beloved Community.”

The Latin on the Laetare Medal translates “Truth is mighty, and it shall prevail.” This speaks to the greatest need in our world today: we need persons committed to living truthfully. We need men and women with the intellectual and spiritual gifts that equip them to pierce through the falsehoods, deceptions, and cover-ups that mark so much of our society and even our Church today.

Such as our ability to find over \$150 billion dollars in a few short weeks to bail out financial institutions but at the same time we can't find the money to house our people and educate our children. Or when cities across the country pass laws to arrest panhandlers and people living on the streets while Wall Street executives face no justice for their corrupt decisions that led to millions of Americans losing their homes and their savings.

We need people who can see through hypocrisy and stand up for America's promise of justice and liberty for all. We need people to stand squarely on the side of the poor and those who are struggling on the margins of our society. We need people who believe that everyone matters; that there are no throw away people.

I believe this is the very mission of Notre Dame: to turn the ethics, theories and knowledge that you have learned here into the living, breathing expressions of truth, human dignity and social justice.

With the education and the values you have experienced here, you can refuse to be blinded by the false values of excessive individualism and phony materialism. You must pave the way in reigniting the quest for the common good. As Joan often reminds us: “Strive to live a life you admire, rather than one you envy.”

Part of living truthfully, according to our faith, is our willingness to enter the world of suffering and struggle. The former Jesuit Superior General Pedro Arrupe said, “If there is hunger anywhere in the world, the Eucharist is incomplete everywhere in the world.” We don't get involved simply out of a sense of moral duty or to fulfill any obligations. We are drawn toward mercy, compassion, and justice, because, in the mystery of the Gospel, we recognize that our common humanity is at stake. We enter into the experience of human suffering because it teaches us the deepest truths of who we are as humans.

This is what we have found in over thirty years of working with those who have experienced homelessness, mental illness, and addiction. We become most fully human when we enter the mystery of suffering and, with God's grace, tap into the miracles of healing and transformation. And we see those 'miracles' occurring daily at Project H.O.M.E. A man who has refused twenty times to come off of the streets comes in the 21st time....a young woman who spent her first 10 years homeless, came to PH with her recovering Mother and 10 years later, she is a junior at Albright College, her Mother works full time and is a leader in our community....a fifty year old mentally disabled person is completing her college degree while working at the HOME Page Cafe.

It might seem a strange thing to say to people who are about to launch professional careers, but we are convinced we must be people who see beyond what we can touch and weigh and measure and count. We must be people who believe -- believe in the essential dignity of the human person. If the spirit within us withers, so too will all the world we built around it. Nazism will stand forever as the indictment of progress for its own sake. We must begin to take the first steps, however, small, on that long journey to where the wasteland ends and human wholeness and fulfillment begin.

As Isaiah said, "If you spend yourselves on behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday." We need your light and the Truth to shine brightly in our Cities, Country, Church and world.