Remarks for Convocation September 2013

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WHICH MEANS...

When I first came to Dominican University – then Rosary College – one of the first persons to make me welcome was Sr. Clemente. She had a grace and presence that was compelling, and she was an outstanding teacher, mentor and friend.

I wanted to be like her.

I remember when the seminars first began – one of the gifts for the faculty teaching in the seminars was the sharing of expertise, especially in areas of specialty – Sr. Clemente taught us all how to teach Shakespeare.

I wanted to be like her.

When I was invited to teach Catholic Social teaching, I remembered the history of the Sinsinawa sisters – of their commitment to justice, their willingness to take a stand. Outstanding among those women is Sr. Clemente.

Again, I hoped – I wanted to be like her.

So to be given this award which bears her name is the deepest honor I have ever received.
There are two things that I think allowed me to be chosen for this distinction – I have boundless enthusiasm, and I am willing to trust in the Holy Spirit. So I want to talk to you today, particularly those freshmen beginning their experience here at Dominican, and those seniors who will be going out into the world, about those two things.

First, enthusiasm! Life is exciting! Each day is an opportunity to try something new, to make mistakes and learn from them, to discover more about the earth, about myself... to grow. Each person I encounter has something to teach me – if only I listen with my heart as well as ears.

In my classrooms my students are my best teachers. When they grapple with questions, and put together their insights and research into projects and papers, I am enriched. Their ideas take me in new directions all the time. Here at Dominican we are also blessed to have such a diverse student population. I am teaching the sophomore seminar this semester, and in the common text Diane Eck reminds us to embrace our differences – to move past tolerance to acceptance of differences – to seek common ground. In a place like Dominican, we have many opportunities to learn about other cultures, other beliefs, in our daily encounters, if we approach those encounters with enthusiasm.

The second reason I mentioned is that I am willing to follow the call of the Holy Spirit. I have rarely been prepared for the experiences, events and tasks that have changed my life – but that hasn’t stopped me! When you are on a journey and trusting in God, you will be able to do things you never
dreamed of doing. I often tell my students I am in my sixth career. I have been in nursing, secretarial work, politics, business, consulting and now, for the last 20 years, teaching—and each phase, each piece of my life has been interesting, and has built upon the last! Having a liberal education—my degree is from Rosary College—has enabled me to learn new ways of being in the world, and to be able to adapt to new challenges.

I began high school in 1960—college in 1964—and it was an exciting and challenging time to be studying. It was a time when social patterns and proscribed ways of living were being challenged. Even the music we listened to challenged us to take an active part in changing the world. There is a line from a song that has always moved me. “The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind.” It taught me to listen, to be open to the spirit, to seek wisdom.

What are the answers in the winds that blow around you today? What are the social patterns, the ways of being in the world that you can help to change? You have to listen, and to be ready to say yes when you hear that answer.

One moment when the Holy Spirit changed my life happened here at Dominican. Our son, Tom, was a student—he had never had great success in school because of learning disabilities—and Sr. Laurie Brink saw his great potential. She created the Montana trip to Native American reservations for him, and another student from Croatia, Sandy. It was life-changing for Tom. He was her intern the next year, and helped teach the course the third year. Then Sr. Laurie left DU.
She came to me and asked if I would teach the course – Native American Spirituality. I had every reason to say “No”. I had never met a Native American person, never driven west of Minneapolis by myself, never camped without my husband and sons – on the other hand, I wanted some other students to have the experiences Tom had – so I said “Yes.” That first trip I was terrified!

But I learned along the way. I read everything I could, I met people who could teach me, and we built relationships. I was invited to take part in ceremonies, and I listened to the wisdom of elders, so that I could be an effective teacher. The trip has grown over the years to incorporate community based learning. Each year in late fall I contact elders on the reserves to which we will be traveling, and find out where they are focusing that particular year.

In my class I incorporate their projects so that our students can assist the people in their work. One year the Nutrition department helped us with a diabetes cookbook for seniors; most years we work with the middle school children on a project focusing on the environment. The Field Museum, the Morton Arboretum, and the Forest Preserve have assisted us in learning. The students put together great resources – and then we are off. We travel to Pine Ridge, and spend time with elders and teachers there to learn about the history of the Lakota people. We visit Wounded Knee, the memorial to the massacre. We camp in the Black Hills, travel to Browning to work with the Blackfeet people and the children of the De La Salle School. We camp in the Glacier, and then head to Rocky
Boy, a small Cree-Chippewa reserve on the Canadian border, where we again share our project with children, and meet and share meals and ceremonies with the adults there. We always have the gift of participating in a sweat lodge there as well.

Because I said “Yes” to an unknown, I have had amazing experiences, made deep and lasting friendships, and become more of who I am. And all of this led to an interesting discovery. I am adopted. About 7 years ago I had cancer, and I wrote to the adoption agency asking if they had any medical history for me. They did not – but they sent information about my biological parents – and I found out that I am Native American. I began to understand the call and the response in my life to the Spirit blowin’ in the wind.

It is a great joy for me today to accept this honor – and to share it with the people who helped to make it happen. My husband Neil, has picked up the bread from the Mound, set up the tables to distribute it for our fundraisers, helped me shop and pack and sent me off on 15 trips – and accompanied me on three of them.

Our son, Tom is the reason the Montana trip came to be, and he is here with his wife, Heather and their three sons Justen, Mason and Colin. And two of my Anishinabe teachers, Myles Goddard and Starr Bresette are sitting with them. They are the first two elders I was privileged to meet, and they have mentored me and guided my studies over these last 15 years.

Thank you to them and to all of you for choosing me for this honor.