

The following speech was delivered to the Loyola students and faculty by Sonia Banegas ('10) on Friday, January 30, 2009

A Loyola Student is Committed to Doing Justice

Good morning everyone.

Consider the profile of the graduate at graduation as an outline. Through the course of a Jesuit education, not only are we spiritually, mentally, and emotionally nurtured, but you and I are molded—molded into men and women of high moral standing and character who can one day become the people described by that outline. We have all heard the five characteristics of being the grad at grad: Religious, Loving, Open to Growth, Academically Excellent, and Committed to Doing Justice. But in truth, it would take a lifetime to be proficient in all five, and nearly impossible to master them by graduation. It is possible, however, to develop the foundation necessary to execute said points in an incremental manner throughout our lives.

Being committed to doing justice strongly intertwines with our actions. When we serve others, there may be an inspiration that motivates us. For most of my life, my motivation has been where I live, my family, the struggles of my mother and uncles, and the resources I have been blessed with when many are not. I live in the Mott Haven section of the South Bronx which, as some may know, is the poorest area in New York. I have grown up in a neighborhood where crime, lack of education, minimum wage jobs, and violence are used to get by on a daily basis. And as I was growing up I did not see anything wrong with the poor living standards of the people in my neighborhood.

Quite frankly, before attending Loyola I was ignorant of the social injustice around me. If you asked what I knew about poverty, I'd reply, "it's what you see in the commercials, about OTHER countries." I did not draw the connection between the images on the t.v. and my own neighborhood. Throughout my 3 ½ years at Loyola, though, I have come to learn that the justice issues we face today involve not involve far away places, but our own communities and cities which are often neglected. The United States still faces issues of human trafficking, exploitation of immigrant workers, and even factory induced slavery in some Asian countries that produce the good we buy.

At Loyola I have learned that being committed to doing justice not only requires caring for the rights of those around us and outside U.S. borders or growing in the awareness of global issues; being committed to doing justice also requires action—helping the disadvantaged, acting as stewards to our planet, and distancing ourselves from selfish tendencies. My own active service journey may sound familiar to many of you. My earliest memory of service was volunteering at a Daycare center for my Confirmation. It was fun, my younger sister attended the center, and it was easy. I had put my personal convenience before those I planned to help.

During freshman year, Brownbaggers—my second attempt at service—fulfilled my service requirement. For me, the most challenging part of the day was distributing the lunches we had prepared. I felt awkward in approaching a homeless person and offering the lunch. I was nervous they would act coldly with me or be angry for some reason. I worried the homeless would think I was trying to feel superior to them. For this reason, I tried handing out as few lunches as I could. Stepping outside of my comfort zone

was healthy, though. I ultimately overcame that weirdness, and it was primarily due to the gratitude and humanity of the people I had helped. Fr. Adolfo Nicholas, S.J., the Superior General of the Jesuits, once said “Why do we want to love the poor, to help the lonely, to console the sad, to heal the sick and bring freedom to the oppressed? Simply because that is what God does. Nothing else.” With Brownbaggers I began to understand the importance of helping the less fortunate. There was a satisfaction in knowing I had spent my weekend caring for another, growing in compassion and deepening my faith. If I did not take out the time for service, how could I expect anyone else to reach out to the needy as well?

During my sophomore year, I attended a Camden trip and something that has always remained with me was the hope and faith I witnessed while in Camden. Through the Carpenter’s Society, homes were provided for families; the people were also taught to manage money so they could keep their homes, and helped in finding employment. So many good changes were in action, and even though there was still a significant amount of poverty, the people of Camden were still loving and willing to share. While attending the Living Stations of the Cross through the streets of Camden on Good Friday, I was taken aback by how many people joined in the procession. Despite their adversities, almost the whole neighborhood walked in faith. The people of Camden still saw hope in their worst situations, having trust in God to lead them through their struggles.

This past summer I interned with the Bronx District Attorney's Office. It wasn't a typical service placement per say, but it did provide opportunities like a service placement. I was able to witness cases and talk to the victims of violent crimes, many of whom were from my very own neighborhood. My job was assisting prosecutors compensate for the suffering of victims. I wasn't challenged by the amount of work, meeting new people every day, or hearing some of the offenses victims underwent. My challenge was realizing that it would take 3-5 years to go to trial, an extra year for jury selection, and then several more years after that for a conviction. The process is almost never-ending, and the defendants may be found not guilty. The fact is, a long time would pass before action was taken. Which brings me to another understanding of social justice: the movement toward a socially just world may never bring about the fairness and change so many strive for.

Something that has heavily shaped my thought on being Committed to Doing Justice was the Ignatian Family Teach-In. During my weekend in Georgia, I experienced an overwhelming feeling of community, and purpose. I communicated with people from Jesuit schools all around the United States, and felt a bond with strangers who were gathered for the same cause: closing the School of the Americas. Most of the time we were there, we were gathered with this Ignatian Family at the Convention Center listening to speakers or joining in prayer. We learned about new leaders sprouting up, successful programs college students created on campus, and heard from witnesses who endured abuses of SOA-trained soldiers, and families who have been changed forever because of the SOA, whose loved ones had been captured and tortured or publicly executed.

The Ignatian Family Teach-In is remarkable. Yes, thousands of people congregate to stand up for a cause, but the Teach-In is so special because we are able to remember the Jesuit martyrs and other victims in El Salvador and other Latin American countries. We use their memories to find the inspiration to move on and spread awareness in solidarity. This year’s keynote speaker, Father Jon Sobrino, SJ, would be the perfect example for this. Father Jon Sobrino was a housemate of the six Jesuit priests who, along with

their housekeeper and her daughter, had been killed on November 16, 1989, by officers trained at the School of the Americas. They were forced to lie on the ground face down, and then shot in the back of the head; Fr. Sobrino was out of the country that night—had he been home, he certainly would have shared their fate. Now he directs the Oscar Romero Pastoral Center at the University of Central America in San Salvador where his friends were murdered. Father Sobrino has dedicated his life to speaking out against injustice, to teaching, to writing, and resisting oppression. Rather than ending a mission his companions died for, Father Jon Sobrino has not let fear or sadness takeover his life. At the Teach-in he reminded us that the legacy of the martyrs isn't really their death—their legacy is the love of others which characterized their lives. That's the example and the challenge they provide for him and for us.

Before the Teach-In actually started, our group visited the Martin Luther King Jr. Historic Site as well as the house he lived in. You may be wondering, how could it possibly be relevant to the Teach-in? Well, in order to be committed to doing justice, we must grow into leaders. MLK said “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” MLK and the Jesuit martyrs were linked in their work for justice in very different contexts, but are united in their commitment to it. Martin Luther King and Coretta Scott King used their education and public influence to organize rallies, sit-ins at white only restaurants, and preaching against segregation. Both of them were leaders, and in the eyes of death, they were not afraid to stand up for the rights of African Americans.

Like them, we are taught to be leaders who support our views and strive for change. We are taught to be like the martyrs in El Salvador, who would speak out against the killings of innocent civilians. We are taught to attend a rally like the one at Fort Benning, Georgia, and remember the victims that have passed before us and find the strength to move on to change. We are taught to step outside our boundaries, and find new ways to relate justice to us. Without these experiences, I would have never thought that I could inspire change or be capable of starting a movement.

There may be a certain frustration with service. At some point, you may find yourself asking, “Why bother? I'm one person, years have gone by and everything is still the same.” We hope to be triumphant, and even though our faith tells us to respond to human indignity and preach God's kingdom, we do not complete service for triumph. We look forward to success, but we strive for justice because we are called to do so, whether we are successful or not. Jesus said, “love God and neighbor.” Therefore, we strive for justice because we love our neighbor.

It was once said “Faith is the first factor in a life devoted to service. Without it, nothing is possible. With it, nothing is impossible.” It is my faith and love of God and neighbor that compels me to serve.

Thank you.