

Address by Sister Jacqueline
at the II Century Commitment Civic Banquet
Denver Hilton Hotel
January 30, 1965

As a farm child from the plains of Illinois, I feel, in the words of the songs that I heard tonight, that I have been asked to climb the highest mountain. As I share with all of you here a great milestone in the history of my own sisters and as I greet you, Most Reverend Archbishop, and all of the dignitaries here assembled, I wish to greet most especially that group that I have never been privileged to address before, my own beloved Sisters of Loretto. They are the important women who are here tonight - those who are sitting with veils like mine all around these tables and those who went before us and those who will come - and it is those who will come that I want to speak of and speak for tonight, because it is they in whom we must be interested.

It is the future of man, the future of woman, the future of the world, the future for God in which we must be interested. I am terribly pleased that you have chosen to call this great celebration a Second Century Commitment. I think it is significant that nobody bothered to call it a centennial. A centennial, you know, is just a static point, and static points are not very interesting, but a Second Century Commitment is a forward thrust, and it is forward thrusts that are important in the evolution of man.

History provides for us data - data in facts, in persons, in all kinds of legends which come and form power for us, but history also provides for us the generated energy that comes to us from our own parents, the generated energy that comes to us from our predecessors - our predecessors in government, our predecessors in religion, our predecessors in education. Our success will be measured in the way that we develop that power, in the way that we carry it on. With this conviction,

I would like to say to the young women of St. Mary's Academy and to any other young women who are here tonight that unless one of you is more powerful than any one of my generation who stands here before you tonight, then I and my generation have been failures because we believe in an evolution of man. We believe in a world which is possible to become better and better and better...better through the intellect of man, better through the grace of man given to him by the God who loves him.

It is terribly exciting to me to find a framework and a whole character to a set of symbols in the Gospel. They are the symbols that talk about new wine not being put in old wineskins; they are the symbols that talk about the seed that goes into the ground and dies before it can bring forth fruit again; they are the symbols that talk about a life, a life that you must have and have it more abundantly. But because life means growth, and life therefore, means change, I am grateful to be a Sister of Loretto, to be 38 years old in 1965 at a time when life is terribly exciting--almost terrifying when we know not where it is going to go next.

I, as a Sister of Loretto, am a member of a frontier society, a society that has been described by a succession of dignitaries tonight as a pioneering, a forward-thrust society. My society was formed by three young women from Maryland who looked at a need in mankind in a little place in Kentucky and realized that there was no one there to take care of the spirit of man, his intellect, his mind. And so they started a school even before they were nuns--they started a school in a log cabin where they began to teach. Then because they wanted that teaching to be graceful, to be graced in a special way, they found a way to make themselves nuns--not a conventional way. They were told they should run back to Europe and get trained. They were then told they should send for European sisters to train them, and they kept saying, "No thank you, no thank you, we want to do it our way, the

way for this society." They talked the clergy into letting them do it and they formed their own religious society out of the roots of Kentucky.

And when did the next big forward thrust come for my society? It came again when the spirit of man needed a new push--needed women who would go somewhere where no one else would go. And so my sisters, who were never cloistered sisters, got into covered wagons and slept on the open prairies across the fields of the mid-west to come out here to go first to the south-west and then here to teach in schools, to lift the spirit of man--not even to teach in separate schools but to go to all people everywhere to teach where no one else would go, before anyone else would go. Again they went to fill a human need to raise the spirit of mankind. And so my sisters, I think, have always been a contemporary society, a contemporary society in the log cabins of 1812, a contemporary society going through the plains of the mid-west to the southwest in the middle of the last century--a contemporary society today as they talk about their Second Century Commitment. What is that Second Century Commitment all about?

I wanted to base my remarks tonight in the future of man. I have stolen the title from a man with whom I am in love--a man whom I have never met, a man who died in 1957 without having one of his works published. His works are pouring forth now and being devoured by the new breed no matter what their religious affiliation may be. The man I speak of is the French Jesuit, the great scientist, Teilhard de Chardin, who wrote The Phenomenon of Man and whose new book of essays The Future of Man has just been published. The opening essay contains the most exciting, the most encouraging page and a half I have ever read in my life. I want to read to you that page and a half, to share it with you as I have shared it with friends of mine all over this country in letters, on long-distance phones, shared it with men who don't think they believe in God, but who can think with Teilhard de Chardin.

Chardin said in 1920, before I was born:

The conflict dates from the day when one man, flying in the face of appearance, perceived that the forces of nature are no more unalterably fixed in their orbits than the stars themselves, but that their serene arrangement around us depicts the flow of a tremendous tide--the day on which a first voice rang out, crying to Mankind peacefully slumbering on the raft of Earth, 'We are moving! We are going forward!'...

It is a pleasant and dramatic spectacle, that of Mankind divided to its very depths into two irrevocably opposed camps--one looking towards the horizon and proclaiming with all its new-found faith, 'We are moving', and the other, without shifting its position, obstinately maintaining, 'Nothing changes. We are not moving at all.'

These latter, the 'immobilists', though they lack passion (immobility has never inspired anyone with enthusiasm!), have common sense on their side, habit of thought, inertia, pessimism and also, to some extent, morality and religion. Nothing, they argue, appears to have changed since man began to hand down the memory of the past, not the undulations of the earth, or the forms of life, or the genius of Man or even his goodness. Thus far practical experimentation has failed to modify the fundamental characteristics of even the most humble plant. Human suffering, vice and war, although they may momentarily abate, recur from age to age with an increasing virulence. Even the striving after progress contributes to the sum of evil: to effect change is to undermine the painfully established traditional order whereby the distress of living creatures was reduced to a minimum. What innovator has not re-tapped the springs of blood and tears? For the sake of human tranquillity, in the name of Fact, and in defence of the sacred Established Order, the immobilists forbid the earth to move. Nothing changes, they say, or can change. The raft must drift purposelessly on a shoreless sea.

But the other half of mankind, startled by the look-out's cry, has left the huddle where the rest of the crew sit with their heads together telling time-honoured tales. Gazing out over the dark sea they study for themselves the lapping of waters along the hull of the craft that bears them, breathe the scents borne to them on the breeze, gaze at the shadows cast from pole to pole by a changeless eternity. And for these all things, while remaining separately the same--the ripple of water, the scent of the air, the lights in the sky--become linked together and acquire a new sense: the fixed and random Universe is seen to move.

No one who has seen this vision can be restrained from guarding and proclaiming it. To testify to my faith in it, and to show reasons, is my purpose here.

This, I think, is my purpose, your purpose, our purpose here. To testify to our faith in the future, to show our reasons, is our purpose here. To pledge ourselves to the future, to believe courageously or foolheartedly that the future can be extraordinarily better than the present, is our purpose here. How can we do this? How can we do it through the medium of education? How can Roman Catholic Sisters play a part in this? They can play a part in this if they have the courage to inquire, to look, to probe, to go where no one else will go, to do what no one else will do, to look for not just a good way to spend their lives, but to look for the very best way to spend their lives. When I was a young girl and had sometimes \$20 or \$25 to spend, I often went to a dress shop and looked up and down those racks of dresses, trying to decide on which one to spend my money. When I found one dress I liked and another dress I liked and a third dress I liked, I had to choose the dress on which I was going to spend my money. At 38 when the actuarial tables tell me that at best I have about a half a life to live, I am fascinated with other questions. What is the best possible way that I can spend my life? What is the best possible way that I can get young women to spend their lives? Not a good way, the best way. What is the best way I can spend a year, the best way I can spend a decade? Where can I invest it and get the most out of it? I might have another dollar to spend, but I will never have another life to spend. Who needs us most? I would say the world needs us most. Just as the world of America needed my sisters of 1812 and 1865, so the world, the entire cosmic world, needs us today. The secular universities need us today, the public schools need us today, the community action programs of the anti-poverty bill need us today, civic roles need us today, the arts need us today. They need us in the mainstream, they need us in the mainstream as individuals, and they need us in the mainstream as institutions. I find it terribly exciting to be sitting on a platform, dedicated to the second century commitment of the Sisters of Loretto with an Episcopalian Bishop, with a

Jewish Rabbi, with a Methodist Bishop, with all of these people who together are seeking the kingdom of God, who are seeking to give again grace to the world, and to share with the world God's life, because life can only be shared. Nobody has ever created life alone. Biologically you and I were created by the love of two individuals. All love, all life is shared. Now in this magnificent moment of time, in the 1960's, we have a magnificent opportunity to rededicate ourselves, in the beautiful shadow of John XXIII who had the simple courage to embrace the whole world and to say "I love you" but also to say, "I need to be loved by you because I need to grow, my church needs to grow by being open, my church needs to reach its new potential by reaching out to the needs of mankind, by trying to figure out the miseries of mankind, by realizing the tremendous new discoveries of mankind, and saying, 'we are contemplative, we believe in the infinite God, we are the ones not only the physicists, who can go on successfully approximating truth forever and ever and ever.'"

I remember as a little girl on the farm in Illinois lying on the grass when I was nine years old, looking up at the stars and wondering if they were really there. Then I began to ask myself, "Am I really going to live forever and ever and ever?" That kept turning over in my mind. I was going to contemplate God. My Sister of Loretto had just told me that I was going to contemplate God forever and ever and ever and ever. And my little nine-year old mind said, 'how dull'.

It has been turning over in my mind for about thirty years. About three years ago, my mind began to ask intensely, "How am I going to spend my life?".....

I decided I would like to have a go around as an architect, I would like to have a go around as a physicist, I would like to have a go around as an artist, I would like to have a go around as ...and on and on and on. I would like to spend ten lives or one hundred lives or a thousand lives. I began to think forever and ever and ever. Because I had learned to say why, because I was learning to

see that I should not be baffled by what I did not know, but rather I should be enticed and caught by the very fact that I could never know it all. This is what they were trying to tell me when they said that I could never exhaust Him. This is what they were saying when they said that I could go on contemplating God for ever and ever. This is what it meant to be intellectually humble. It meant that I was infinitesimally powerful, that I could make a little crack, that I could make a little push forward in the future of man, and you could make a little push forward, and the next generation and the next one and the next one. I really believe we are in the babyhood of mankind. And God's grace, the God who loves us, the God who loves his power into us, has made you and me sure that we have not a lesser power but a greater power, a power really to go where no one else will go, a power to take some chances that no one else will take. You see, I would go down any dark road if I had my dad's hand. I would go anywhere in the world if I had my dad's hand. I would go where I was afraid to go by myself. If I who possess and know I possess the grace of God am less able to go to fearsome places, I, I think, am a scandal, a real stumbling block to those who are trying to believe that there might be such a thing as the grace, the shared life of God.

This, I think, is our real challenge. I do not begin to know precisely how we are going to meet it. I can hypothesize some ways we are going to try. It is, however, those young women that we saw on that stage, some of them who will be the mothers of tomorrow, some of them who may follow in my footsteps, perhaps not looking much like me, those young women are the ones who are going to ask questions that I am not going to figure out. Because they will be able to ask better questions than I am able to ask, they will do more for mankind. But they will ask that question because Mother Pancratia Bonfils asked hers, and because Sister Mary Luke asked hers, and because Sister Jacqueline asks hers.

We will have generated their power that we have created, if an environment exists in which it was a good thing to ask, in which we really had what I have been telling the students is the security to be insecure, the security to know that one has a finite mind, that one is a finite person, that you have got to make a decision, that you have got to make the best one you can, and that the God who loves you will love you for doing the best you can.

If there is anyone I will trust in this world, it is the lovely farm couple who are sitting home in Illinois tonight, my own precious father and mother, because I know that they will love me and trust me, and that they have loved and trusted power into me. If there is another person I love in this world today, it is a woman whom many of you know, Sister Francetta, who was for many years the superior at Loretto Heights College. Sister Francetta as my first superior told me that all too many people were afraid and used the will of God as a crutch for their own inabilities, for their own fears. When they were afraid to do something or too lazy to do something, they said, "Maybe that's not the will of God." But she said, "Sister Jacqueline, if you really believe in the will of God, push it to the wall, and then if He says no, push it to the wall four or five more times just to be sure you heard Him right. And then if you are reasonably convinced that He does not want you to do it, then you take it and that detachment, Sister Jacqueline, is the detachment that is willing to fail, it is the detachment that does not know before it starts for sure." When Sister Francetta came to Webster College and brought me to follow her, she gave me tough assignments, and she said to me, "Sister Jacqueline, if you are on the road and have to make a decision, the only wrong one is not to make one." She said that to me five years ago, and for five years she has never operationally retracted it. She loves and trusts power into human beings.

Another Sister of Loretto, Sister Mary Luke is that great superior general of ours whom we are, as Sister Mary Florence says, sharing with the world. That great superior general loves and trusts power into human beings. She says, "I may not always agree with you, but I will give you the freedom to stand for what you believe." These are the great people, like a couple of great intellectual friends of mine, who don't quite know that they believe in God, great intellectual friends of mine who loved and trusted power into me in the toughest kind of intellectual debate. These are the people who give you courage; they give it to you integrated into the human spirit, integrated so that it is yours. This is the courage that I think we must give to persons we touch. But then we come full circle and ask who is the greatest person, the person who loves and trusts power into you and power into me in a way that my mother and dad can not do, Sister Mary Luke can not do, Sister Francetta can not do, my agnostic intellectual friends can not do. That person is the Person in whom I have come to believe in a way I never thought I could believe, the person I call God, the infinite, omnipotent, powerful God, the God who loves and trusts power into me, who loves and trusts the divine life which I call grace into me, the God who graces me with his life, and says, "Child, go forth". This is what I think we must say tonight, "Child, go forth", go forth into the unknown land, go forth and ask the question that needs to be asked; go forth and find the place by trial and error that you and all Sisters of Loretto can best spend themselves; go forth and find the ways that the young women of tomorrow can best spend themselves. We are indeed on a new frontier for the history of mankind. A new frontier when grace is going to shoot back and forth, when the so-called secular university and the so-called secular world will no longer be secular because we will have moved in and charged it with the conscious grace of God.

I am thrilled to be with you tonight, I am thrilled to be alive tonight, I am thrilled to be a Sister of Loretto, to be loved by God, to be walking into the unknown to create the future of mankind.