

## **Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy**

### **Loretto Alumnae Association**

#### **Loretto Abbey**

**November 4, 2005**

Loretto alumnae, teachers, students, ladies and gentlemen:

I wish to thank Maureen Harquail and the Loretto Alumnae Association for inviting me here to join you in the Order of Mary Ward Tribute Evening. I would first like to congratulate Ms. Patricia Murphy, Sister Marion Norman and Sister Joan Overholt, our recipients of the Order of Mary Ward Tribute award. We are all looking forward to hearing them speak later.

I have been asked to speak to you today about the role of women in today's society, and in our changing world. As graduates (students) of Loretto Abbey, you have a crucial role to play in shaping the future, and I expect that many of you will take on important tasks as leaders and opinion makers. With its proud history, and its focus on the value of education, Loretto Abbey will help you to be at the forefront of change.

I believe I have been asked to speak tonight because of my strong belief in education, both formal and informal. What drove me to pursue my PhD, at my age, was the desire to learn, and to develop the discipline I must have to achieve my goals. And, being an achiever, it is also important for me to have a degree to show for all the hard work I have done.

When I first enrolled in the PhD program at the University of Toronto, I was told by some that perhaps I should go to England because I could complete the degree there within 2 years. In the History Department of the University of Toronto, it is a very long drawn out process, and it would take a minimum of close to 5 years. I didn't mind because it would mean I would learn a lot more than just researching for my thesis. Just getting the degree was not the focus; learning with the guidance of my professors was. Everything I've learnt has proved to be extremely valuable to me in everyday life.

Graduates of Loretto Abbey, you know that getting a diploma or a degree is not an end in itself. The world is changing so fast that the day you stop learning is the day you will fall behind in the march of progress. It is important to develop a passion for learning throughout your life. Besides, it is exciting and life will never be dull. I always say that the day I stop learning is the day I die.

I believe there's a time for everything in life. I was a stay-at-home mom for a number of years raising our children, and I'm really glad I did this. During that time, I continued learning by reading a lot, and taking language lessons. The most important thing of all - the closeness I developed with our children - is absolutely irreplaceable. As you can see from me, or others like me, we can find our own paths to success at any age.

Young women today have a lot more opportunities than we had in the past. In the 1950s and 60s, we were told that girls were sent to university because educated women would bring up educated children. That was our role. The majority of us were not expected to have careers. Today, the sky is the limit, and you have a lot of choices.

It may be a generalization to say that women are nurturers, but it's one that has some truth in it. We are still the mothers, and in most societies, including our own, women are the backbones of society. We are the volunteers, the caregivers, and the educators.

In many international studies, each more compelling than the last, the status of women has been found to have a direct relationship to the health and development of nations, and the degree of good governance. That means, giving women leadership roles makes logical sense, both in economic and political terms. This holds true both in developed countries like ours, and developing nations.

In countries like Sweden as well as other Nordic countries, where women are well represented in government, there is an emphasis on issues that are important to families. Foreign aid tends to be higher, and health, housing, childcare and the environment tend to have priority in government policies.

In countries with brand new governments that have experienced significant corruption and violence, like South Africa, and Rwanda, women are playing important roles in large numbers in their governments. It is interesting to note that Rwanda now ranks first in the world for the representation of women in their government at 49%, surpassing Sweden. As Canadian women, we have a lot to learn from African women. Their strength, and their perseverance, in the face of violence, and the spread of AIDS across the continent, is superhuman.

In Canada recently, we saw the importance of women in the discussion of the application of Sharia law here in Ontario. According to all the reports, it was the intervention of women that helped Premier McGuinty decide that he could not allow Sharia law to influence the arbitration of civil disputes in our province.

On Parliament Hill, we have a Liberal women's caucus which puts forward issues that are important to women and their families. As women Parliamentarians, we not only work together on these issues, we need to ensure that more women get involved in politics. Women's elected representation in government, both provincial and federal, remains stagnant at about 20%. This is a very poor representation of the Canadian population of more than 50% women. We have yet to get our government on-side to help ensure that we have a critical mass of women in our parliament. I look forward to the day when there is no longer the necessity to have a women's caucus.

When you see how women Parliamentarians are treated by male politicians and by the media - even being criticized for our clothes, our hair and our voices - and how we are often held up to a higher standard than men, it may be difficult to imagine a life in politics. But, I want to say that there are a lot of things that are satisfying about public life. In my case, I get to speak frequently to groups like yours in the community, and influence the way Canadians think. This has to be the most satisfying part of my job!

In the business arena, women make up 50% of the market, so we are an important part of the economy. Companies that are smart enough to realize this will profit from their decisions. I am going to give you an example in Sweden. Recently, Volvo developed the "Volvo Your Concept Car" (YCC) which is created by a team of female designers, engineers and marketers. This team was shown on Chinese language TV about a month

ago – what an impressive group. The reason Volvo came up with the idea of designing the YCC is because over 50% of purchasers of cars are female, so it makes perfect business sense to the company. What I heard on TV was that today cars are designed with men in mind, especially tall, big men. No wonder I have so much trouble fitting comfortably into the driver's seat.

In the Canadian corporate world, we do have some upward mobility in our careers, but corporate boards continue to be dominated by white men. A recent headline in the *Globe* that reads “where the women aren't: boards are still mostly guys in ties” aptly describes the situation that is prevalent in Canada. I find it interesting to read that professional search firms say that “diversity is rarely a priority,” and that having women on corporate boards is not a corporate issue, but a social issue. Ultimately, I believe it is still very much an old boys' club. I am confident that the next generation of women, including the Loretto Abbey graduates, will help to change this corporate culture in Canada.

Recently, I read that a third of self-employed individuals in Canada are now women, and that the numbers of women choosing to be entrepreneurs is growing at a rapid rate. Self-employed women say they left higher pay in the corporate world, because they experience greater satisfaction in their own business; are better able to balance family and children, and are often able to do things that make more of a contribution to society. In short, they are happier, and that's important.

Actually, for the same reasons, I ran my own fashion design business for 14 years, from the beginning of the 1980s to the middle of the 1990s. It allowed me to be creative, to exercise my business acumen, and to learn people skills. At the same time, it gave me the independence I needed to work around my husband's schedule, and to be fully involved with the needs of my growing family. Besides, I like being my own boss!

In my life as a member of the Toronto community, as a citizen of Canada and of the world, I was merely committed to making a difference in society, and to improving the lives of others around me. Very surprisingly, I was recognized for what I did. When I was appointed to the Senate over 7 years ago, I was given the opportunity to contribute more to Canadians. No matter where we are, I believe it is our duty to give back to society.

What thrills me about the lives of young women today is that you have so many choices. Whatever you may choose to do, remember education is the key to success. I want to leave you with a very important teaching of Confucius, the Chinese philosopher, and that is - gentlemen are not born, they are created through education. You see, there was no aristocracy in China; anyone could elevate himself socially through education (I say him because a woman did not work outside of the home unless she was very poor). In other words, the only classes in the world that matter are those who are educated and those who are not, and in many ways, this is as relevant today. And, I would like to add, education should be used only for the good of humankind.

Follow your heart, wherever it may lead. Keep in mind that your success in life is not measured by how much money you make, or what kind of honours are bestowed upon you. It is measured by your contribution to your society, to make it a better and kinder place for all of us.

Today, I am very happy to have the chance to recognize the achievements of three extraordinary women, who have received awards because they are role models for young women. At the same time, both in their characters and their careers, they embody the admirable qualities of the founder of the Institute of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mary Ward. I wish you continued success in your contributions to our world.

Now, I will give the podium to these women, who will inspire you with their presentations.