

Xavier University of Louisiana
Inaugural Address by President C. Reynold Verret
February 26, 2016

Good morning, Archbishop Aymond, Ambassador Altidor, Sister Donna Breslin, Rabbi Cohn, Mayor Landrieu, Congressman Richmond, Chairman Rue and members of the Board of Trustees, Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, delegates of sister colleges and universities, Dr. Francis, Ms. Suggs, Dr. Holland, Dr. Paschal, faculty, staff, students, alumni, colleagues and friends of Xavier.

Good morning, and thank you for joining us today, in this year of Jubilee, for another milestone in the history of Xavier.

Some five decades ago, President Lyndon Johnson remarked, "Yesterday is not ours to recover, but tomorrow is ours to grasp."

Ninety years have passed since the founding of Xavier- 90 years of tradition, 90 years of progress, 90 years of Xavierites in positions of service and leadership around the world. We have 90 and more years of tomorrows before us to advance Xavier's noble mission- a mission to contribute to the promotion of a more just and humane world by preparing its students to lead and serve in a global society.

You, friends of Xavier, students, faculty and staff of immense generosity and inspiration, and I, this new president, we are gathered on a summit overlooking our tomorrow to which by grace we have been called.

Our increasingly interdependent world has a need of Xavierites. I am reminded of a few words of the Somali-British poet, Warsan Shire:

*I held an atlas in my lap
ran my fingers across the whole world
and whispered
where does it hurt?
it answered
everywhere
everywhere
everywhere.*

This is where we find Xaverites- in the tradition of St. Katharine: Everywhere the world hurts, serving and leading, healing, working to relieve suffering, empowering the disadvantaged, achieving justice, making the world a better place for everyone.

Our yesterday is a legacy of striving, of achieving, of shaping students who, true to the calling of this place, Xavier, went forth to bring hope to the world, to nurture and to transform

communities, both near and far. Xavier was founded as a gift to the future. Join me as we extend this precious treasure, this gift to the future, once again.

Let us gather our force of mind and spirit, our institutional soul and our many talents to shape Xavier's destiny, to keep the promise to educate, to transform students and to be a vessel of grace for the next 90 years and more to come.

Our founder, St. Katharine, understood the need for education in this place for an underserved people. For her, education was an enduring gift, it was a right by justice, and a means of empowerment and self-determination. She heeded the signs of the time. She responded.

The founding of Xavier was an endowment to the world in response to the challenges of that day. The times called for raising people up through learning and the formation of leaders, like themselves, to shape communities in Louisiana, across the South, and in far-off places. When Xavier graduates went forth, they shared and gave generously of themselves as they had received at Xavier.

One such leader is here with us today- Dr. Norman C. Francis, President Emeritus, Xavier class of 1952, steward of this university, servant of Louisiana and of the nation, a servant leader and a statesman. He is the living embodiment of Xavier's noble mission- the quintessential Xavierite.

Our mission, Xavier's mission, is the formation of many hands and minds to be instruments of the Master. We are grateful to Mother Katharine and her sisters who labored with her and to the lay faculty and coworkers who gave of themselves to build this great University.

For Xavier University is an act of divine love- love made manifest among us. Its fruits are before us in you: the alumni, the staff, the educators and, our jewels, the students.

Out of that love springs the commitment to high expectations that enfolds our nine generations of alumni and has informed every aspect of their education and their entire development in mind, body and spirit. Because of those high expectations, we are confident of the capacity of our graduates and of their value to the nation and to the world.

Out of that love surges the rigor that at first may shock new generations of students but soon transforms them and sustains them through the challenges of life and career. The standards upheld by this faculty and staff have demonstrated to the nation that it is possible, and imperative, to educate students of color and to educate them well.

You may have read, and if not I encourage you to do so, the recent *New York Times* report on the "The Making of Black Doctors." The article speaks of Xavier's achievement and leadership in preparing African Americans for medical school. It describes Xavier's preeminence among American colleges and universities in preparing its students to go on to doctoral study in the sciences. Xavier's success does not stop there. Our alumni excel in every imaginable profession, from teaching and educational leadership to presiding over courts of law and

delivering social and public services and from creating powerful works of art to leading industries and developing new technologies. They are everywhere they are needed.

For these achievements, Xavier has been heralded as a national model for higher education. The University is most proud of the success of its graduates, but at Xavier, career success is not an end in and of itself.

For education at Xavier is not purely utilitarian. It is not solely the utility of our degrees- their monetary values that give them merit. Education at Xavier will always be education with a purpose, education with meaning and education to serve. Indeed, to be a Xavierite is an aspiration to be fruitful.

A Xavier education has never been an individual benefit- but a benefit also to those around us. Being a Xavierite comes with an obligation to do one's best and to be of service.

Xavier alumni fulfill that calling every day. They are community builders. They are pillars of societal strength. Xavier proud- they love their alma mater for the gift of learning that was bestowed upon them. It is because of their fruitfulness that Xavier truly is a model for the nation.

As I reflect on my own journey, I want to thank my late mother, Lorraine, from whom I first heard the call to service. As a child, when you really listen to grown ups, some of their messages resonate deeply. I am reminded of words she often repeated: *C'est bien d'être de serviable*. Be of service; be of use.

I must thank my family here with us today; whose love, affection, prayers and support embraces me. Especially my sister and brothers: Monique, Gabriel, and Henri. They inspire and sustain me through my journey.

And my sons, Emmanuel and Antoine, of whom I am most proud and who continue to teach me about myself.

Wisdom passed to me as a small boy goes to another generation: that to be of use means useful, not to only to one's self, but to be of service to others.

Since its founding, Xavier has responded to the needs of the times. Throughout its history, this university has welcomed change. It opened as a secondary school to provide basic education. To address the shortage of qualified teachers, the primary challenge of the day, a normal school was soon added. The College of Arts and Sciences was then established to expand opportunity and give outlet to the talent that was receiving education. At each of these critical junctures, Xavier leadership, then the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament, could have chosen to just be satisfied with previous accomplishments. Instead, they heeded the signs of the times and listened to students and their parents yearning for more options to pursue ever broader horizons. Thus began the program in pharmacy- the first school of pharmacy in the state. How radical, how risky must this have seemed at time? Pharmacists of color could not even be

licensed in Louisiana. Xavier took the lead anyway, and today its pharmacists are such an essential asset that this region could not function without them. Seeing a need twenty-five years ago, Black Catholic leaders found a home at Xavier when the Institute for Black Catholic Studies was established. All this because the Xavier community reflected on the existing boundaries and decided to push beyond them.

The times speak to us today as they have before. As I pledge myself as a member of the Xavier community, we all stand here on a summit together. What are the signs that we must heed? Our society is in flux. The globalized community presents borders porous to ideas and to commerce. Emerging technologies are changing labor and work as we know it. How shall our graduates negotiate that world?

Peering dimly through clouded glass, we know that by cultivating habits of mind, analytical skills, the ability to define problems and to solve them and the imagination to create new possibilities, we will prepare Xavier students for that new world. They will be ready to meet the inevitable obstacles because they will be grounded in moral and ethical principles and values that permeate this faith-based institution, and they will be learned women and men.

No matter how hard we strain our eyes, though, we can little perceive the challenges of the next decade and thereafter. Surely as Xavierites before met the tests of their changing times, though, today's Xavierites will be ready. Our faculty and staff will continue reimagining education so graduates will be prepared to engage and thrive in the emerging world.

We at Xavier know well that the important challenges to society, locally and globally, are not the province of our individual disciplines as they have traditionally been defined. They span across disciplinary borders. Education at Xavier will enable students to bridge the humanities, sciences and social sciences with knowledge and analysis and to dialogue intelligently with the experts in diverse fields.

For example, crucial questions in bioethics call for informed conversations across the sciences, philosophy, theology, and other disciplines. Similarly, the challenges to our environment must be addressed in social and technical dimensions.

The faculty has begun to reimagine general education at Xavier to expand students capacity for broad interdisciplinary analysis. They are considering new programs, at the undergraduate and graduate levels, in evolving areas of knowledge and practice. Thus, Xavier will expand the reach of New Orleans, and Xavier, as a global destination for education and contribute to the vitality of the city and state.

We are called to reflect on Xavier as it is now and to contemplate the Xavier we will become. We have been principally an institution for traditional undergraduates. Xavier will continue to serve this role, but Xavier will expand boundaries and explore what new educational programs can best serve the needs of this day and tomorrow. We look at the evolving economy to know how Xavier can best prepare the agents of that economy. Whether we expand graduate

offerings in specific fields, provide programs to mid-career professionals or reach adults seeking to complete their bachelor's degrees and develop key proficiencies, we must respond to the signs of the times.

Xavier has been ready before, and it is ready now. Tomorrow is ours to grasp.

As we evolve to meet the needs of the day, we shall sustain the mission to serve, and, most importantly, to serve the underserved. We shall recognize the demographic shifts that have occurred in this region and in the nation. As Xavierites, we are called to ponder: what would Mother Katharine do if she were founding Xavier today? Who would be on her list of those needing the Xavier education and experience? Surely, those who are here at Xavier now, but certainly others, too, who are not here. She would push to enlarge the Xavier tent, as the University has done over and over again throughout its history.

In this day, we will continue to prepare Xavier graduates to serve in a wider world, open to diversity and ready to engage with global voices. Our students benefit from engagement with the greatest range of ideas and cultures we can gather together on this campus. As the educators in this hall know, learning occurs as much between classes as within them. Global citizens are nurtured by each and every encounter with diversity in libraries, cafeterias, hallways and quads.

Xavier is about engaging with the world- transforming and bettering it. We are a grace-filled place. May that grace aid our planning and our work. In choosing a patron, Mother Katharine gave us the powerful example of Francis Xavier, who confronted the present by seeking *el modo de proceder*. The right way forward. In fidelity to our calling and mission, we at Xavier will read the signs of the times. We will change in response, and we will be renewed as we seek the best path forward.

Faithful to our history as Black and Catholic and open to the world, we will continue to educate students for the highest levels of achievement. We will redouble our efforts to craft educational programs and offerings to be responsive to the evolving needs of society. We will broaden our outreach to welcome others who Mother Katharine might today find are in need of the exceptional education we offer. We will educate and be a gift to the world.

That good work will depend on all of us. We at Xavier count on you- friends of the university, civic leaders, corporate leaders, fellow educators in K-12, and our alumni. We are profoundly grateful every day for your generous support and prayers. We are joined together in noble work.

Mother Katharine once said:

"I looked up in wonder at God's wonderful ways and thought how little we imagine what may be the result of listening and acting on a desire He puts into the heart. If He puts it into the heart, He will bless it; if we try to act upon it, great will be the effect before God ...it will be a success before God."

It is the spirit of our motto: *If God be with us, nothing is to be feared.*

So, as we march forward into the next 90 years in firm assurance, the challenge is to resist complacency, to take risks, to adapt, to change, and to rely on God's providence.

We are partners together in this noble mission. We have a gift that we must share and extend to the future. Join me in grasping our tomorrow. Join us in securing the next 90 years. We are hand in hand. We have been called. Thus, we continue: to serve, to lead, to heal.

*everywhere
everywhere
everywhere.*

Thank you, and may God bless you and Xavier University of Louisiana.