June 16, 2010

Academic Freedom Award

The AAUP has awarded its Alexander Meiklejohn Award for Academic Freedom to Patricia Ann McGuire, president of Trinity Washington University. The award recognizes an American college or university administrator or trustee, or to a board of trustees as a group, in recognition of an outstanding contribution to academic freedom.

McGuire was recognized for authentic appreciation of the central role of rigorous and open debate in a university and her consistent willingness to speak out on topics that other college presidents will not touch. She received the award June 12 at the plenary banquet of the AAUP Conference on the State of Higher Education.

In the aftermath of 9/11, McGuire courageously and eloquently raised questions about the ethics of Guantanamo, threats to civil liberties made in the name of national security, and new federal regulations that treated international students with suspicion and limited their fields of study. In a time of great national stress, she insisted that “the university is the rational center that must hold when all else has gone mad.”

More recently, McGuire took on those in the Catholic Church who sought first to cancel and then disrupt President Obama’s commencement address last year at the University of Notre Dame. In this she stood virtually alone. In commencement remarks to the Trinity community, she called the pressure against Notre Dame “one of the angriest and most aggressively hostile efforts to block a commencement speaker ever endured by any American university.” Citing the precedent of luminaries such as Fr. Theodore Hesburgh, a former Meiklejohn Award recipient, she noted that “Catholic universities must have the same high intellectual standards as all universities, nurturing academic freedom as the bedrock of excellence in scholarship and teaching.”