

COLLEGE OF  
MOUNT SAINT VINCENT

Annual Scholarship Tribute Dinner, 2013

Remarks

Students, Sisters of Charity, Cardinal Egan, Alice and David, colleagues, friends, Trustees, it is a pleasure to welcome you to this celebration.

I worked hard on remarks for tonight. I was going to cover the Wars of Religion, Vincent de Paul, the racism of the ancien regime, Elizabeth Seton, the Sisters of Charity of New York, Abraham Lincoln, chattel slavery, the etymology of the word sacrifice, Steven Spielberg, and Pope Francis. The remarks were short, though. Four minutes. I completely skipped the Treaty of Ghent, Louis XIV, and Alexis de Tocqueville.

Mercifully, I'm sparing you a history lesson . . . at least for tonight. But I believe it all, and I believe you do, too. It explains why the Sisters of Charity founded the College of Mount Saint Vincent, why the College is a good and important place, and why your support of this college matters.

Vincent and Louise de Marillac evaded many of the doctrinal and political battles of their day. They evangelized with a message more radical, more demanding, and more effective than the command or sword:

*Every human being has dignity and worth.*

*We must see God in the face of everyone we meet.*

*True charity is never an act of condescension. It is always an act of love between equals.*

This is the charism of the Sisters of Charity. This is the moral foundation of democracy. This is the reason the Sisters of Charity founded the College to prepare themselves and others for lives of accomplishment and service.

Democracy releases people from oppression—oppression imposed by power, exacted with privilege, or afflicted by circumstance.

Freed slaves in the wake of the Civil War knew it. The women's movement from the 18<sup>th</sup> century through today shows it. The excluded and oppressed always know, and we must never forget: whatever one's background, however privileged or however modest, only education makes opportunity real. Whatever one's background, however privileged or however modest,

only with education can we transform our potential into accomplishment. That is true for us as individuals. And it is true for us in community.

Since ancient Athens, and certainly since Augustine, the liberal arts have served as preparation for a life of choice and therefore responsibility. Through the College, the Sisters of Charity brought democracy to liberal education. In the young republic, they were pioneering. Their work still is. The liberal arts require us to decipher complexity; to see what is assumed as well as what is explicit; to break problems into parts; to think critically about origins, applications, implications, and consequences; to anticipate and understand positions other than our own; to express ourselves with precision, clarity, and cogency; to weigh moral belief, choice, judgment, and action.

2500 years of outcomes should convince some major foundations, governors, and even members of Congress. But then again, the position of those who would reduce education to training and thus learning to compliance is not about what they would want for themselves or for their children. The challenge of democracy never is. It is always a question of whether we will accord to others the freedom and opportunity that we want for ourselves.

In supporting the College of Mount Saint Vincent, in celebrating tonight's honorees, you are making the College's work possible. It is life changing work. It makes the world a bigger place for our students and a better place for us all.

And I thank you for it.