

St. Mary's Seminary & University
Roland Park Neighborhood
5400 Roland Avenue
Baltimore, MD

Letters from the Park

Letter #1

March 19, 2020
Feast of St. Joseph

Dear St. Mary's Community,

We already miss our seminarians and staff and we're only one day into this. For me it's a little like summer when the building empties and only staff are here. The difference is more striking for faculty, especially new faculty. St. Mary's is such a vibrant place, always so active, such that it sometimes seems hard to catch your breath with everything that's going on. Now everything has been cancelled, everyone has gone home except resident faculty hunkered down for the duration.

Something strange is happening—there is a great silence on earth today, a great silence and stillness. The whole earth keeps silent because the King is asleep.

From an ancient homily on Holy Saturday.

Everything *in attesa*, they say in Italy: waiting; waiting to see what's going to happen.

In the past, when people were separated they used to write letters. If on a trip, they would send postcards; if out of the country, postcards or long letters during long trips. And, of course, some people left home for good—not seeing friends and relatives back home for years, sometimes forever. We are a country of immigrants. Many left everything behind to come here, not knowing if they would ever return home; relationships at home were kept up by writing letters.

Most of our students and staff have gone home for a time to stay safe in a time of danger, but fully expect to come back (except those students who are graduating, being ordained and moving on to first assignments). We all need to stay in contact with one another and what better time to revive that age-old way of staying in touch: Letters.

Letters take time; you can't dash them off like an email. Letters are kept for a long, long time, not deleted from an inbox and forgotten. They are well thought-through, reflective, not just informational. What better time to reflect, to take time, to communicate from the heart, not just pass on information.

This emergency is offering us something we have precious little of during our "normal" hustle-bustle lives of seminary, ministry, business and recreation. This emergency is making us slow down, is giving us time on our hands, and many fewer distractions: Time to set distractions aside and reflect, to ask big questions, and littler questions that gnaw below the surface, not needing to be confronted in the midst of so many distractions, because we're so good at avoiding confronting them through all the distractions we create. So perhaps there's a blessing in this crisis: the blessing of time, time to think things through more intentionally, more deliberately, more deeply.

This crisis is disrupting the order of our normal every-day lives. Perhaps it's an opportunity to re-order our lives and get in touch with what really matters: family; friends; truly intimate friendships that enrich; faith; hope; love. We're going to be living in close quarters with just a few people these next few weeks, not distracted by the hustle and bustle of life in the midst of the many. Perhaps this can be a time to remember and re-create what it's really like to live in close and supportive friendships, familial relationships that nurture and enrich at a deep level, instead of being distracted by many superficial relationships built on shared distractions and momentary experiences, instead of the things that truly last.

And so, I thought I would write a few letters during my down time (although we'll no doubt find lots to do, anyway, not least of which finishing up coursework at a distance—but even with that, there'll be more “down” time than usual to be wasted or put to good use in cultivating enriching personal relationships, even at a distance). I want to write a letter a week to my good friends who are away, including good friends not in the seminary but “of” the seminary as alumni, benefactors and others who support us in so many ways.

St. Mary's since moving to Roland Park in 1929 has been affectionately known by alumni simply as “The Park”, so I thought I would call these missives *Letters from the Park*. I'll write once a week, not to convey information, but just to stay in touch, and perhaps offer musings on what's really happening here, what it really means, not so much its fearsome risks but its hidden opportunities for those who take the time, the precious time we are now offered, to reflect and get back in touch with the hidden desires and rhythms of our lives that lead us to one another and through one another to God.

The Letter to the Hebrews in the breviary today tells us that “Faith is confident assurance concerning what we hope for, and conviction about things we do not see.” The greatest risk in times of crisis is the loss of hope, of confidence, of conviction. Such losses can only result from loss of faith. We need to console one another in these times with the assurances of faith, to build confidence, to reinforce conviction. There will be life after coronavirus, even as there is life during this emergency, life in abundance for those who slow down and notice, who reflect, who draw on faith that nurtures hope leading to conviction.

I'd like to begin a journey of reflection with you to last through Lent, into Easter and throughout this time of emergency, through to the end of the seminary year; to share some thoughts, but mostly just to stay in touch; to be in touch in what is perhaps a new way for some, through letters, *Letters from the Park*.

F. (Stille) J. Brown, pr