Opening Doors, Celebrating 40 Years of Coeducation
College of the Holy Cross
January 28, 2014

Thank you, Father Boroughs. It is truly an honor to be here today and to participate in this celebration of 40 years of women at Holy Cross. And what a celebration it has been! Over the last 18 months you have engaged with distinguished speakers like Soledad O'Brien and Anne Marie Slaughter; you have participated in panel discussions across disciplines and generations; you have collaborated on art exhibits, poster presentations, and theater productions. ***Opening Doors*** has been a stirring commemoration of that momentous decision in 1972 to invite women into the Holy Cross community. I thank you for this opportunity to speak today. I am humbled to be here in the company of the women and men who serve this college with such distinction, the students who inspire all of us, and the loyal alumnae and alumni who join us in celebration of what is probably the best decision the College has ever made.

As I thought about what message would serve as an appropriate closing to this celebratory year, many thoughts crossed my mind. I could speak about how far women have come, and in some cases, have not come, a topic I address quite frequently as the president of a women's college, or I could

reminisce about the Holy Cross I encountered in Fall 1975 at 18 years of age, a tantalizing opportunity to "remember when…." But neither seemed worthy of this occasion, so instead let me share with you something a little more personal and, at the same time, I believe, universal: let me try to put into words what Holy Cross has meant to me, a woman and a graduate of the class of 1979, one of the early classes of coeducation.

I have heard it said that Holy Cross is really about 'Place.' And I think that is true. Holy Cross is in many ways a home. I remember being welcomed into my Carlin dormitory (or residence hall as we more appropriately call student housing today) by my R.A. Connie Morse, class of 1976, and Mary Callahan, wife of the legendary Dr. Ed Callahan. As I remembered that day, how curious that my memory is of two women – different generations – welcoming me to this place, to this adventure. Mrs. Callahan, who was acting as sort of informal "house mother," assured my parents and me (and many other parents and their daughters and sons) that we would be fine. And we were. In fact, I had a ball – socially, academically, and spiritually, I loved my experience. I was a part of a community that welcomed me, challenged me and supported me.

I have to tell you I don't remember feeling different because I was a young woman in the early years of coeducation. And in retrospect, I commend

Holy Cross, the administration, the Jesuit community, the faculty, particularly the women faculty in those early days, for creating so quickly and so fully a real space for women: a space that felt natural, welcoming and affirming. Holy Cross was home and I was supposed to be here. We were all supposed to be here.

As some of you know, Holy Cross was also home to other members of my family. My four sisters are also alumnae of the College and I feel so fortunate that three of my sisters are here today: Meg, class of '77, Jane, class of '81 and Julie, class of '87. And of course, our sister Kim, class of 1976 and longtime chaplain, colleague and friend to many of you was fully at home here on the hill. How happy she must be looking down on her family – all of us – as we celebrate women, a topic about which she had particularly strong convictions. I am so thankful that Kim's husband, Tim Cox, is also here with us today. And how proud I am to see my nephew, Jack Peterson, class of 2016, here as well.

Holy Cross changed my life and the lives of my sisters. In many ways, my sisters and I grew up here on the hill. Four English majors, and one French major, one honors student (not me), several of us Eucharistic ministers and SPUD volunteers, and some of us faithful enthusiasts of Breen's and Miss Woo's. Each of us had our own distinctive experience at Holy Cross – yet

there is something we all shared, and that something is not unique to our family. It is an experience that so many families and so many students share. Holy Cross helped us – all of us – develop habits of mind that have served us well: the desire and the ability to think deeply and creatively, to communicate with clarity and confidence, to take risks, to excel. As a Catholic liberal arts college, Holy Cross taught us the best of the Catholic intellectual tradition (although most of us did not really understand or care about that term back then). And it did more.

Holy Cross truly taught us what it means to be women and men for and with others. Our experience compelled us to think beyond ourselves and to see our education in the context of the needs of the world. We came to understand what Father Donnelly tried to instill in many of us in his Freshman course on the French Jesuit, Teilhard de Chardin, who said, it was "our duty...to proceed as if limits to our abilities did not exist. We are collaborators in Creation."[1] Our Holy Cross experience invited us to live out the message of the Gospel in a way that transcends different faith backgrounds and belief systems and challenges our understanding of what our abilities are, and where our limits may **actually** lie.

[1] "Pierre Teilhard de Chardin Quotes," GoodQuotes.com, accessed January 24, 2014, http://www.goodquotes.com/quote/pierre-teilhard-de-chardin/our-duty-as-men-and-women-is-to-procee.

We were called to lives of meaning and we were ready for whatever came. Perhaps the confidence of youth swelled our sense of what was possible but I believe that this place, this community, lit a lasting fire in each of us – and although the flames flicker and glow with varying intensity across the years that have followed, a spark is always there – ready to be reignited at different moments in our life.

I don't know if my experience as a woman in the class of 1979 was terribly different than that of my male classmates. And I don't know if the fires of the Holy Cross experience burn differently for them but I do know that as a woman who graduated from this College, I felt prepared and eager to do something that mattered. I felt smart; I felt valuable and valued. I felt confident about my future and I believed as a young French major should that French philosopher and feminist Simone de Beauvoir had it right when she wrote that "one's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others by means of love, friendship, indignation and compassion."[2] And this conviction has stayed with me. It not only gave me the courage to study in Paris after graduation, to pursue my doctorate, to stand for tenure and promotion as a faculty member, to put my name forward for positions of increasing responsibility in Higher Education leadership, it gave me

[2] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Coming of Age* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 541.

something far more important. My experience at Holy Cross gave me a sense of *possibility*. And that is a gift I cherish. When I come across closed doors or cracked but still durable glass ceilings, I still believe in possibility and I try, as Teilhard de Chardin said, "to proceed as if limits to my abilities did not exist."[3] Because Holy Cross taught us that **that** is what we are called to do.

And so today as we celebrate the College's commitment to "opening doors" to women, let us not lose sight of the work we are still called to do. There are doors that still need opening and barriers that need dismantling. For today, when women make up 51% of the population in our country, it remains true that only 18% of Congress is represented by women; less than 5% of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies are women and women comprise only 24% of STEM professions, where some of the fastest growing jobs exist.[4] Even in higher education, we see persistent gender gaps when only 26% of college and university presidents are women.[5] And these numbers tell only part of the story: as we drill down we see that the picture is even bleaker for women of color.

---

[3] "Pierre Teilhard de Chardin Quotes," GoodQuotes.com, accessed January 24, 2014, http://www.goodquotes.com/quote/pierre-teilhard-de-chardin/it-is-our-duty-as-men-and-women-to-pro.

[4] *The Report on the Status of Women and Girls in California* (Los Angeles: Prism Publications).

[5] Sarah Gibbard Cook, "Women Presidents: Now 26.4% but Still Underrepresented," Women in Higher Education, May 2012, accessed January 24, 2014, http://www.wihe.com/displayNews.jsp?id=36400.

Yet rather than allowing oneself to become overly discouraged, although tempting, I cling to the promise of possibility. Gloria Steinem put it well when she said, "Without leaps of imagination, or dreaming, we lose the excitement of possibilities. Dreaming after all is planning."[6] Those pioneer women who entered the College in 1972 had dreams. They had plans. And just as the College did back in those first years of co-education, this community continues to ignite a fire in the hearts and minds of students – women and men. Holy Cross gives us the gift of imagination, of courage, of possibility and then calls us forward. And **that** is a precious gift.

Thank you.

[6] Gloria Steinem, "The Official Website of Author and Activist Gloria Steinem," January 28, 2014, accessed January 24, 2014, http://www.gloriasteinem.com/.