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PASTORAL LETTER

A PASTORAL LETTER TO COLLEGE STUDENTS

September 21, 2017

Feast of St. Matthew the Apostle

Dear College Student,

As you begin a new year of studies, I have you very much on my mind and in my heart. This moment in our history is challenging us to search our souls and to choose between justice and prejudice, violence and peace, reason and emotion. The media have recently been flashing before our eyes the images of angry protests across our nation. When the city officials of Charlottesville, Va., the hometown of Thomas Jefferson, decided to remove a statue of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee from a downtown park, they ignited a nationwide argument about the propriety of honoring heroes of the South's confederate past. As a result of this controversy, a statue of Lee no longer towers over the city of New Orleans. And the limestone, almost life-size image of Lee no longer graces the entrance to the Chapel of Duke University in Durham, N.C.

Many adamantly protest any image that reminds them of a time when our national heroes did not respect the dignity of every human person, regardless of race or color. Will their protests bring down the statues of Jefferson who spoke against slavery while owning hundreds of slaves himself? Will Christopher Columbus and Ulysses S. Grant be exiled from New York? If so, then what are we to do with the stone statue of Margaret Sanger in the Smithsonian? Can we legitimately immortalize the founder of Planned Parenthood who was active with the Ku Klux Klan and promoted doing away with races she deemed inferior?

Do we simply erase our history? Do we choose to forget our past? Are we simply to replace what was with a revisionist's view of the facts? Stalin tried that. And, it doesn't work. The best solution to the social ills that still mar our national character can never be the destruction of our past, but the honest, reasoned understanding of it that inspires the effort to move forward.

As students, you are returning to your colleges and universities at a time when protests and counter protests, accusations of hatred and bigotry have made it difficult to listen to the voice of reason. And, at the heart of your studies, it is exactly reason that should be guiding you. But, irrational, angry icon-



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Iconoclasm not simply against statues but also against leaders is making that more difficult for you. Please allow me to offer some thoughts to help you make the best of your education at this particular time.

We are witnessing a great divide in the soul of America. It manifests itself in the angry mobs clamoring to sanitize our past. It stands unmasked in the way the media at times offers us a less than objective reporting of events. The divide is between facts and opinions, between truth and personally held beliefs. It is the divide between rational thought and biased emotion.

Tearing down statues and violent riots do not advance rational discourse. And, therein is the challenge you are facing: the need to stand apart from the loud shouts of bigotry, intolerance and hatred on any side of an issue and to think rationally. Is this not the very method used in your science labs and taught in your philosophy classes? Calm rational investigation, discussion, argumentation, and judgment is the gateway to truth. It cannot be replaced with emotion, vitriol or, worse yet, the opinion of the crowd.

According to Aristotle, one of the world's greatest philosophers, only humans are capable of thinking and acting according to well thought-out principles. Only humans are capable of taking responsibility for their choices. You alone are responsible for the truth you embrace or reject.

The need to belong, to be accepted, is a basic human need. Made to live in relationship with others, all of us have the intrinsic desire to be part of a community greater than ourselves. As a result, there can be the temptation for you as a college student to simply embrace the commonly held opinions on campus and thus be accepted. Furthermore, it is all too easy to sit in a classroom and to accept the opinion or judgment that a professor teaches without subjecting it to robust intellectual scrutiny. Please resist such temptations. You owe it to yourselves as thinking individuals.

Through his reading of the history of ancient Athens, James Madison, one of our Founding Fathers, warned about the inherent weakness of a direct democracy. He foresaw that the majority could force its interest over the rest, even at the expense of the common good. Please be aware that the majority may be the more powerful political party at a particular time in our history or the prevalent ideology present at your school.

Do not simply acquiesce and allow the majority to control your thoughts and behavior. Do not surrender your ability to think critically, to analyze facts and to make judgments. Francis Bacon, the English Renaissance statesman and philosopher, best known for his promotion of the scientific method, once said, "Critical thinking is a desire to seek, patience to doubt, fondness to meditate, slowness to assert, readiness to consider, carefulness to dispose and set in order, and hatred for every kind of imposture."

We are living at a time that is post-Christian. Many of the professors in our colleges and universities reject a Christian anthropology. They are intent on revising our understanding of what it means to be truly human. The human person is no longer seen as a creature of God, but someone of his or her own making. The present zeitgeist divorces the human person from the wise design of the Creator. An individual's preferences and choices have become the determining factor of happiness. Our courts and politicians are actively promoting this secular view of the human person. Please know that pandering to the positions of your professors, politicians or the majority opinion is simply a form of conformism that closes your mind.

In reality, the iconoclasm of our day that seeks to impose one way of thinking on you is an unhealthy distraction from intellectual honesty. Be patient with others, especially with those who disagree with you or label you unenlightened or intolerant because of your faith and firmly held principles. As Joseph Ratzinger, the future Pope Benedict XVI, once said, "God, who became a lamb, tells us that the world is saved by the Crucified One, not by those who crucified him. The world is redeemed by the patience of

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God. It is destroyed by the impatience of man.”

God has gifted you with reason for a reason. The rational search for truth, done in charity, will always lead to the Truth who alone can bring lasting happiness. You are adults. As children your parents taught you to safely cross the street by looking in both directions before you crossed to the other side. Look at all sides of every issue before you cross over from one belief or opinion to another. In the words of St. Paul, do not “be infants, tossed by waves and swept along by every wind of teaching...” (Eph 4:14).

As a young person belonging to the Catholic Church, you are part of a culture that spans the centuries and has been able to live under so many forms of government and persecutions. You are heir to a vast intellectual search for truth in every science. Galileo, the father of modern science; Copernicus, first to formulate a comprehensive heliocentric cosmology; Descartes, father of modern philosophy; the monk Mendel, the father of genetics; Pasteur, founder of bacteriology; and, the priest, Lemaître, the father of the Big Bang Theory — just to name a few. Your faith does not destroy reason. It guides and directs it, like a light shining through a fog.

Do not be covered into thinking that your faith does not matter. Your faith broadens your understanding and allows you to question and come to the full truth about yourself and the cosmos. Our secularized culture is like a swiftly moving stream, ready to carry you away. “A dead thing can go with the stream, but only a living thing can go against it.”

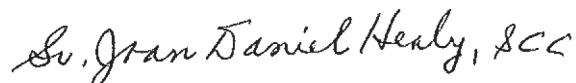
Today’s culture would have you conform to its idea of progress on the social and ethical issues we now face. I urge you to always use the gift of reason, while, at the same time, embracing the precious gift of being a Catholic. Both will enrich your lives with truth and freedom. As G.K. Chesterton astutely remarked, “[The Catholic Church] is the only thing that frees a man from the degrading slavery of being a child of his age.”

Be assured of my prayers for each of you. May the Lord keep you close to his Sacred Heart and fill your hearts with joy and peace.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



**Most Reverend Arthur J. Serratelli, S.T.D., S.S.L., D.D.
Bishop of Paterson**



**Sister Joan Daniel Healy, S.C.C.
Chancellor**