

Good morning class of 2019!

Thank you, Rob, for a wonderful introduction and for your work as AS President this past year.

My name is Mary Conlon and I am honored to be representing this amazing graduating class as its Valedictorian. During my time here, I had the tremendous pleasure of majoring in English and minoring in both Women's and Gender Studies and Justice, Community, and Leadership. Women's and Gender Studies is celebrating its 25th anniversary and is the reason why I am wearing hot pink, satin gloves today.

I want to take this moment to acknowledge the powerful work these departments are doing to encourage students to use their voice to speak truth to power. That is what these pink gloves represent, and that is what my degree represents. I hope to do the staff and students of all three departments proud today, and every day.

I would like to begin with a few thank yous.

Thank you to the selection committee for choosing me as valedictorian. It was such an honor to be considered amongst many other immensely qualified students.

I have also had the privilege of having an incredible support system during my four years here.

To my friends, thank you from the very bottom of my heart for loving me, for cheering me on, for believing in me when I did not—I will hold y'all in my heart for the rest of my life.

To all of my professors, thank you for sharing your expertise, your passion, and for allowing me to do a critical feminist analysis of nearly every text we read in class. The love and joy you brought to the classroom meant the world to me, and I will be a better teacher one day because of you. A special thank you to Professor Witzig and Assistant Dean of Students Jen Herzog for their support, especially in my journey to this stage today.

I would also like to take a moment to remember a beloved professor and advisor, Janice Doane, who passed away last summer. She has left a lasting impact on this school and me.

I would also like to thank my parents and my extended family. Mom and Dad, thank you for believing in me, for teaching me to care for others, for your never-ending patience, and for the encouragement to simply do my best. I recently found out I am the first Conlon woman to graduate from college- so I owe a thank you to the hard-working family members who came before me that made it financially possible for me to attend Saint Mary's.

I have made a lot happy memories during the last four years: sitting on the grass by Dante Hall and running into friends, sharing a home with some of the best people I have ever known, the Wednesday nights singing karaoke at Round Up—our memories should be thought of and cherished today as we look forward to the start of the rest of our beautiful lives.

When I first began thinking of what I wanted to say today, I thought it would make sense to share a piece of the best advice I have received during the last four years.

As I previously mentioned, Professor Denise Witzig has been a deeply influential educator for myself and for many of my peers. In my third class with her, Feminist and Gender Theories, we begin class by relating those theories to the often-troublesome moments of our daily life. A classmate was discussing a conversation she had with a male friend where a misogynistic comment was made.

She explained that she didn't press the matter during the conversation, for fear of making things uncomfortable. To which Professor Witzig responded--no, that's the point of your degrees, to create discomfort, to challenge people.

That is the power of a Women's and Gender Studies degree, or a college degree in general-- to create discomfort and to call attention to important issues of injustice. I plan to follow Professor Witzig's advice, and I encourage you all to do the same.

We are graduating at what feels like a crossroads in American history. We are being called to reconsider where our priorities lie, what values we hold, and what we want our elected officials to do in our name. As Professor Witzig told us in class, we have a responsibility to speak up, and to create the discomfort that comes with demanding a better world.

One of the most important lessons I have learned at Saint Mary's is that human beings have the power to create injustice, but that we also have the power to dismantle it. We have the power to create equitable social structures, expanded

understandings of the diversity of human identity, and new ways of relating to one another. These discussions will often be uncomfortable, but it is in that discomfort that individuals are able to grow, and systems are able to change.

We must use our educations to facilitate that discomfort, to disrupt the status quo and challenge the patronizing voices that tell us we are too young to make such changes. There will always be those who say we are too impractical, too inexperienced, too angry. They are wrong.

Studying, experiencing, and bearing witness to a number of national and personal tragedies has left me and many of my peers angry. We are angry about: the earth experiencing climate change at rates that actively threaten the continued existence of life, the 1.56 trillion dollars in student loan debt in the US, families being separated and brutalized at our border, the more than ninety percent of campus sexual assaults that go unreported, the 1,636 mass shootings in the US since we arrived in September of 2015, the instances of police brutality that have gone widely unpunished, and the many elected officials that are attempting to strip us of our reproductive autonomy.

But this experience of anger over the past four years has been eye opening, and life affirming. Anger at injustice ultimately comes from a place of love for our neighbor. Being angry that you or others are being marginalized and dehumanized is righteous. We have every right to be angry and to be demanding change.

If the events of the last four years have not angered you, I encourage you to pay closer attention and to reflect on who you call your neighbor.

I ask us all to ensure that our love is as fierce as our anger. I tried to hide from my anger, and instead it only ate away at me. But through my education here, I learned to lean into it, acknowledge it—and I found that this anger was rooted in a deep longing for a more loving society, one that reflected the value and humanity of all people.

We must bring to the forefront of this anger the love we have for those who are hurting, for our communities, for the work that we have ahead of us. When we tap into the love at the root of that anger and use it to fuel action, we can make a real difference.

Making anger productive, rather than destructive is vital to ending the cycles of violence we are watching play out on our TVs. The anger we feel is valid, but it cannot stop there. We may be receiving our degrees today, but our work has only just begun.

One of the first, and best classes, I have had here is Introduction to Literary Analysis with Professor Ed Biglin. On the day of the final, we were all visibly stressed. As he walked around the classroom handing us each the exam, he noted the anxiety in the room, and told us all to relax, saying, even Jesus couldn't get twelve out of twelve, so don't worry so much.

No one can achieve complete perfection, so we owe it to ourselves to try our best and forgive ourselves for our shortcomings. Yes, the next steps seem daunting, but we do not need to be perfect, it is enough to do your best. We have already accomplished so much, and I am so proud of us all.

I have seen the magic and the power inside so many of you. It is this class's resiliency and passion that has changed my life and will continue to change the lives of those you will meet after today. The challenges our generation will face are many, but I am confident that we have the strength to work through the discomfort.

The activism I have seen done on campus through the Center for Women and Gender Equity, The Campus Assault Response and Education Center, the Intercultural Center, the many diversity organizations, and End the Silence all show that when we are upset at the state of things, we can organize, rally, and build new coalitions in the process.

The intelligent, nuanced conversations I have seen in classrooms demonstrate that we are well-informed and well-spoken. This class is full of some of the smartest, most empathetic, and angriest people I know. The love we have for each other and our world is our power and our hope. We are a force to be reckoned with.

So let us celebrate each other today, so that tomorrow we can start thinking about the future—because it is ours to define. Through the transformative power of education, anger, discomfort and ultimately love, we can and will change our world. We just might be able to spare future generations the burden of bearing this anger too. Perhaps we will allow them to feel only the love.

Thank you all for your attention and consideration this morning. Congratulations class of 2019, I wish you all tremendous luck as we begin this new chapter, God bless.