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“Keeping the Dream Alive”
College of Saint Benedict
Commencement Address
May 12, 2007

It is something of a departure, I think, not to have a nationally known speaker for the commencement address at the College of Saint Benedict. So I am deeply humbled and grateful that President MaryAnn Baenninger chose to acknowledge the 150th anniversary of the Sisters of the Order of Saint Benedict by way of this invitation to have “one of us” speak today. You, dear graduates of 2007, have your own “claim to fame.” You are the “sesquicentennial graduates” of this place and this community, founded 150 years ago.

I want to speak woman-to-woman to the graduates of the class of 2007, about a cherished legacy from the Sisters of the Order of Saint Benedict, the sponsoring body of the College of Saint Benedict. In doing so, my intent is not to ignore anyone else who is here today, least of all the men in this audience and the influence they have had in the lives of the accomplished women we celebrate today. We have often heard that behind every great man is a great (or greater!) woman. I like to think that it takes a “*few good men*” to measure up to *one* great woman! So, you good men out there — fathers and grandfathers, brothers and uncles, friends and lovers — cherish with your lives and love these women you have come to celebrate today!

One Woman’s Story

As I now turn to you, women of the class of 2007, I want to begin with a story — a story about a woman who was born ten years after Napoleon’s demise in the early part of the nineteenth century. His rule had left Europe in shambles. So it is exceedingly significant that she came of age during on era of renewing and rebuilding — a time of social, political, economic and religious restoration in Europe, particularly in her native country of Germany.

She discovered her passion for teaching when she was very young, and obtained a teaching certificate at a time in history when women dared to do little in the arena of public service. When she was just a “tad” older than you women graduates, she learned of the heart-rending plight of the thousands of German immigrants who were fleeing their war-torn country and pouring into mid-nineteenth century America to seek a better life. Filled with zeal to help educate the children of her German compatriots in the so-called “new world,” she endured a month-long journey across a stormy Atlantic, only to find herself in a primeval wilderness-clearing in northern Pennsylvania — in a closed colony of German immigrants, in a frontier country that was less than one hundred years old. The German immigrants whom she encountered at her destination in northern Pennsylvania were attempting to tame the wilderness of their setting, but found themselves poverty-stricken and desolate in a country that had promised them freedom, prosperity and all of the good they had lost in the war-torn and ravaged country of their birth.

Before long, this young zealous woman encountered the threats of the Nativist, anti-immigrant, Know-Nothing American Party, intent on preventing foreign women from teaching in their schools. In addition, she was faced with the abusive power of certain churchmen in Pennsylvania who believed that they knew better than any woman how to succeed in this frontier country.

Not to be dominated by powers-to-be that would threaten the work she came to America to do, she resolved to return to Europe, and ultimately to plead her cause before one of the most influential men in the world. Standing ready to plead the cause of German-American immigrants, and the rightful role of women in determining their own future, she was prevented from doing so by those who deemed her a renegade, a woman who had overstepped her bounds, who had refused to be silent. She returned to America, broken in spirit and ill with tuberculosis. All of this happened within a very short life. She died in St. Cloud, Minnesota, at the age of 36.

Her courageous life has made possible *our lives here*, in this very place, on this joyful day, 150 years later. The woman of whom I speak is Mother Benedicta Riepp, foundress of Benedictine women in North America, foundress of Saint Benedict’s Monastery here in St. Joseph, Minnesota — the woman after whom the Benedicta Arts Center is named, and whose eternal resting place is a mere two blocks from this Field House, in the monastery cemetery. She is the woman who has made it possible for nearly 2,500 women to discover their passion for God, and to live out their call as Benedictine sisters here over the past 150 years. She is the woman who has made possible the education of women on this campus — more than 18,000 women who have graduated from this college, who have made and are making a difference all over the world.

Because of her short life, *I* stand here today, *you* stand here today, and we have a debt of gratitude to pay, in becoming women of strength and compassion, courage and leadership, service and love—women with a mission to make a difference in our spiritually bereft and troubled world. This legacy of spiritual values was her gift to all of the sisters who came after her, and is alive still today in the vision and mission of the College of Saint Benedict.

I know that all over this country during May and June, commencement speakers are delivering messages embedded with advice for succeeding in this world and making it to the top. *We do* want you to be successful, to enjoy the fruits of your diligent work, to attain the dreams you have for yourselves on this day. That is a given. But while these are worthy goals for which to strive, I want to challenge you today to “go deeper” with your lives. I want to leave you with another kind of message, drawn from the spirit and mission of Mother Benedicta Riepp.

Unfortunately, many pieces of Mother Benedicta Riepp’s story are lost to us. We have only fourteen precious letters that have survived — letters that tell us, in her own voice, something about her life and legacy. For more than twenty years now, for a variety of reasons and in many contexts, I have pondered and prayed over these letters, wanting and needing to learn the significance of her life for us who have made our home here as Benedictine sisters, and for all of the women who have come here to be educated.

I confess to reading between the lines of Benedicta Riepp’s letters, and happily I have found there, in her own words, inspiration that I hope will help you, as it has helped me, to “go deeper” with our lives. What follows is a five-fold message I wish to leave with you, dear graduates — on this, the “day of days” in your college career and young lives.

Listen to the Deeper Call

Above all, listen to the deeper call that runs *beneath* your career and pursuit of the so-called American dream, and consider that call a privilege. Mother Benedicta Riepp’s deeper call was to her bereft and struggling German compatriots in North America and their children. Faithful to the opening word of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, which is the word “listen,” she heard her call and considered it a privilege. In an 1852 letter she wrote: “Among the fortunate ones chosen for this mission, I find myself, though unworthy of this great grace. However, I am encouraged by the thought that God often calls the weak to do his work. . . . God has called us, and if we faithfully [follow God’s] call, strength and fortitude will surely be given to overcome all obstacles and to compensate for all that we have left for [God’s] sake.”¹

The deeper call and privilege of the Benedictine sisters in this place for the past 150 years, has been to seek God in a community of prayer and work — to live the gospel of Jesus Christ by serving in education, health care, pastoral and social services, peace and justice advocacy, liturgy and the arts.

Esteemed graduates, fortified with the completion of your privileged Catholic, Benedictine, liberal arts education, remember to *listen* to your deeper call — to respond to the human and spiritual needs so evident in our world today. And consider it a privilege to do so. I was so inspired by the words of U2 rock star Bono at a prayer breakfast in Washington D.C. in February of 2006: “God is in the slums,” he said, “in the cardboard boxes where the poor play house. God is in the silence of a mother who has infected her child with a virus that will end both their lives. God is in the cries heard under the rubble of war. God is in the debris of wasted opportunity and lives, and God is with us if we are with *them*.”² Bono has obviously heard his deeper call beneath celebrity and fame.

Trust and Be Grateful

A second challenge we can draw from the life of Mother Benedicta Riepp is to trust and be grateful. In her early years in this country, Benedicta Riepp was often discouraged about their dire poverty and their unpromising location in northern Pennsylvania. She was upfront about those feelings, and even more so about her abiding trust in God. In an 1857 letter she wrote: “A few times I was on the verge of losing courage when I considered the want and poverty in which we often found ourselves; but I always found hope again in the thought that God ... will not forsake us; ... [God] always helped us out of our misery. Eternal thanks be to [God].”³ Her letters are laced with words such as “accept our humble thanks,” “we will always be grateful,” “my gratitude will [never] diminish.”

Graduates, our world can be very scary and lonely if we set out to “go it alone,” without a deep trust in Someone beyond ourselves. There will be loans to pay off, career setbacks, all kinds of personal and family tragedies, broken relationships, weariness over our country at war, violence in our streets, and seeming powerlessness to help the people all around us who lack the bare necessities of life. However these realities may impinge upon your personal life, be reminded that there are many people “out there” who are willing to join hands with you to show the way. Trust God. Follow your heart and spirit. Do not fear “fear.” Be confident. Own your mistakes. Embrace change. Apologize and forgive. Express love. *Trust and be grateful.*

Seek Unity and Love

Thirdly, I believe that Mother Benedicta Riepp inspires us to seek unity and love in all of our endeavors. It is commonly held that she returned from Europe in the spring of 1858, broken not only in health, but in spirit. Her greatest heartache was the disension that had centered around her sisters and the churchmen of the time who had jurisdiction over them. By the time she settled in St. Cloud where she would live out her days, she saw only one solution to the lack of reconciliation among them all — the goal of unity and love. Writing to a church official in Rome from St. Cloud in 1859, she said: “It would be my consolation and joy if our new foundations in America ... were to remain united ... so that one spirit and one [love] could be preserved in the hearts of all.”⁴

Dear graduates, whenever I have asked students at our colleges which Benedictine values are the most important to them, invariably community and hospitality are at the top of the list. In the Benedictine tradition, hospitality and community are the path to unity and love. Take these values with you into the waiting world, for they are the stuff of “unity and love” in your relationships, your families, the workplace, and all of the near and far-flung places in which you will be living, and working, and making a difference.

Be Resolute and Healthily Assertive

Fourthly, it may be an understatement to say that I’ve noted in Mother Benedicta’s letters a certain resoluteness and healthy assertiveness. As a last resort in her conflict with churchmen of the time, she set out to go to Rome and to secure an audience with the Pope, himself. In preparation for that intended meeting, she drafted a document which she entitled “Points of Difference.” After explaining her six points of difference, she simply added: “I beg your Lordship to read these points. ... I could really call attention to more, but I believe this is enough. May the dear God direct all ... and may he lead your Gracious Lordship in every way.”⁵ Mother Benedicta did go to Europe, but in the end was prevented from going to Rome to plead her cause. She was “out of line,” it seemed, and was sent back to America. The convents in the East wanted nothing more to do with her, but the sisters in St. Cloud welcomed her with open arms.

We women here today, are the beneficiaries of her resoluteness and assertiveness. The sisters who were to come after her in St. Cloud and St. Joseph encountered similar threats to their autonomy, from churchmen who were more powerful than themselves. They too responded with the legacy of resoluteness left to them by Mother Benedicta Riepp.

Women graduates of the College of Saint Benedict, we have tried to hand on to you the legacy of strong, courageous, and determined women who have persevered in this place for 150 years. Find your voice when you need to speak. When it is a matter of justice and truth, be resolute. In a world where women seem always to have to “try harder,” take this legacy, and witness it to all of the girls and women in your life, today and into the future.

Have Concern for Women’s Experience

Lastly, there is further inspiration we can take from the life of Mother Benedicta Riepp, that is related to her resoluteness and assertiveness in the face of abusive power and patriarchal dominance — her pervasive concern for women’s experience. Here I want to quote her last extant letter without further elaboration, for it speaks for itself and you will certainly “get it.” Writing to a Cardinal in Rome she said: “I readily agree that the Reverend Prelate [Boniface Wimmer] in every respect understands better than I do how to direct our whole order. In respect to our [own] sisters, however, your Eminence will agree with me, I am sure, that much, and especially what concerns the internal direction of the convent, should not always be left to men.”⁵

Conclusion

Allow me to summarize, dear graduates, the message I wish to leave with you today. The ultimate requirement in the *Rule of Saint Benedict* is to seek God in all things, to give God the place of primacy in our lives. This was the motivation behind the spirit and vision of Mother Benedicta Riepp. It is the glue that has held this Benedictine community of sisters together for 150 years. And it is our desire and prayer for you as you leave this place. Listen to your deeper call to serve the needs of humankind. Trust God and be grateful. Seek unity and love at all times. Be resolute. Have a special concern for women’s experience in the face of gender inequality.

Oral tradition has handed down a story in our Benedictine community of sisters, that we love to remember and tell over and over again, especially in this year of our 150th anniversary. We’ve been told that in her darkest hour of discouragement, Mother Benedicta Riepp had a dream. In it she saw a beautiful tree covered all over with white blossoms. It is said that she took the tree to be a symbol of her future community. After 150 years in this place, there are some 20,500 white blossoms on our tree, representing the sisters and CSB women graduates over a century and a half. Today we add you, 469 *new* blossoms, to the tree she planted with her very life and love. Today you join us, in keeping the dream alive!

Ephrem Hollermann, OSB, is an Associate Professor of Theology, Koch Chair in Catholic Thought and Culture, and former Prioress of Saint Benedict's Monastery.

Notes

1. Riepp to von Reisach, November 27, 1852. Translated by Incarnata Girgen, OSB, in *Behind the Beginnings*, St. Paul, MN: The North Central Publishing Company, for Sisters of the Order of Saint Benedict, St. Joseph, Minnesota, 1981, pp. 24.
2. "Bono's Remarks to the National Prayer Breakfast." February 2, 2006. Bread for the World & Bread for the World Institute. Online <http://www.bread.org/get-involved/one-campaign/bono-prayer-breakfast-speech.html>.
3. Riepp to Council of Ludwig-Missionsverein, April 13, 1857. Girgen, pp. 62.
4. Riepp to Barnabo, January 4, 1859. Girgen, p. 136.
5. Girgen, pp. 110–112.
6. Riepp to Barnabo, January 4, 1859. Girgen, p. 136.

Editor's Note

In last year's edition of *Headwaters*, Jill Zasadny (in "Moses Has No Tongue") examined the conflict between Abbot Boniface Wimmer and Prioress Benedicta Riepp, who led Benedictine men and women to the United States in, respectively, 1846 and 1852. Fortuitously, S. Ephrem's commencement address, delivered shortly after *Headwaters* went to press, also invoked the legacy of Mother Benedicta — a central figure in the history of the Sisters of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph — yet a woman little known by most lay members of our college community. In this edition of *Headwaters*, S. Ephrem's commencement address is published as a counterpoint and complement to Zasadny's contribution in the previous edition.