

**Speech delivered by Victoria Swigert, sociology professor and dean for the Class of 2008 at the College of the Holy Cross**

**Senior Convocation, Jan. 15, 2008**

Today we celebrate the Class of 2008. We are called together on the afternoon preceding your final semester and with prayer and song, poetry and dance, rhetoric and art, we capture in this one hour, in this one sacred space, the spirit of Holy Cross. Look, listen – all around you right now — as for the years you have been here and for the lifetimes you will lead after this place — see and hear Holy Cross at work — this liberal arts education in the Catholic and Jesuit tradition. It is cause for celebration.

Four years ago I helped introduce you to this tradition. At that time, we invited you to live the mission and I told you that the gateway to that mission was our curriculum — a liberal arts curriculum — the disciplinary and interdisciplinary study of nothing less than life and its meaning. The liberal arts, I told you, were the **stories** of life and what it means to be human. Stories told in voices that transcend the ages. In an unbroken line, voices from the very beginning of time; voices wrapped in the paradigms and methodologies of the disciplines which are the liberal arts, all angles of vision on what is essentially one question: what is life all about: The chemistry of it and its biology; the implications for it of an expanding or contracting universe; the poetry of it; its metaphors and music; as it reveals itself in sculpture and oils and architecture; the psychology of it and the sociology of it; its politics, its languages, its religions. Voices co-mingled speaking of the human experience — from other times and from our time — of transcendent sorrow, joy, love, and hate. Listen, I said. And you have. These presentations and performances today bear witness.

We wanted you to join this dialog. We asked you to read literature because of its insights on the human condition, a condition we share, that you might find your connection to that fundamental humanity. We wanted you to study history to know something about where we have come from; that you might develop a vision of where we might go next. Studies in religion taught you how people have sought the divine to help you in your own search. Philosophical discourse has challenged you to confront the most important questions on the nature of existence, of truth, of ethics and aesthetics. The social sciences taught you how we organize our lives, make them meaningful, and respond to these meanings — that you not take our lives together for granted. You studied the artistic expressions of people — throughout the ages and around the world — to better express yourselves. You studied the science of life — the science of your lives — in biology and chemistry; in mathematics and physics.

Every encounter you have had with the liberal arts — every book, every painting, every lab experiment, every research paper — has been an invitation to connect your life with all life; to find yourselves in the great scheme of things; to know yourself as part of this magnificent and mysterious world. Every encounter has intended to liberate you — through these the liberating arts. And freed, you have soared. Today is our witness.

This is so much more than about skills, though skill, of course, is fundamental. But Matt Mohorovich was a jazz musician long before Holy Cross. Minh and Rob did not begin piano here. Matt White knew how to pray. Members of the dance ensemble knew how to dance, the singers sang before they came here, and our speakers have long spoken well. They did not acquire their talents here. I have no doubt they honed them, and some onto mastery. But more, much, much more, they have learned to use these talents, these skills, these gifts to tell us something of what they know of life and its meaning; they have learned how to speak their minds, paint their visions, compose.

We are their witness.

In one brief semester, you will join the legions of graduates who have engaged this encounter with the liberal arts and who now fill every corner of this globe. In the blink of an eye, we will be coming together for a different kind of celebration — a celebration of your transition from undergraduate to alum.

Soon enough but not today. Today we pause; slow it down. Where has your journey brought you, my dear members of the Class of 2008? What distance have you traveled to get here, where are you now, and what remains for you to do this final semester that begins tomorrow? This is your capstone semester — for you to cap your experiences here — at the College of the Holy Cross. What do you want to take with you from this sacred hill? What will you take with you to your corner of the world? How will you bear witness?