



Office of the President Rector

ST. MARY'S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY

Founded 1791

Letters from the Park

Letter #9

May 10, 2020

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Getting Ahead of the Curve

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's watching the "curve" right now; wondering if the curve has flattened (there are encouraging signs that it has); trying to "get ahead of the curve", after feeling "behind the curve" for several months.

St. Mary's is doing everything it can to get ahead of the curve. This past week the Coronavirus Response Committee I mentioned in *Letter #8* met for the first time for almost two hours. The expertise and sound judgment I had hoped for in appointing those who were recommended to me was evident from the outset. Christopher Thomaskutty was especially helpful. St. Mary's closed down on March 16 asking seminarians, other students and staff to return home and work from there, as other educational institutions have done. Mercy Hospital and its healthcare system, where Christopher is Vice President of Corporate Affairs and Chief of Staff, couldn't do that; they had no choice; they had to keep working and figure out how in the midst of a highly contagious disease that was spreading quickly as a pandemic. As we all know, healthcare professionals are on the front lines of this battle, and it was apparent immediately how carefully and how quickly Christopher and the professionals at Mercy started adapting, strategizing, mobilizing, and making critical decisions about what is really needed to respond and what might sound good but does not really make things safer. There's a lot at stake, and it's important not to waste time or financial resources doing things that look or sound good, but don't really work. That's exactly the kind of thinking, the kind of expertise needed as we begin to navigate into the future.

As I said in my first letter, life is going to change. There's no going back to the way things were before March. We're in a new normal, and we need to adapt and use every bit of our creativity to fashion one that enables us to live humanly, to provide for everyone, and to move into the future with

confidence and optimism. *We can do this!* And there are a whole lot of really smart, very capable and creative people who are already helping us to do this. Christopher is not the only one. Every member of our Coronavirus Response Committee brings remarkable expertise, creativity and commitment to the task, and that's just at St. Mary's. That strengthens my own confidence that we're going to be ready for the new seminary year in August; that we're getting ahead of the curve.

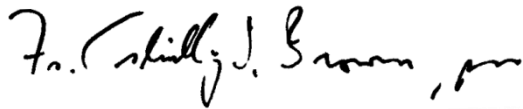
I've also been participating in weekly phone conferences with the Presidents of all of Maryland's independent colleges and universities (an organization called as MICUA—Maryland Independent Colleges and Universities Association) to discuss how each of us is responding to the emergency. Each of us has a unique institution with unique needs and challenges; but it's nice to know that we're all in it together; helping one another; sharing information and brainstorming solutions— together.

The reality of the human condition is that we spend most of our lives trying to get ahead of the curve, don't we? It's actually a theological principle that we're born "behind the curve" and have to find a way to get ahead of it. Remember that pesky old doctrine called "Original Sin"? It's a little more complicated than we often think of it, you know. Some have said it's the only Christian doctrine for which there is ample proof! But what it really means is that the human condition is not ideal. We are born into a situation that is fraught with challenges, that is hardly perfect, and that sooner or later involves suffering, and always leads to death. We avoid thinking about that, but it's true, and that's what religious-minded people, theologians, have thought about a lot from the earliest times and have come up with ways of explaining. For Christians and Jews it's that human beings are subject to some terrible fault that resulted in all of the suffering we see in the world, most of the evil, even death itself.

It's important, especially during Easter Season, to think a little more deeply about what the Christian message is really telling us; what it means by Resurrection and Christ as the Light of the world; a light that rises in darkness, in the darkness of sin, suffering, tragedy and death to restore hope; that enables us to believe that it's all worth it, because there's something much greater ahead, no matter what we have to endure in any particular time, the things we have to accept and endure about the human condition: A good reason to go to church (when we're able to again!) and to turn on the tv or the radio and listen to what good preachers have to say about faith, about the Christian faith and what it tells us about our lives, and how it sustains us through the great challenges of life with hope, faith, optimism and determination.

Do you remember that back in January and February it felt like we were really ahead of the curve? More people than ever had jobs. The stock market was at its highest ever. Yes, maybe politicians were making us miserable with their antics and squabbling, but nobody seemed to be too bothered by it; sadly, it's what we've come to expect from politicians, but times were good in any event, and we didn't have to pay attention if we didn't want to. Then, boom, like a thief in the night, life threw as a curve ball, and we were behind the curve again. Something so unexpected, so sudden: coronavirus! Not many people outside the medical-scientific community had ever even heard of a coronavirus before. Suddenly it's all we've been hearing about for over three months. With the swiftness of a tornado it leveled the economy, threw countless numbers of people out of work, and changed our whole way of life—in less than three months! Behind the curve again, waiting for the curve to flatten, trying to get ahead of the curve, wondering what's beyond the curve. Christians know what's at the end of the curve: the horizon, where light rises and will rise again; where light always

rises after we've made our way through darkness. For Christians it is a light that one day will never fade, for it is the very Light of Life we celebrate during this Easter Season: Jesus Christ risen from the dead; Jesus Christ, who overcomes sin and division, who heals wounds and forgives sins. Jesus Christ who leads us forward, in deep theological ways but also in the everyday, ordinary circumstances, challenges and decisions we have to make all the time as we try to get ahead of the curve. Jesus who leads us ahead of the curve, who leads us beyond the curve, into the horizon that helps us understand and experience that it's all worth it: the endurance, the perseverance, the suffering and even death—and the love that undergirds it all. Jesus Christ, the foundation and the goal of our faith, who sustains us through everything in this life as He leads us to life eternal. That's what we celebrate; that's what we believe; that's what gives us joy: not insubstantial, momentary happiness, but joy; even in the midst of life's greatest challenges; even when we're behind the curve, waiting for it to flatten, waiting to get ahead of it, waiting to get beyond it; moving forward toward the light of Christ who guides us.

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.