



Office of the President Rector

ST. MARY'S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY

Founded 1791

Letters from the Park

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.

Letter #4

April 5, 2020

Passion Sunday

The Measure with which you measure

Dear Seminarians,

I hope you are all safe and sound, settled into your living situation during this pandemic “stay-at-home” period, that you have established routines that give daily life some kind of normalcy as we wait things out. The fact of the matter is we in ministry *are* safe and sound; well taken care of, even during a pandemic. If anything, “stay-at-home” makes us even safer and sounder. Healthcare workers are on the front lines, but this time we're forced to remain in the rear. We ought to be thinking about that, to reflect on it. Others are much less safe and sound than we are; I think especially of the homeless, and increasingly of those who have been laid off. Just before the pandemic the U.S. jobless rate was at its lowest in 50 years, 3.5%, about where it has been since last September. (The Department of Labor started keeping data on unemployment in the 1940's; the very lowest was 1% during World War I.) In one week since the pandemic started jobless claims doubled; the unemployment rate is expected to be in double digits by the end of April. Such are the consequences of pandemic: a catastrophic health crisis, catastrophic unemployment; people losing income with which to pay bills and purchase the necessities of life.

Christians have, in a sense, made a bargain with priests, bishops, monks, friars and sisters and others whose living is provided by the Church: We'll support you and provide you with the necessities of life, in good times and in bad, so you can keep ministering to us and to those in need; so you can tell us the truth without fear of economic reprisals or a loss of livelihood; so you can live honestly and not have to make the kind of compromises the economic realities of life sometimes tempt or force people to make; so you can keep preaching the Gospel that encourages us to better behavior, even in difficult circumstances, that gives us hope and inspires us to strive toward the ideal. Please don't abuse that privilege. No doubt that's why it's so scandalous when it is abused, when clerics live in luxury and squander Church wealth as if it were their own. What a sacred trust: To honor the generosity of those who provide for us by being true to our vocation, true to the mission.

The stock market, too, has caused many to recoil with concern. From a Dow Jones high of almost 30,000 in February it has dropped as low as just over 18,000, and now hovers between 21,000 and 22,000. It's a bracing experience to lose 1/3 of the value of one's wealth in just ten days (at least on paper). People are scrambling to convert gotten gains to safer forms of wealth until it seems safe to entrust it once again to the risks of the market—not exactly gambling, but there are always risks involved. But the market always comes back, they say; some say it's going to come roaring back—for those who can wait, who don't have to convert gotten gains to ready cash to pay bills, to buy necessities, for food.

Many people today have retirement accounts, others have been fortunate enough to accumulate even greater wealth. All feel the impact of the economic downturn. It's wise to save for a rainy day, to “build bigger barns to store grain and other belongings” in order to prepare for the future. Now the rainy day has come. How what we have should best be used is not always an easy question to answer. A lot depends on how we understand what constitutes the most profitable use.

But what about those who live paycheck to paycheck when the paycheck is no longer coming, those soon to be in the double digits, much less those who live from hand to mouth (especially the homeless)? Waiting out the pandemic is a different matter for them; they can only wait so long, certainly not indefinitely.

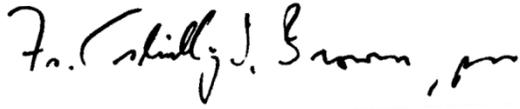
I do feel a little sorry for ministers right now (priests, deacons sisters, monks and brothers), not because they are threatened with living in want, relatively few are, but because generosity in helping others is their real wealth; being with people, consoling them, comforting them, laughing and celebrating with them. But we can't be with people now (oh, yeah, virtually we can, through electronic images, and electronically reproduced voices, but it's hardly the same). Not being able to be with people is our poverty right now. There's no way to save up for that kind of rainy day.

But whatever we save up for a rainy day, what's the best way to use it when the rainy day comes? To safeguard it so it can be used to produce even more when the rainy day passes? But what about all those who now are, overnight as it were, on the edge of desperation, and those who were already in desperate circumstances when this all began? I wonder what might be the best use to put riches to in these circumstances, however diminished they may be, whatever kind of riches they may be. Hold onto them for a less rainy day, or give even more generously to alleviate the want of those in desperate circumstances? I know the kind of returns riches can yield when held onto and wisely invested; I wonder what returns generosity might yield? Rainy day funds used not to maintain myself but to help those in real need. Do we trust God enough to be generous, even during tough times? Words keep ringing in my ears: *The measure with which you measure will be measured back to you.*

As for storing things in barns, “. . . *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.*”

And I think of that poor widow: “. . . *he noticed a poor widow putting in two small coins. He said, 'I tell you truly, this poor widow put in more than all the rest; for those others have all made offerings from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has offered her whole livelihood.'*”

With that widow in mind, should we not make up our minds and set our hearts to be as generous as we possibly can, trusting in a recompense from God that will be beyond all that we can ask or imagine?

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