

Holy Family University Fall Commencement of 2007  
Thomas K. Gilhool - Keynote Speaker  
February, 2007

Sister Francesca, Sister Celine, and members of the Board of Trustees of this great University, distinguished faculty, administration, and staff and most especially those of you today who received your earned baccalaureate and masters degrees. And a special salute to those of your family and friends who celebrate this achievement with you and who may properly celebrate their own mighty contribution to the support of each of you in this achievement. I am pleased and proud to receive this honorary degree from the Holy Family University. You honor my work, you honor the work of my colleagues over four decades at the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia and you honor our clients throughout this time and going forward into this new century-leaders of organizations which in turn have been the leaders of the movement of people with disabilities, their families, and their friends to take their place as equal citizens in this great land of ours.

I am as proud and as pleased and as excited as must be each of you, members of the graduating class of this very special university. Today, you receive your degrees and I am as pleased and proud as I can see your family and friends are of your achievements. As you take your place, your new place in our world, you do so at a time of enormous possibility and need for action based in the moral imperative in which your education has been rooted, an education richly rooted in the understanding of equal worth and dignity of each and every person and the oneness of the human family. Our country and our world today cry out for the lively, informed, and insistent thought and action which can

be hoped for and expected from you, you the graduates of Holy Family University, whose education has been so richly rooted.

While the 20<sup>th</sup> Century is properly remembered as the century of enormous tragic violence, it was also the century to your own which saw the triumph of thoughtful, morally based, non-violent action and its success. We saw it, the success of such action, in the velvet revolutions of Eastern Europe; in the end of apartheid with the Mandellas, South Africa; in the end of imperialism in Ghandi's India, and here in our country, in the American Civil Rights Movement, the movement addressing and setting aside a history of discrimination based in race, and the movement which is propelled, of women, of people with disabilities, a war against poverty, and the struggle to save our environmental world. Now, for example, our country cries out for redress of the distribution of income and wealth which is this year as it has been in nearly every year since 1989, the most unequal as it has been in all of our history since 1776. Today, families, children, and other individuals in Philadelphia living in poverty are the largest proportion of any city in the country to do so. Today, nationally aggregated in the United States, only some eight percent of children from poor families graduate from college. Seventy-seven percent of those from the most affluent families do. Our globe has grown now very small and the inequalities of income and schooling and health that beset most members of the human family have become easier for us to see and the cost of wars, suffering, and pestilence harder to ignore. Thus, for educators, nurses, young business leaders, rising thoughtful people, you, the members of this 50<sup>th</sup> graduating class, there are crucial fields for courage, for thought, and for action, wide open to you as professionals and as citizens.

I was lucky enough to be born into the smallest generation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century- those of us born in the depression and the second Great War 1931 to 1946. My generation was lucky enough to come of an age when the United States opened their hearts and minds to enormous change. From 1956 to 1965, there was much to understand and to realize, in fact, the promises of the American Revolution occurred, for it was then that the Civil Rights and Women's Disabilities Movement worked hard and all of us who participated in these movements experienced enormous success. You, I believe, have the same opportunity now, immediately before you, as did my generation. There is a new great awakening among the American people. Resolving and rising up, despite little help from the media and not much from established leadership to oppose a tragic war and to put right the distortion of the investment of the people's hard-earned wealth that has occurred in consequence. Globally, people in countries across the world through their governments have brought the United Nations to adopt the convention to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, the treaty on the rights of children, and just a few weeks ago, to submit to the nations of the world for ratification, the convention on the dignity and rights of people with disabilities. Each of you undoubtedly has noticed that in the decade just gone by, the extraordinary work of citizens internationally in formulating and securing the treaty to eliminate landmines. It is my hope and given commitment in which you are rooted that your decade and your generation will not only have in the decade ahead an opportunity to carry on this work, but that you will, in fact, do so.

Abraham Lincoln, in Springfield in 1857, said the assertion that all men are created equal was of no practical use in affecting our separation from Great Britain and it

was placed in the declaration not for that but for its future use. The framers of the Declaration meant to set up a standard for free society which would be familiar by all and revered by all, constantly looked to and constantly labored for and even though never perfectly obtained, constantly approximated and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere. The framers meant to declare the right so that enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances should allow.

In the later decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, circumstances did allow people with disabilities, their friends, and their allies, to assert their essential person with their claim to equal citizenship, their wish to be participating and contributing members of our society. The movement of people with disabilities and their families and friends overcame a terrible legacy of state imposed segregation and degradation which in its virulence rivaled that of Jim Crow. In every state in the land, every state, at the turn to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, state legislatures by force of law, segregated people with disabilities often called the feeble-minded, the imbecile, the idiot, into isolated and segregated public institutions. They excluded them from the public schools, they excluded them from the vote and despite the fact that in 1904, Governor Pennypacker of Pennsylvania had vetoed the first Sterilization Act offered here in our state, most states adopted compulsory sterilization acts. This legacy, so dispelled in the ways that we are here, in part to celebrate, by the undertakings of the disability movement of responsible federal court to believe a constitution was to be enforced and by a congress who saw constitutional values as their purpose. Still that legacy had great strength and it continues to have great strength that will challenge you educators in reality, now, to extend to children with

disability, and children of poverty and children of greatly diverse heritages their claim to an effective education and hence to equal citizenship. Those of you who enter the nursing profession do so with the special eye to the well-being and happy development of children. And most recently to the extraordinary isolation and segregation into nursing homes which has overtaken in part on ground of health elders in our society. They, like the disabled of all ages, deserve better if their dignity and our connection with them is to be vindicated. Those of you who are to be domestic and international business leaders have from the roots of your education here, an understanding to impart across the crucial sector in our country and in our globe.

Across this nation and around the globe, your generation has the opportunity to bring to life the moral imperatives in which you are now each so steeped. I congratulate you on your achievements thus far and Godspeed in the even greater responsibilities as professionals and as citizens to which your education has here uniquely committed you and for which it has uniquely fitted you. This is an exciting and historic day, I wish you, in the struggle to establish the understanding of the dignity of every and each person and the oneness of Holy Family many more exciting and historic days. Have no fear, be of good courage, act well and feel the pleasure of doing good. Thank you.