



Office of the President Rector

ST. MARY'S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY

Founded 1791

Letters from the Park

Letter #8

May 3, 2020

Fourth Sunday of Easter

Opening Up

To the Larger St. Mary's Community: *Letters from the Park* are weekly letters to St. Mary's seminarians sent home during the Covid-19 emergency I would like to share with the larger St. Mary's community, friends and supporters of St. Mary's.

Dear Seminarians,

Everyone is talking about when things will start to open up again. Everyone wants to know when things will *be allowed* to open up again and we can start getting back to a more normal way of life. Official voices voice caution. Impatient voices speak menacingly about freedom and constitutional rights. Angry voices say they don't like to be told what to do. Worried voices remain silent. Planners talk phases. Reasoners watch charts—waiting for at least two weeks of flattened curve, fewer new cases, fewer deaths.

Here at St. Mary's we've formed a special committee to plan for re-opening. Impressive people: Jack Cavanaugh, Vice-Chair of our Board, concerned from very early on that everyone be kept safe, that we make the most prudent decisions; Dr. Kathy Getz, Dean of the Sellinger School at Loyola University of Maryland, a member of our Board; Christopher Thomaskutty former Baltimore deputy mayor of public safety and operations, now Vice President for Corporate Affairs and Chief of Staff at Mercy Health Services; Fr. Paul Maillet, Vice Rector; Fr. Gladstone Stevens, Dean of the School of Theology; Dr. Brent Laytham, Dean of the Ecumenical Institute; Betty Visconage, Senior Vice President for Administration and Advancement at St. Mary's, Vicki Semanie, Vice President of Finance, and of course myself. We've started thinking about the most likely and all the possible scenarios for August when the new seminary and school year is set to begin. No one knows enough right now, but we have some idea of what things may be like, so we need to plan. We hope everyone will be able to come back and we'll be able to have classes and engage in formation activities onsite; but no one is sure right now, so we have to plan. I'm optimistic that we will be able to return, but there will likely be special policies, like reasonable distancing, frequent handwashing and sanitizing, etc.

I was fortunate to have very good parents and grandparents. Not perfect parents or grandparents, but very good ones, every one of them. They made mistakes, but they overcame them. They had misfortunes and encountered tragedies; who doesn't at some point in their life? I think about

them a lot; every day; always have. I've always asked how they got past their mistakes, how they endured and overcame the misfortunes and tragedies, how they got through it all. In part out of curiosity, but also as a guide for living my own life. Some of their mistakes were serious, but they somehow overcame them. Some of the misfortunes heartbreaking, the tragedies crushing, but somehow they survived and came back from them, wounded but stronger in spirit and more determined than ever. So I've always asked myself, what qualities made that possible, allowed them to survive, and in fact thrive, to be positive people with optimistic outlooks who accepted life on its own terms and not only went along for the ride but rode the wave? After much thought and reflection, I've arrived at the following most important qualities: perseverance, and when necessary endurance; flexibility and adaptability; resilience, and most important of all faith. I could tell they knew they didn't have all the answers, but they had taken on responsibilities—work, family, a sense of owing something to the communities they lived in—responsibilities they took very seriously and to which they subordinated many of their own needs and desires. And it was thus they raised good families (not perfect families; we all made mistakes we had to overcome also) and they were always positive, optimistic and determined. Their attitude was “there's no challenge that can't be met,” which they passed on to us; no tragedy that cannot be endured, that one cannot come back from; no misfortune that can't be overcome; no triumph that shouldn't be celebrated; no life that shouldn't be lived to the fullest, optimistically, with verve and fervor, joyfully, and shared with others—with family, friends and community.

The key years in the lives of both my grandparents and parents were 1915-1945. Without the qualities that made them who they were, that made their generations what they were, they never would have survived, and in fact our country and the world would look very different today. They were the years of maturity and middle age for my grandparents, of youth, maturity and middle age for my parents. In the thirty years between 1915 and 1945 they experienced World War I, the world's first worldwide war, killing millions and crippling millions more; the Spanish Flu epidemic, rampant and violent organized crime in the twenties; economic crash and collapse in 1929 that went on for over ten years; the Dust Bowl Years (I remember Grandpa Brown talking about the “Dirty Thirties”; I asked him why he called them the Dirty Thirties; “Because they were dirty,” he said. “There was dirt everywhere from the dustbowl, but the politics were pretty dirty, too!”), caused we know now by over-cultivation during World War I when demand was high and prices for crops were good; then grasshoppers, like locusts, that devoured whatever crops were left, and any green thing sprouting from the ground (Grandpa told me about walking to the State Capitol where he worked and thousands of grasshoppers rising up from the enormous lawn in clouds, almost as thick and dark as the Dust Bowl clouds); the rise of fascism and the Nazis; then World War II, even more violent and destructive than the First, with far more deaths and disabilities—in the millions and millions worldwide; and then the bomb to end all bombs, the bomb to end the world, the first time humanity would have it in its power to destroy civilization and the world in less than an hour. All of this within just thirty years, not to mention the personal tragedies and challenges along the way; faced with optimism, determination, perseverance and resilience. But also all the advances of those years; the progress; the triumphs and the improvements to everyone's lives; the families they raised, the wonderful lives they lived. They endured a lot, everyone from those generations. But life went on with faith and determination, and there were many, many victories. Kind of puts things in perspective, doesn't it?

