



Office of the President Rector

ST. MARY'S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY

Founded 1791

Letters from the Park

Letter #10

May 17, 2020

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Stay Safe

Dear Seminarians,

The seminary year has ended. Classes are over. Exams are done. Grades are in. No more formation activities. Pastoral assignments are now in your diocese. Everyone is home for the summer. To that extent everything is normal for the middle of May. But, of course, things are not normal at all. No one returned home after exams, because everyone was already home since the middle of March. Hard to believe we've been at home, required to stay home, for two full months. Things are starting to open up a bit, in stages, different stages in different places, but nothing is at all the same. Everyone is aware there are still risks, especially if you venture out. Some will continue to stay at home, others will venture out; everyone wishes we could get out more, be more active, that things could get back to normal. But it doesn't seem things will be anything like normal for quite some time.

One of the things we have missed the most is Commencement, when we honor our graduating seminarians and EI students. We're planning a very special graduation ceremony on October 22 at the end of Alumni Days and we really hope all of our graduating seminarians can return for it. For now, I want to acknowledge what an outstanding class of graduates we have this year and let you know what an honor and what a pleasure it has been to be President-Rector and a faculty member while you were here. We are all certain that you are going to be excellent priests; the kind of priests and pastors the People of God deserve:

- Rev. Mr. Malachi Clark, Diocese of Syracuse
- Rev. Mr. Zachary Crowley, Archdiocese of Baltimore
- Rev. Mr. Mark Dunmire, Diocese of Greensburg
- Rev. Mr. C. Matthew Hawkins, Diocese of Pittsburgh
- Rev. Mr. Kevin Holland, Diocese of Erie
- Rev. Mr. Jonathan Kuhar, Diocese of Scranton
- Rev. Mr. Thomas Lanza, Diocese of Metuchen
- Rev. Mr. Evan Ponton, Archdiocese of Baltimore

So, what should be our watchword as we start figuring out how to live in this new normal, becoming as active as we can under the circumstances, as we get on with our lives and moving forward

with our lives, our plans, toward our goals? Those in ministry have an important role to play, not just by what we say but by what we do and how we do it. We're not just ministers, we're models. It's always been that way. Ministers are prominent in peoples' lives, and many look to us not only for wisdom and faithful preaching of the Gospel, not just for help, but for an example of how to live in the circumstances of our time. We who are in ministry ought to be conscious of that, and be careful in the example we give, even as we strive to be generous in the service we give.

I've noticed that many people are signing off "stay healthy—stay safe" in their e-mails and letters now. That seems to me like the best watchword for these times, the times we're moving into as people start venturing out: *stay safe*. Those of us who have dedicated our lives to service in the helping professions ought to venture out as we are able, but we also ought to *stay safe* so we will stay healthy, so we will be able to serve better for a longer time, for our whole lives, for full lives. It is, I believe, the particular kind of stewardship we're called to as ministers. Everyone is called to good stewardship, certainly those who are believers, those who seek to follow Him who taught us what faithful service and good stewardship really mean. All should assess honestly the aptitudes and the gifts they have been given and dedicate them to serving others. For many it's simply the ability to work hard and support their family. For some it's the aptitude for a particular profession—salesman, counselor, banker, financial advisor, businessperson, teacher. Everyone has a special gift, given for the benefit of all, that ought to be put to use to benefit others, to benefit everyone. That's stewardship. Not just good financial management, but the management of one's personal resources and giftedness to benefit others, to serve others, to build up family and the communities we live in. For Catholic and other Christian ministers it's being available to others in whatever ways they can, to provide the sacraments, to counsel, to console and to celebrate life. But it also means *staying safe* so we will be able to provide the sacraments and be available to so many who need our presence and our ministry.

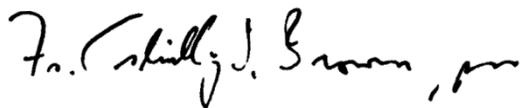
Staying safe means not taking imprudent risks; not being reckless by disregarding known risks. I pointed out in an earlier letter that St. Charles Borromeo was quite prudent during the plague in Milan in the late 16th century. He continued to minister, but in creative ways; to be present and encourage the priests of his diocese to be present to those in need of ministry, but in ways that were prudent; in ways that modelled how to *stay safe, as safe as possible*, while being available in ways suited to the times. That's what we need to do now. And that's not just for ministers, it's for everyone. Ministers need to model what it means to *stay safe*; everyone needs to *stay safe*. That's what we're figuring out now at St. Mary's so we'll be ready to re-open and welcome everyone back in August. We fully intend to open the seminary year with everyone back in August, and God-willing that's what we'll be able to do.

This will be my last *Letter from the Park*. Summer has arrived, everyone's home, and we have all the summer work we normally have to do, although it's a little slow-going working at a distance. Hopefully everyone at St. Mary's will be able to work onsite soon, following safe practices. Our enrollment is looking very, very good for next year, so we have a lot to do to get ready. Hopefully the numbers we're seeing now will pan out. We have many challenges to figure out, because we know we're going to have to do a lot of things differently in light of the risks presented by the virus, so we want to make sure we are doing everything safely—but we are going to do what we need to do to continue the education and formation of seminarians and our other students.

I've enjoyed writing these letters. I hope they've given you something to think about, something helpful in your formation or simply in getting through this emergency. The whole purpose has been to

keep us close even though we have been separated. In my first letter I said this emergency was going to give us precious time we don't ordinarily have to think things through more intentionally, more deliberately, more deeply. I hope you've been able to find that time and use it that way. I also said it would be an opportunity to re-order our lives and get more in touch with what really matters: family; friends; truly intimate friendships that enrich; faith; hope; love. I hope that's happened, too. As we start to venture out more, as we yearn for things to "get back to normal" I hope they don't get back to a normal that diminishes our awareness of those things as we begin to get caught back up in so much frenetic activity. I hope we take a deeper awareness of our need for one another, our need to be close and to share life with one another at a very deep level, with us as we emerge from this stay-at-home time and move into a time that is more active and starts to be more "normal".

We do have work to do, goals to reach, life to get on with. There's going to be a lot to do; a lot of recovery, personally and economically. There are going to be a lot of people who need our help, our sympathy, our consolation, our encouragement. Let's make sure we're there for them. A lot of people have lost their jobs, many whose old jobs won't come back. We especially need to be there for *them*. Everyone will have suffered financially, our economy as a whole for sure. Ministry will go on and will be needed more than ever. Ministers are some of the few who will immediately have a lot to do and who will be taken well care of. Let's be grateful for that in a way that makes us more generous than ever with what we have to offer: the Word of God, the sacraments, and other kinds of ministry from people who really care; ministers whose hope is great enough that we will never be discouraged by the many needs of others, but stimulated and spurred on by them to bring Christ's healing love and helping hands to the service we are called to. COVID-19 and its particular risks are going to be around for a long time, so we're going to have to make sure we stay safe in necessary ways until science makes it possible for us to live more normal lives as soon as possible. But it's going to be awhile. May you have an enriching summer filled with many blessings even in the midst of these challenging times. As I look forward to seeing you in August, my parting words for now are: *Stay safe and stay healthy.*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. Phillip J. Brown, S.M." The signature is written in a cursive style with a small flourish at the end.