

## President Heather A. Smith's Inaugural Address Friday, September 12, 2025

For those I have not had the privilege to meet - my name is Heather.

I started out as a nurse. My first love was helping sick kids get better. Along the way, I began leading people who wanted to do the same thing. As a single mom who raised an accomplished and fierce daughter... my second love is empowering and educating young women. So, while this calling was not something that I had imagined, it quickly made perfect sense.

Therefore - With a grateful heart, I humbly accept the invitation to serve the College of Saint Mary as its 8<sup>th</sup> President.

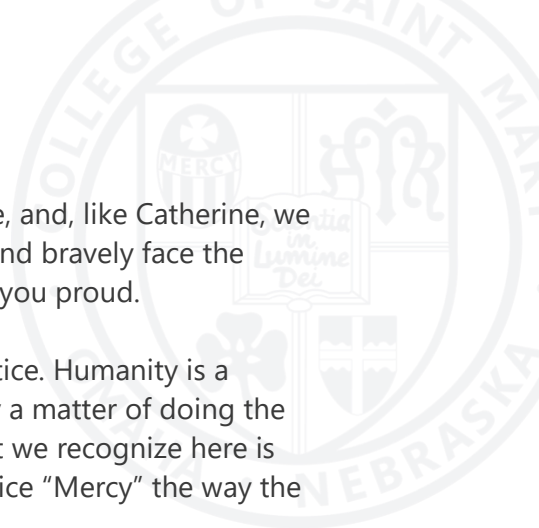
Many of you have said to me, "Well, that's great, Heather, but you've had the job for over two years! Why are we doing this now?" It is true that I've had this privilege since 2023, so the question is valid, but I have my reasons:

I wanted to celebrate with you on the College's highest holiday. Today is Founder's Day – our 102<sup>nd</sup> birthday! Also, I was really not interested in an event focused on me. I wanted to be able to tell you about this amazing place and its unlimited opportunity. And I had a few things to learn before that was possible. One of my first tasks upon accepting this challenge was to attend a fairly intense "new presidents boot camp" at Harvard. One of the MANY things I learned there was that inaugurations are indeed necessary and should occur within the first three years. So, we are right on schedule!

Let me begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, President Emerita Dr. Maryanne Stevens. Over her 27-year tenure, President Stevens – Sister Maryanne – grew and shaped CSM into the vibrant institution that surrounds us today. This very room – where our students play, compete, and graduate -- is a monument to Maryanne's vision and to her formidable fundraising skill. She remains a dear and sustaining friend to CSM and to me. Maryanne, the entire CSM community thanks you.

Maryanne is a Sister of Mercy. Through a sacred covenant, the Sisters of Mercy sponsor our College. Their mission and critical concerns animate our own. Their foundress, Catherine McAuley, inherited a fortune from a wealthy family. Rather than live a life of comfort, she founded a house in Dublin where young women could live, learn, and thrive together. Ever since then, the Sisters have dedicated themselves to the needs of our world, and, we are happy to say, our community.

In 1870, when Omaha needed a hospital, the Sisters built one, and it bears the name of Bergan Mercy today. In 1923, when our schools needed teachers, Mother Mary Leo Gallagher took over a hotel on 15<sup>th</sup> and Castelar and, on this day in 1923, opened the College of Saint Mary.



Every day, our work here honors the Sisters' devotion and their service, and, like Catherine, we will use every resource at our disposal to improve the lives of others and bravely face the challenges of our time. Sisters, we will not rest in our efforts to make you proud.

"Mercy," as the Sisters use the word, isn't pity, or even charity. It's justice. Humanity is a universal family, the Sisters say, and taking care of our family is simply a matter of doing the right thing. We have all been helped at some point in our lives. What we recognize here is merely that it is our turn to do the helping. In this place, we will practice "Mercy" the way the Sisters have taught us.

Our files are full of marketing studies that tell us CSM is a "hidden gem" and a "well-kept secret." One of the first things I recognized was that that secret needed to end... On this emerald of a campus, in the heart of this great city, we have too much skill in the hands of our faculty, too much care in the hearts of our staff, and far too much power in the souls of our students, for the College of Saint Mary to remain a "secret" of any kind. To paraphrase the writings of Matthew and Mark - you don't light a candle just to put it under a basket. We will see that our light shines as far, and warms as many hearts, as it possibly can.

Our undergraduate school, the region's only all-women's college, is the beating heart of our institution. There, we affirm what the Sisters have taught us: This world offers no substitute for a community of women who walk with each other, who lift each other, who laugh, cry, work, play, and win with each other.

We will nourish that community here. Our campus will serve as a living invitation for women to gather in a place that values comfort and community - more study spaces, cozy couches and fire pits. For the generations of women who have lived and learned here, and for the generations yet to come, this will be the place that changed the trajectory of your life. And it will always feel like your home.

We will cultivate centers of excellence for women. Omaha does an admirable job of all-girls education through high school. We proudly carry that standard for women in college and beyond. On our campus, we will convene women who have the grit, the resilience, the confidence and the humanity to light the road for every woman finding her way. When women gather to focus their power, very often, the College will gather them.

We will be a destination of choice for every woman. From tough neighborhoods to the suburbs, from every background, from every corner of our region, women will dream of being here. Our student body will reflect the community around us. We will, as we always have, see that no one misses out on a CSM education based on their ability to pay. What we offer is far too important.

Our graduate schools welcome women and men who support one another. Our advanced degree programs form professionals of character, service and ethics, ready to do meaningful, purposeful work. We will prepare extraordinary people to lead, to teach, and to heal.

Just as the Sisters have done, we will always evolve to meet the needs of a world in constant motion. We expect our health professions graduates will continue to shine in our community for years to come. But we will lift our eyes to the horizon. Our university, and the creative, committed people who power it, have shown they can adapt CSM to new challenges and new opportunities, and open new paths for our students to express every bit of their potential, so they can make a difference where the world needs them most.

We will not flinch from a world increasingly suspicious of learning. In a world being transformed by artificial intelligence, we will need more human intelligence and more emotional intelligence. More than ever, we need exceptional humans. In our classrooms, we will teach students how to think, but we will never tell them what they must think. We will expose our students to humanity's finest thoughts, and we will teach the difference between an opinion and an argument. Guided by the Sisters, Catholic Social Teaching will remain our North Star. This means that we will recognize and respect the dignity of every human being we encounter.

These are worthy challenges. Certainly, I will need your help to overcome obstacles along our path. I will be reaching out to you!

So far, you have answered my calls. Already I've been stunned by the devotion you show this institution every day. I have seen the fire in the eyes of our faculty, our staff, our students, our benefactors, and our volunteers.

You have led me to fall in love with the College of Saint Mary. I will work to be worthy of your trust in me. I will give everything I have to be worthy of this transforming gift from the Sisters of Mercy.

I'm grateful to be on this journey with you.

Our very best days lie ahead.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Heather Smith". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'H'.