

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

Letters from the Park

Letter #2

Social Distancing

The Fourth Week of Lent

Dear St. Mary's Community,

I imagine you're all settled into your new normal living situations; comfortably, I hope, and without too many hitches. We're very settled in here now, there are eleven of us who remain at the Seminary.

We're doing our best to keep a regular schedule, more or less modelled on our regular seminary schedule, although a little simpler: Mass at 8:00 a.m. every day, Monday through Friday, Morning Prayer at 7:45 before Mass, and Evening Prayer at 5:15. We're also continuing to pray the Rosary on Sunday Evenings at 8:30 before Night Prayer at 9:00. It's nice to have a sense of routine, especially in the midst of very irregular and unusual times. It relieves some of the sense of crisis, even though it is a crisis with real urgency to the exceptional measures that have been taken. By the same token, it makes one feel like "OK, we just need to hang in there and get through this and gradually things will get back to normal; the more we can preserve 'normal' the easier it will be to get through it and get back to normal when the time comes."

We've been asked to practice something completely new to most of us: social distancing. Or is it really something so new? It does involve physical distancing, which is something new for us, but I would argue that we've been practicing social distancing for a very long time now; that we are, in fact, much more "socially distant" than was the case years ago. Let me explain what I mean by that.

I've noticed for several years that all of the "social media" we use these days doesn't really make us closer, even though we've been fooled into thinking that it does. What it really does is enable each of us to construct our own private little worlds that we can control by giving attention to others or not with flip of a switch (or a swipe on a glass stream); by making ourselves available to others or not as we please in the same manner. We can give attention to one another on a glass screen while ignoring everyone else who is right there in front of us, often in ways that are actually quite rude and inconsiderate.

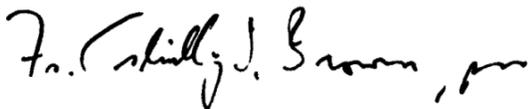
While we think our I-phones, and Facebook, and Twitter and all the rest are helping us stay close, the fact of the matter is by their very nature they put distance between us. We should make sure we're aware of that. I'm not implying they're bad things in themselves; in many ways they are very good. But they can also be deceptive, because they can make it seem like we are present to one another, when we are actually creating social distance that masks all kinds of things: what we're feeling in favor of what we're saying; what we're *really* feeling in favor of what we're portraying; open to all kinds of interpretation of what the other person is feeling or portraying, even what they mean to be saying, that leads to all kinds of mis-interpretation and misunderstanding.

Communicating through machines by way of electronic images is just not the same as the kind of give-and-take, intuitive understanding, and empathetic sharing that occurs when we are physically present to one another. Increasingly I've noted how people rely on electronic communication in favor of personal encounters, even when it would just as easy or easier to communicate face-to-face. I wonder why that is. Is it because it's just easier not to have to experience what someone else is feeling, instead only having to worry about what *I'm* feeling? Is it easier to only worry about getting my own point across, rather than having to contend with another point of view, and sit with it until our differences are mediated? Is it just easier to exchange information than to experience one another's presence, and experience life together in a prolonged way? I just wonder.

The ability to communicate at a distance through electronic media is going to be important for us during this emergency. There's no question we need to maintain physical distance to avoid transmission of the virus. Physical distance, yes. But maybe "social distancing" is just the opposite of what we really need. What we need is greater closeness socially, to recover the ability to enter into truly intimate relationships in which we share what we are really feeling in a way that allows us to feel for one another and with one another; in which we learn more and more and better how to truly share who we are, and to share of who we really are with others. Wouldn't it be ironic if the imperative of physical distancing is the very thing that leads us to rediscover our need for social closeness, helps us discover new ways of being close socially, sympathy for one another and empathy in the sharing of our lives and our experiences. While I do believe electronic media can help us rediscover those things, I don't believe that we will ever be able to experience them fully until we are in one another's presence, when we are also experiencing physical proximity. The ways we communicate now, while we can't all be physically present to one another or close, can prepare us for a deeper experience of shared life and intimacy when the opportunities return to be together, if we go about this in thoughtful, reflective and intentional ways.

The very heart of our Catholic faith is centered on presence; on the Real Presence of Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar, and in our own presence to one another; Jesus' presence to us in one another, and Jesus' presence in us who we make present to others. This is a very deep mystery, and a reality that is palpable for those who experience it through faith. Pope Francis talks about it as a theology of encounter; that the whole purpose of the Christian faith is to *encounter* Jesus, not just to know stuff about him. It is to encounter the living God in and through Jesus, Jesus through one another, and Jesus in the other.

For those of us who follow in the way of Jean-Jacques Olier, it is to experience Jesus first and foremost of all living in Mary. Let us never forget the importance of being truly present to, never socially distant from one another, for it is in and through that presence, for those who develop the right sensitivity to it, that we first experience that presence of God in our lives and in our community of faith that reaches its fullness in the Eucharist.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fr. (Schillj) J. Brown, OSB". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.