

SISTER JACQUELINE GRENNAN'S CONVOCATION TALK
November 21, 1966

Unlike most colleges and universities, Webster has not inaugurated a celebration of a Founders' Day. Perhaps it has been a fortunate oversight. I would speculate that those visionary ones who found an institution would be the first to ask that every day be Founders' Day, that every generation be founding a new institution, an aggregate of elements reassembled and reordered to best meet and serve the problems and the promises of this day.

In an article published in 1962 for International Business Machines, Mr. John Gardner, then President of the Carnegie Corporation and now Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, formulated what was to become one of the central thesis questions of this century. Mr. Gardner said: "In the long stretch of history societies have emerged, flourished and died. Over shorter periods organizations emerge, flourish and die." Mr. Gardner goes on to ask if this is inevitable, if this means that there is "no alternative to becoming stiff in the joints?" John Gardner called the alternative which he proposed in his 1962 paper the principle of the self-renewing society. It is, I believe, the alternative forged by the event of John XXIII which was to become known as aggiornamento. It is the alternative, I believe, proposed over and over in the Gospel: the seed that must go into the ground and die in order to bring forth new fruit; the new wine that will burst the old wine skins, the Old and New Testament gift of prophecy which always proclaims a new age.

Why is any institution founded? I submit that worthwhile institutions are founded by groups of people coming together in a new way to do something needed by society which older institutions of the society are not prepared to cope with. Thus, the founding of an institution is always a radical move, a somewhat revolutionary move. If the persons involved were thoroughly satisfied with existing institutions, they would see no necessity to found a new one. The new one is almost always conceived to deal with a specific task. It enlists members who become interested in still newer tasks.

At such times in the history of institutions one company often becomes a parent company by generating one or more subsidiaries.

An institution is, indeed, vital when it gives birth to a daughter corporation and nurtures that corporation. It may be most vital of all when it releases the daughter corporation in its own maturity to its own life. Strong parents, great progenitors are seldom possessive. They seem not to need to live through their children, fulfilled rather in the knowledge that the children can live an independent life--a life willed and generated and fostered by the parent.

Webster College is such an institution, such a corporation--willed to life, generated, nurtured, and fostered by the Sisters of Loretto. Let me trace for you and with you in the next few minutes our family tree.

In 1812 in the hills of Kentucky, three young women began a school in a log cabin. They had come to Kentucky with the early pioneers. Realizing that there were no schools on the frontier, they founded their first log cabin institution to begin to educate in some rudimentary way their own nieces and nephews and all children in the settlement. That log cabin was the school of the neighborhood open to and concerned about all who would come.

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Next, the three young foundresses of a school went about founding an American religious congregation that would speak to and for the new nineteenth century American frontier. Encouraged and ever pressed to go to Europe for novitiate training as religious or to bring European religious to Kentucky to train them, they somehow prevailed in their determination to invent a religious community in the very character of the new frontier.

The Sisters of Loretto, like most new corporations were conceived in the attempt to bring a community of concerned persons together to accomplish a task that the existing society was not yet ready to handle. The community attracted new members and the task grew more extensive.

The next great period of growth in the congregation occurred in the latter part of the nineteenth century when the next generations of Loretines went further West with the new pioneers. Again, there was a task of founding schools in the wild and woolly Southwest. And so they went in covered wagons, abandoned cloister, slept on the open prairie, lost one young member in an Indian attack and one to cholera -- to go where no other teachers would then go--to found schools for the settlers in a community, to accomplish a task that the existing society was not yet ready to handle. Before that century was over, a small boy sat in one of those schools in New Mexico and learned from his own pioneer mother the gratitude for the devotion to the spirit of the frontier of these Sisters of Loretto.

We assemble as a community today in the building born of that gratitude and bearing the names of the small boy, Conrad Hilton, and the pioneer Sisters of Loretto who went to found his school when no one else would go.

Some frontiers are geographic. Others are social, intellectual, and even spiritual. In 1915 a new generation of Sisters of Loretto addressed themselves to a new task. In 1915, college education for women west of the Mississippi was a rare phenomenon and there was no real Catholic involvement in those few colleges which had opened their doors to the world of women. Again, a new daughter corporation was formed -- a subsidiary company of the parent company. Again, a community of concerned persons came together to accomplish a task that the existing society was not yet ready to handle. Again, the community attracted new members as the task grew more extensive. But this time, the members of the daughter company began to come from many rich and varied backgrounds. The work launched by the family corporation, the Sisters of Loretto, first even known as Loretto College, became Webster College, and the family corporation became more and more a public corporation. As the task expanded, the Sisters hired cooks and janitors and secretaries and part-time and full professors and top administrators to share in the building of the corporation. It is a story told in many versions. Sometimes we call it the American dream--the small beginning planted by an individual, often rooted by a family, but almost always nurtured and transplanted and cross-bred by the wider society that inherits the land.

Some families have held on to their corporations, have refused ever to commit them to the public sector. But these have not been the corporations that have become the leaders of today and the makers of tomorrow. A few decades ago, two chemical companies in St. Louis each had gross sales of under 50 million dollars annually. One, still a family corporation, still operates at about that level. The other, operating in the open world of the public sector, is grossing nearly a billion and a half.

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Is Webster College at this moment a family corporation of the Sisters of Loretto or a corporation operating in the open world of the public sector? Legally, like 90% of the Catholic colleges and universities in this country, it is owned and operated by the Sisters of Loretto. Sisters of Loretto make up less than 1% of the staff, about 4% of the student body, about 25% of the teaching faculty, 60% of the central administration, and 100% of the legal Board of Directors. As the faculty and many of the older students know, we have for almost three years been questioning seriously the viability of this governmental structure. Some very important questions are raised. (1) Should a General Council of a religious congregation, elected primarily to address themselves to the task of operating that congregation, be ex officio the Board of Directors of a subsidiary corporation in which the task has become highly diversified and complex? (2) Should an institution of higher education necessarily committed to free inquiry and the frontiers of secular as well as theological knowledge be owned by a congregation which has freely subjected itself to hierarchical control? (3) In the world of Vatican II with its emphasis on involvement of the laity and on ecumenism, might not a dynamically catholic institution be catholic in its original sense of universal -- truly ecumenical rather than self-consciously denominational?

This last question was raised quite forcefully, I believe, in a very perceptive editorial in a recent WEB. In this latter operational sense I think many of us believe that Webster is already operating in the open world of the public sector. It is this fact, I believe, which is our glory and our shame. It is the fact which impels John Cogely in the Saturday Review and Michael Novak in the Saturday Evening Post to single us out as one of the most dynamic Catholic colleges in the country. (It is also the fact which causes conservative Catholics in California and Kentucky to write me letters to tell me I am a daughter of Beelzebub and each day they pray for my excommunication before nightfall so I won't cause any more trouble.) One learns to thank God for the shared insight of the Cogleys and Novaks. But one learns also to compassionate the conservative critics who are compelled to judge the inventions of today by the artifacts of yesterday. Catholic colleges and universities across the country are soul-searching about their mission in the new intellectual and spiritual frontier that my generation has begun to dream about in which your generation will know the anguish and the joy of the early settlers.

The Sisters of Loretto of this generation believe in that intellectual-spiritual frontier. Under the leadership of Sister Luke, our Superior General, and Sister Rose Maureen, our Provincial, the General Council of the Sisters of Loretto has voted to request from the chancery canonical permission to transfer the ownership of Webster College to a self-perpetuating Board of Directors. We who are members of both the community of the Sisters of Loretto and at the same time are members of the administration, faculty, student body, and staff of the wider community that is Webster College are proud of our family which has come to believe so deeply in the maturity of that which it has generated. If the canonical approval comes through, the Sisters, along with dedicated laymen, will remain committed to the Webster College we all love. Convinced of the power of religious presence as distinct from the power of religious control, we wish to demonstrate to an open and opening world, and to ourselves, that the vital force of faith can live and mature in a diverse and dynamic society.

A leading citizen of St. Louis, whose name I am not yet free to give, has agreed to accept the chairmanship of the new board. A number of highly competent men and women in various parts of the country have indicated a willingness to serve on the Board of Directors if and when legal ownership becomes vested in such a board. All are persons who have come to believe in the fact that is today's Webster College and in the potential that lies within that fact.

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The first commission to try to effect this new incorporation was given me by the General Council of the Sisters of Loretto early last February. Shortly thereafter, Sister Luke and Sister Rose Maureen shared this information first with the Sisters here at Webster and then with the congregation at large. In early Spring, we met with the faculty to communicate with them the direction we wanted to take. We have tried, to this point successfully, to keep the matter out of the public press. Garbled versions in these sensitive days of requesting canonical approval could be disastrous, as you know. However, I felt at this time it was imperative to share with all of you who are the fact of Webster College, the vision, the plans, the negotiations of the parent company to make legal and permanent our maturity and independence as a college. I asked and received Sister Rose Maureen's approval to make this public speech to all of you -- in the privacy of the college community without reporters or newspaper release. I know that you will hold the information in trust -- that you will be prepared for the garbled versions that will be inevitable when the news becomes public.

Suspicion and criticism are, indeed, inevitable. Some healthy skepticism is even desirable. But you and I know that history records not suspicion and criticism or even skepticism, but deeds. By our deeds, they shall know us. If we and the generations that follow us are responsible, compassionate, concerned, magnanimous, and faithful, we will be known as men of faith and we will open faith to and with men to whom it has been heretofore closed by narrowness of vision.

Today, my colleagues, is Founders' Day -- for me, for you, for the generations who will remake and refound what we bequeath to them in freedom and in trust.

One hundred and fifty-four years after the event of a log cabin school on the Kentucky frontier, we thank God for Mary Rhodes and Christina Stuart and Nancy Havern. A century after the covered wagons and open prairies that led to the frontier of the Southwest, we thank God for Mother Praxedes. Fifty-one years after the founding of Webster College, we thank God for Sister Louise Wise.

May we join in a commitment that future generations may thank God for the General Council, the administration, the faculty, the students, and a developing new body of trustees who faced the intellectual - spiritual frontier of 1966 and formed a new and wide community to address itself to a new and wider task.

History records. Men do. Let us begin.