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PASTORAL LETTER

A PASTORAL LETTER TO COLLEGE STUDENTS

January 28, 2016
The Feast of Saint Thomas Aquinas,
Priest and Doctor of the Church



BISHOP
ARTHUR J.
SERRATELLI

Dear College Student,

For some time, I have wanted to write to you. I congratulate you on taking the path through higher studies to knowledge and wisdom. Whether you are moving toward a career in medicine, law or any other profession or whether you are seeking to learn a trade that serves the common good, all education is a gift.

College education, for its part, provides an immersion in the world of ideas. You have embarked on a most exciting adventure. The humanities, the sciences, the arts, philosophy and theology can open your mind to truth and expand your worldview.

I am sure you realize that college studies are just the beginning of your disciplined and serious striving to understand your place in this vast, beautiful universe. As Thoreau once said, “*As a single footstep will not make a path on the earth, so a single thought will not make a pathway in the mind.*” Lectures and personal study, together with research and dialogue, help you gather knowledge. But, to attain the wisdom needed for happiness in life, much more is required.

At every level of education, from freshman year to post-doctoral studies, you will find yourselves swimming in a pool of information. We live at a time when each day brings new discoveries that challenge our accustomed ways of thinking. “The saddest aspect of life right now is that science gathers knowledge faster than society gathers wisdom” (Isaac Asimov). Higher education is a marketplace of competing ideas. Knowing those ideas is commendable. Discerning the truth in those ideas births wisdom.

I am deeply concerned for each of you during your formative undergraduate and postgraduate years. There are few positions that carry as much influence and authority as that of teacher. Everyone has a point of view, based on his or her own experience. And, not one of us is without our own biases. Remember that college professors have the privilege of helping you to reach your own conclusions. They do not have the right to impose their own.

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It is hardly a secret, and I am sure your experience proves this true, that most of your professors espouse many of the attitudes of today's secular culture. Just to give you an example, 84 percent of college professors across the nation suffer no moral qualms about the taking of the life of the unborn and 67 percent support same-sex unions. As result, you will continually face statements that are not only inconsistent with your Catholic upbringing but hostile to it.

To be honest, Cicero was right when he said, *"The authority of those who teach is often an obstacle to those who want to learn."* The views of your professors may be so strong that they suffocate your desire to learn about your faith in a way commensurate with your academic studies. It is all too easy to let yourself be swept away by what is most popular. As Fulton Sheen astutely remarked, *"Dead bodies float downstream. It takes live bodies to resist the current."*

A grade school understanding of arithmetic hardly equips you with the ability to deal with the Newton-Raphson method for discovering the root of an equation. So also, a high school level understanding of your faith cannot help you navigate the shoals of secularism in higher education. In such circumstances, you will inevitably face the temptation to dismiss your faith as an outdated way of viewing reality.

As your bishop, I am deeply saddened to learn that nearly one-fourth of you succumb to this temptation. You even stop participating in Sunday Eucharist. In some cases, it is not your professors' dismissal of the relevance of faith that succeeds in dismantling your religious formation. Rather, it is the pressure of campus lifestyle and peer influence to experiment with drugs, alcohol and sex that distance you from the faith. So often the rejection of the faith finds its cause not in some philosophical disagreement with it, but in a lifestyle that does not embrace God's design for our happiness.

For some of you, tragedy strikes a serious blow to your beliefs. How can an all-good God allow a young person to die in a sports accident? How can he allow disease to rob us of our loved ones? The question of evil has perplexed the world's greatest thinkers. It need not be the end of your faith. For faith is more than just the ready answer to the mysteries of this life. Our faith is not a therapeutic deism that makes us always feel good. Our faith is a lived relationship with God within the Church. God is truly infinite. How can our finite minds ever grasp his infinite wisdom? Pride prompts us to think that we must have all the answers.

While facing the sad fact that some of you leave your faith behind when you cross the threshold of higher education, I have confidence that most of you can successfully navigate between the Scylla of anti-Christian hostility and the Charybdis of moral indifferentism. In your heart, you know the difference between good and evil. You may leave the public practice of the faith, but deep down, there will always be a yearning for something more than this world offers. Close to 80 percent of you willingly confess that you desire a spiritual life.

Our faith is both cognitional and relational. As cognitional, it offers us truths about God, the world and ourselves. Not having at the ready a quick defense of your faith when challenged does not mean that your beliefs are indefensible. Do you not owe it to yourself to keep learning about your faith? Why cut yourself off from a stream of tradition that has nourished and inspired many people like the third order Dominican Copernicus, proponent of the heliocentric model of the solar system, the Augustinian friar Mendel, the founder of the modern science of genetics, Lavoisier, the father of modern chemistry and the Belgian priest Lemaitre, founder of the Big Bang theory? And the list of great scientists who were devout Catholics continues!

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Our Catholic faith can never be compartmentalized. It is a comprehensive worldview. It speaks to every area of knowledge. The truths of the faith are the light that can aid science, psychology, sociology, law, ethics, economics, and even politics along the path for the common good. St. Augustine had a point when he said, “*Do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that thou may understand.*” Hold fast to your faith and you will come to a deeper and more lasting understanding of life.

Our faith is not simply believing something. It is relational. It is believing in Jesus as our Lord and Savior. We believe first and foremost in the person of Jesus who has come into the world to be the Truth, the Way and the Life. You are involved in many relationships in college. Not a single one will grow if neglected. Neither will your relationship with Jesus grow unless you spend time with him, listening to his word in Sacred Scripture, speaking to him in personal conversation every day, belonging to a parish or Newman center and receiving the Sacraments regularly. You are responsible for your own faith life. Faith is a gift. It is given in Baptism. It can be lost. And, what a loss!

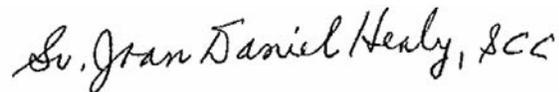
Your parents and family want the best for you. As your bishop, I do as well. I want you to find your way in life and come to the eternal life which God gives us in Christ. Yes, I know it is hard at times to believe. It is hard, also, to love. As Pulitzer prize winner Anatole France once said, “*You learn to speak by speaking, to study by studying, to run by running, to work by working; in just the same way, you learn to love by loving.*” And, I would add, “*You learn to believe by believing!*”

You are in my prayers, especially at the altar. Remember questioning and doubting the faith are signs of growth. May you never stop growing in the irreplaceable gift of your faith lived out in the Church Jesus himself founded!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+ Arthur J. Serratelli". The signature is written in a cursive style with a cross at the beginning.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sr. Joan Daniel Healy, S.C.C.". The signature is written in a cursive style.

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