



ST. MARY'S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY

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Letters from the Park

Letter #6

April 19, 2020

Sunday within the Octave of Easter: The Divine Mercy

Sabbath Spring

To the Larger St. Mary's Community: *Letters from the Park* are weekly letters from Fr. Brown to St. Mary's seminarians who have been sent home during the Covid-19 emergency that he would like to share also with the larger St. Mary's community and friends and supporters of St. Mary's.

Dear Seminarians,

I suspect many of you have never heard of "blue laws". "Blue laws", also known as "Sunday laws", limited Sunday activities to promote a day of worship and rest, with both a religious and a secular purpose. When I was growing up in North Dakota in the 1950's and 1960's all businesses were closed from 12 a.m. Sunday to 12 a.m. Monday. In 1967 some businesses, pharmacies, hospitals and restaurants, were exempted because of an especially harsh blizzard in 1966. More were exempted in 1991, and finally the "blue law" was abolished entirely in 2019.

Growing up where there was a strict blue law, Sunday did have a very different feel to it in those days. Most people went to church on Sunday morning and spent the rest of the day resting, visiting grandparents and getting together with other relatives and friends. All work, even work around the house, was generally suspended, and we didn't even think of doing homework until after Sunday dinner. Sunday dinner was always special; a special meal, with extra family and friends at the table, and we always dressed up, just as we had for Mass in the morning. Sunday was a welcome and palpable contrast to the workaday week from Monday through Friday, and the recreational activities of Saturday. Life today is, of course, quite different from that idyllic world and my idealized memories of growing up in the hinterland.

The origins of the sabbath as a day of rest and worship go back a very long way, as old as the law of Moses (see Deut.15-14-15). It is one of the Ten Commandments: Thou shalt keep holy the Lord's Day. But even back then it betrayed a dual purpose: worship of God, and rest from labor. God is deserving of our worship. And we not only deserve, but need periodic rest, a cessation of labor in order to be restored physically and mentally, to get things back into perspective, hopefully to keep them in perspective even when we are engaged in intense labor.

Sunday was first established as a “day of rest” by an edict of Constantine the Great, the first Christian Roman Emperor in 321 A.D., which impacted the whole rest of Western history. Sunday became universally recognized as the Day of the Lord, a day reserved by law for worship and rest in Christian countries.

Christians believe that God deserves to be worshiped; that we have an obligation to worship God, and in a special way on Sunday, the Day of the Resurrection, the Lord’s Day. Whether Christian or not, everyone needs to rest periodically from labor. Without periodic rest, time for family and friends, for recreation, a time to break out of the routines of workaday life, we too easily lose perspective, even get burned out; the secondary things of life take over as primary; we begin to lose, in a very real way, our humanity, the fullness of which derives from our relationship to God, the reference point of our entire being. Once disoriented from the primacy of God in our lives, whether individually or communally, other things become primary, in fact become idols, taking on greater importance for us than God; they can also take on greater importance than other people: family; friends; those who live in want.

There’s a lot of talk about the economy, about the need to “re-open” the economy right now. Maybe there’s a silver lining to the coronavirus emergency, even though it represents a terrible tragedy with much suffering, in that it has forced us to step back from the economy for a while. Maybe this is an opportunity to get things back into perspective.

The economy is important, essential in fact, but it is also something secondary in our lives, certainly for believers. The sabbath exists for man, not man for the sabbath; by the same token, the economy exists for human beings and our welfare, not human beings for the sake of the economy. Getting that wrong turns things upside down; people become objects used to produce wealth, not subjects the production of wealth is designed to provide for. Money making can too easily become an idol. If you don’t believe in God, I suppose it’s easy to understand why: what else is there to live for? That doesn’t mean there’s anything wrong with making money, a strong economy, and prosperity in and of themselves. However, when these things begin to take the place of God in our lives, or become more important than God, when we begin to put God in second place, is it any wonder that we begin to lose perspective, that life becomes, in a very real way, incoherent? If we begin to measure our lives by secondary things, if they become the be all and the end all, how can we hope to keep things in perspective? How can we help but begin to diminish, if not lose altogether our humanity? Likewise, with the place of others in our lives: family and friends. Lives lost to the coronavirus make us remember the value of every human life, of every person we know. Who would have traded the life of a loved one, if they could have, for anything of secondary importance? In a very important way, this tragedy is focusing our attention on those who live in want, those in need, those who need us just to survive, much less to thrive. Everything put in perspective by the subjects of the first commandment of the Law, and the second which is like it: God and neighbor.

Towards the end of March, a journalist, Paul Solomon, interviewed a Dr. David Katz on the PBS News Hour. Katz was already advocating for “re-opening” the economy. He said, “My parents are both 80 years old, generally in good health, but in clearly. . . the high-risk group. . .What they’re most worried about . . . is the loss of his life savings and his legacy . . . he doesn’t want to get coronavirus and die, but, frankly, the loss of his life’s work is his greatest concern.” Solomon: “More than his health?” Dr. Katz: “Well, I don’t want to get coronavirus, but, honestly, I’m gravely preoccupied with

the loss of everything I've worked my whole life for." An interesting perspective. It's hard to see, though, how we do not inevitably lose all that we have worked for our whole lives when we die, unless, of course, we've been working for something other than financial assets; for something other than the things of this world. Certainly these things are an important support for life in this world. But the be all and the end all? Somehow this would seem to trivialize the suffering and grief that so many are undergoing as a result of the rising death toll from the virus.

“ . . . God said to him, ‘You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?’ Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God.”

I don't believe God “sent” the coronavirus to punish us, or anyone, for any reason. I think it just happened, a phenomenon of nature. But I do think it, and the “lockdown” it has spawned, the radical change of our regular routines of work, and the “shutdown” of the economy, offers us an opportunity to re-think our priorities; to re-think what's most important in our lives. To re-orient ourselves to God, and discover ways to re-incorporate regular, periodic rest from our labors into our routines; to re-establish the sabbath for ourselves, however it can best be lived out in the circumstances of our own time. Sunday should still have priority for Christians, but that's not as easy in an increasingly “secularized” society as it might once have been. But we should observe the sabbath every bit as much as believers have throughout history: to worship God, and to rest from our labors and recoup personally and communally. It's the very thing that can help us get things back into perspective, can make sure God is first in our lives; to restore coherence to the way we live, what we hope for, what we believe in, and how we order our lives. That's what priests and the Church are supposed to help people do in normal times: To keep our lives in perspective; to live reasonably, humanly and humanely, sometimes heroically in this world, giving proper value to the dignity of work and the importance of an economy that permits us to live well-ordered and prosperous lives, but also to place everything in proper perspective as ordered to God, the One from Whom all things come and to Whom all things are ultimately destined.

We can choose to make of this emergency, and the way it has changed the rhythms of our lives, a time to give the worship of God its proper place, and a time to build more rest into our schedules, a time to remember and cherish how much family and friends really mean to us. What better way to prepare for the time when we will once again be able to come together freely to be with one another, a time when building time for worship, for rest and for being with those we love may require more discipline and determination. If we start now, perhaps we will come to see the coronavirus not just as a threatening emergency, not just as the tragedy that it is, but as well as an event that allowed us to get our lives back in order by restoring the much-needed idea, the much needed reality of sabbath: God and others as the primary things of life, everything else as secondary. The coronavirus emergency not only as an event of suffering and death, but also a time that reminded us of the importance of God, neighbors, family and friends, and rest: our *Sabbath Spring*.

