

**KEYNOTE ADDRESS TO NEW MEMBERS OF THE GEORGETOWN
CHAPTER OF ALPHA SIGMA NU
THE JESUIT HONOR SOCIETY**

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**Dahlgren Chapel
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- Megan, Thank you for your kind introduction. Good afternoon, President DeGioia, Reverend Michaelson, distinguished guests and faculty members; and warm greetings to the Georgetown students whom we are celebrating today, and their families and friends who are with us. I am so pleased to be here with you today to help honor this extraordinary group of students.
- I thank the student board of the Georgetown chapter of Alpha Sigma Nu for inviting me to be among three honorary members for 2024 and your speaker today. Steeped as I am in Jesuit training and tradition, let me explain why this honor is especially meaningful to me and to my family.
- First, this wonderful Jesuit tradition applies not only to me, but to my wife, Dr. Christine Grady, who regrettably cannot be with us today due to a prior commitment. Christine earned her undergraduate degree in nursing here at Georgetown. Afterwards, she joined the National Institutes of Health, which is where we met. And it was right here in this beautiful Dahlgren Chapel that in 1985 we were married.
- Later, Christine returned to Georgetown to earn a doctorate in bioethics. This eventually led to her becoming Chief of the NIH Department of Bioethics.
- Now, a bit about my background and how it segued into the Jesuit tradition that has framed my life. My parents descended from my Italian immigrant grandparents. We settled in Brooklyn, New York where we lived above the

pharmacy run by my father. At that time, the 1940s and 50s, being a pharmacist in Brooklyn was more like being a neighborhood doctor. As I helped deliver prescriptions on my bicycle, I came to realize and empathize with the fact that many people suffered illnesses and infirmities that were not readily apparent and often were not properly attended to. I wanted to do something about this, and it was here that the sparks of public service emerged in me.

- Fate helped me out. Although Brooklyn was home, I had the good fortune to attend Regis High School, a Jesuit school in Manhattan. I thrived in the intellectually rigorous environment, captained our basketball team, and importantly, absorbed Jesuit tenets as my touchstones.
- My father's "doctoring," my love of science, and the Jesuit focus on serving others all stirred my interest in becoming a physician, and my Regis advisors encouraged me to continue my Jesuit education at the College of the Holy Cross, which I did.
- Although I was a pre-med major at Holy Cross, my academic tract had a name that was somewhat oxymoronic. I graduated Bachelor of Arts, Greek Classics/Philosophy, Pre-Med. Typical Jesuit, as they say. Subsequently, I earned my medical degree at Cornell University Medical College.
- The Jesuit call to serve others was again among the key factors that led me to start my career as a physician/scientist by joining the NIH in 1968.

- This broad perspective has served me well throughout my entire career. As Director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, I was repeatedly required to oversee biomedical research programs to tackle a succession of large, challenging, and often urgent global health problems in infectious diseases, from HIV/AIDS to pandemic influenza, from Ebola to COVID-19.
- After ending my NIH career 54 years later, in an extraordinarily positive turn of events, my life came full circle—back to my Jesuit roots—when Georgetown welcomed me as a faculty member last summer.
- Today, the Georgetown students being initiated into Alpha Sigma Nu, as well as we three honorary members, pledge and re-affirm our dedication to three Jesuit ideals: **Scholarship, Loyalty, and Service**. I have already spoken to you a bit about my call to **public service**. Let me share just a few of many examples of how Loyalty to Jesuit ideals and Scholarship also factored in my career.
- **First, Loyalty to Jesuit Ideals.** Not long after the first U.S. cases of a mysterious illness later identified as AIDS were published in mid-1981, I made the radical decision to completely redirect my NIH career and focus on this new disease. My mentors tried to dissuade me since they thought that this would interrupt what was the promising career tract that I was on. I felt

differently. I felt that it was a calling for me to use whatever talents I had to help these desperately ill patients. When I began personally taking care of persons with HIV— mostly young, gay men—it was initially heartbreaking because we lacked remedies, and one after another, they died usually within months. Infections that normally would not kill an immunocompetent person inevitably killed them because HIV had devastated their immune systems.

- Soon thereafter, in 1984, I was selected as Director of NIAID with major responsibility for developing *de novo* an HIV/AIDS research program.
- Although I was determined to secure the research funding, we needed from Congress to quell the epidemic, the Reagan White House took years to even acknowledge that AIDS existed, and many young lives were tragically lost during that period.
- And so, during the 1980s, as deaths among their friends mounted, AIDS activists became understandably impatient with the slow pace of research and wanted to play a role in setting the policy and the research agendas.
- It was in the context of personal attacks on me as a representative of the Federal government and demonstrations by AIDS activists that in retrospect, I made one of the most important decisions of my career.
- I did something many of my peers were intimidated to do, I invited some of the activists up to my office to engage them in a conversation. And when they

were not shouting and when I listened carefully, a lot of what they were saying made sense and I realized that if I were in their shoes, I would be doing exactly what they were doing – protesting and demonstrating.

- Our honest and transparent conversation was the beginning of a genuinely effective research partnership between NIAID and the HIV/AIDS advocacy community, a partnership that is constructive, has grown stronger over decades, and that exists to this day as the original prototype for advocates working with the research community on other diseases.
- Likewise, I visited gay and lesbian community centers in places like Greenwich Village and the Castro District of San Francisco, meeting activists on their own turf when they felt the government was not listening to or including them.
- Ultimately, we developed the highly effective drugs that have completely transformed the lives of persons with HIV allowing them now in 2024 to lead normal healthy lives as opposed to the inevitable death sentence they would have faced decades ago. Loyalty to the Jesuit ideals of caring for and service to others was the consistent driving force for me over those 43 years that I was involved in the AIDS saga. I feel confident that you will personify these ideals.
- Now let me turn to briefly address the issue of **Scholarship**.

- The highest level of scholarship is integral to the Jesuit tradition. I would like to address one element of scholarship that is very relevant in today's world.
Current forces in our society that are trying to undermine scholarship worry me greatly. And I need to bring this to your attention since it will involve you.
- Scholarship is a process of gathering evidence and data to make informed decisions that are important in life. Evidence and data are what drive progress in scientific and medical research, leading to tangible health benefits.
- When society normalizes untruths as we are clearly seeing in today's world, the truth means nothing, and when veracity is meaningless, and when people have their own sets of truths, it is even more important for those of us trained in this Jesuit tradition, and committed to intellectual integrity, to stick to the highest principles of scholarship.
- Since the emergence of the COVID pandemic, it has become apparent that we have entered an unfortunate era characterized by the tacit and weary acceptance of untruths.
- It is no secret that the political landscape is rife with disinformation and misinformation, distorted truths, and conspiracy theories unrelated to reality. I am profoundly disheartened by the indifference many people have to the proliferation of falsehoods and egregious lies in our public discourse.

- Complacency about rampant untruths imperils democratic societies everywhere. That is why universities, and particularly Jesuit universities, are crucial bastions for championing scholarship that defends intellectual integrity and the truth.
- Here is where you come in. You are not too young to start pushing back on this assault on integrity and truth. Our country and the world are relying on you to put your Jesuit training into practice and continue throughout your lives to be staunch defenders of the Jesuit principles that you are learning so well at this extraordinary institution.
- In conclusion, to the Georgetown Alpha Sigma Nu initiates—my sincere congratulations and please continue your good work! I have great faith that as Jesuit ideals become the cloth of your character as you carve a career path out in the world, you will be among the civic leaders protecting, restoring, and building our world into a better place.