

An Open Letter to College Students

August 2006

WITHOUT A DOUBT

Bishop Thomas J. Tobin

Dear College Student:

Whether you are about to begin college for the first time or are returning to continue your studies, this is an important and challenging time in your life. On this occasion I'd like to share a few thoughts with you. I wish I could meet you personally, but that's not really possible. Nonetheless, I hope you will accept my reflections in the spirit they're given, a spirit of sincerity and love.

As you begin or continue your higher education, I hope, first of all, that you will be aware of and grateful for all the blessings you've already received from Almighty God. You live in freedom, in a nation where it is possible to pursue the education of your choice, to have your hopes and dreams fulfilled. God has blessed you with material prosperity, health, intelligence and talent. Chances are you've been supported by loving parents and surrounded by a family and lots of friends who really care for you. You've been given the opportunity to acquire a solid education that will serve as the foundation of your future success. (Now you'll find out why you spent all those hours learning reading and spelling, science and math!)

Perhaps most importantly you've been blessed with the gift of your Catholic Faith. Your faith has introduced you to God, enriched your life, made you a better person and given you a clear moral framework from which to make good decisions about life.

Now you must be prepared, perhaps for the first time in your life, to defend your faith. On campus and during your studies you will meet people whose values are very different than yours, or perhaps have no values at all. Some will question your faith, ridicule your faith and shake the moral and spiritual foundations on which you've built your entire life. When this happens, be confident, strong and faithful. Be proud of your Catholic heritage and remember that Catholic is something you are, not something you do!

It's essential that you continue learning about your faith so that you can give solid answers to the questions you encounter. And your faith needs to be lived every day if it is to survive this challenging time. Your new-found freedom presumes additional responsibility and that includes the regular practice of your religious faith.

So, be sure to attend Mass on Sundays and holydays and receive Holy Communion. God has given you 168 hours each week for your own use and asks just one of those in return. Make use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Good confessions will keep you on the

right path. Develop a personal prayer life that will keep you in touch with God every day and not just during final exams! Develop a personal devotion to our Blessed Mother and your patron saint. They will be faithful companions on your life's journey.

It would be very helpful for you to get involved in the local Catholic Newman Center or Campus Ministry at your college or university. There you will find other young people who share your values. The good folks there will really welcome your presence and encourage your participation. Also, stay in touch with your parish back home. You have lots of friends and spiritual support there too.

And speaking of values, hang on to those good Christian values you've learned at home and Church: respect for human life; integrity in your personal and public life; a commitment to Christian marriage and family life; concern for the poor, weak and disadvantaged; and the desire to be a compassionate, forgiving and peaceful person.

Scrupulously avoid the evil temptations that are part of society today, temptations that are especially attractive to young people. Avoid addictions - to drugs, alcohol, tobacco, gambling, money, work and the internet. They are false gods.

Refrain from sexual activity and relationships that are contrary to God's law and your Christian Faith. Sex is a beautiful gift of God, an expression of life and love so powerful that it is proper only within the stability of a sacramental marriage. Have good friends and surround yourself with people who share your values. Stay away from those who will lead you astray and pull you down. Again, remember that your new freedom is wonderful, but demands a renewed commitment to act responsibly.

Even at this time when you are rightly focused on your future, be generous, sharing your material, personal and spiritual gifts with others. Volunteer your time to help others, at school, in your community and for the Church. Prayerfully consider a life of service in the Church, particularly in the religious life or priesthood. It is a rich and fulfilling vocation and the Church really needs good young people like you to carry on its mission in the world.

A word about technology which is already a well-established part of your routine. On campus and in the classroom you'll be surrounded by the latest advances in technology and communications. (When I was in college it was an innovation for the school to have a computer, much less every student!) The increasing reliance on technology is fraught with danger, but properly used is a wonderful resource.

Even with the most advanced technology however, and perhaps because of it, you will have to work hard to become a good communicator. Learn to speak and write clearly and effectively; no machine can do that for you. Even more importantly, learn to listen to others, not only with your ears, but with your heart. Appreciate the diversity of other people and respect their points of view, but without compromising your own beliefs.

Remember that your education is a tool to prepare you for the service of mankind, not just a means of making money and accumulating material possessions. In the course of your learning you should discover that there are certain objective truths in life, concrete moral guidelines that are unchangeable. Not everything is open to your personal interpretation. Faith and knowledge go hand in hand. As Pope John Paul wrote: "Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth - in a word, to know God Himself."

So, dear friend, as you are about to begin or resume your college career, this very important chapter in the story of your life, you will have a very special place in my prayers. I hope you will pray for me once in awhile too!

Take full advantage of your college experience, learn a lot and have the time of your life. But stay grounded in the God who created you, has been good to you and someday will be your Judge. Remain committed to your Catholic Faith. Regardless of how much you accomplish in the future, you will be a better person if you live in faith.

Sincerely yours,

Bishop Tobin

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