



ST. MARY'S SEMINARY & UNIVERSITY

Founded 1791

Office of the President Rector

Letters from the Park

Letter #1

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Baltimore: Roland Park Neighborhood

Dear St. Mary's Community

Who would have thought two years ago we would still be contending with a worldwide pandemic? Few, other than scientists, had ever heard of “novel coronaviruses,” much less COVID-19. It swept over the world nevertheless with astounding speed and devastation. We are now in a “third wave” (Omicron). How long will it last? Will there be more waves, more variants? No one can say for sure. One thing is certain, however: we’re all in a state of pandemic fatigue.

When St. Mary's went all online in March 2020 I started writing *Letters from the Park* to keep in touch with seminarians and faculty because of our physical separation and new virtual reality. When a “third wave” began I thought of resuming the *Letters*, not just to keep in touch, but as a way of reflecting on the impact of the pandemic on our lives; a longer-term effort to reflect on some more important things we might want to think about in the light of how our lives have changed. I enjoy writing and this is an opportunity to fulfill an aspect of ministry not always available to me as a seminary rector. Pastors are teachers, preachers and evangelizers who cultivate holiness. These letters are an opportunity to better fulfill my role as a pastor.

There have been many pandemics in history, at least five more devastating than COVID. A plague killed five million in the third century, in the sixth thirty to fifty million. The Black Plague caused over two hundred million deaths, more than one-third the population of Europe in the fourteenth century. Smallpox fifty-six million in the sixteenth, the Spanish Flu, a hundred years ago, forty to fifty million. AIDS twenty-five to thirty million to date, and COVID-19 five and a half million and counting. Though infrequent, pandemics have not been unusual. When they do occur, they cause people to ask profound questions about life and the human condition. They reveal just how fragile our existence really is; they bring us face-to-face with life’s big questions: What does it mean to be a human being, to be part of the human race? What is the meaning of suffering, evil and death, which human ingenuity and progress have not eliminated? What are our achievements really all about, acquired at so great a price? How can we contribute more to the advancement of society? What happens after our lives on earth end? These are questions the Church’s *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)* posed nearly 60 years ago.

Pandemics and other natural disasters can make us wonder if everything is coming to its inevitable end. Is it possible we may be living in apocalyptic times? The Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, once observed that a modern crisis is the extent to which people try to avoid asking the big questions by keeping busy, always distracted by other things. Yet, those questions are always present in the depths of our consciousness, however much we ignore them. A willingness to ask them, however, can lead to exploring the meaning of life in new ways. That's what Christianity did when it appeared on the scene over two thousand years ago, a time when the world as then known seemed to be falling apart. Christian faith offered a new and more hopeful way of understanding life. In contemplating the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, those who grasped its message came to realize and believe that the Kingdom of God had arrived and was breaking into human experience and human history. God's grace was present, and deeply felt; it sustained people through devastating events and great human suffering: truly Good News offering hope and the prospect of new beginnings, despite trials, tribulation, and challenging odds.

It doesn't take a pandemic or other natural disaster to raise questions about the meaning of our lives, a perennial question. Searing personal tragedies and large-scale devastation, however, bring existential questions to the fore; they need to be asked and answered. It takes courage to ask them and trust, above all, to seek answers.

Is the pandemic a sign of the end? Or does it perhaps signal that one world is ending and another being born? What if there are going to be another thousand, two thousand, or many thousands of years ahead for humanity? That is a more likely future. How should we think about what that means? Shouldn't we ask ourselves, "What kind of world, then, would I like to leave for those who come after us? What should we be doing now to bring a new and better world into being?"

Christian faith has everything to do with these questions. Do we not pray for the world "as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever"? Pandemics and natural disasters are a reality that will no doubt continue to occur from time to time. Experience confirms they don't mean *everything* will come to an end, just some things—even as others are beginning. Should we not be preparing for and creating that better world that is to come which will last long into the future?

Roman conquest ended the world of Ancient Israel just forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection. The Roman world was facing its demise as St. Augustine lay dying in Hippo in the 420's. Czarist Russia ended in 1917, its successor in 1989. In each case, the world did not end, just those particular worlds—as new ones emerged. I have always been impressed by how St. Augustine and his patron St. Ambrose addressed the decline of the Roman world they were so much a part of. It has been said St. Ambrose prepared the world of the Church for the darkness ahead as the larger culture crumbled. St. Augustine wrote a book—*The City of God*—which became a blueprint for the world to come: Medieval

Christendom. They focused on “the world to come”, planned, and prepared for that world by nurturing a new one, and with it, a new kind of culture.

I would like to suggest we may be at a similar turning point—not the end of the world, but the end of one world as another comes into being, one that we are going to have a lot to do with; one that will be very much influenced and fashioned by how we imagine it, and what we do to bring it into being. I would like to explore in the next few letters not just how the pandemic has impacted us, but also what our vision of the new world that is coming to be might look like, informed by the insights of our faith and grounded in its long tradition. I invite you to reflect on this with me, as we search for a common vision, rooted in the teachings and example of Jesus Christ, and nurtured by the wisdom of our religious tradition. Shall we reflect together and see where it leads?

F. Phillip J. Brown, Jr.