



DIOCESE OF PATERSON

Diocesan Center
777 Valley Road
Clifton, New Jersey 07013

(973) 777-8818 Fax (973) 777-8976

Office of
THE BISHOP

PASTORAL LETTER

A PASTORAL LETTER TO COLLEGE STUDENTS

Feast of St. Matthew the Apostle
21 September 2016

Dear College Student,

I want to take the opportunity at the beginning of a new academic year to write to you as your bishop. I am very proud that you have chosen to continue your pursuit of truth at the university level. The time spent in undergraduate and graduate studies is a time of growth and change. More than just providing you with the skills and knowledge necessary for whatever profession you choose, a college education forms you intellectually, assists you in discovering your personal identity and helps you grow into a mature individual who contributes to the common good.



BISHOP
ARTHUR J.
SERRATELLI

No longer in the haven of your family, you will be drawn in one direction or another by the many cultural currents of our society. One of the purposes of higher education is to enable the student to examine the world critically so that the merely fashionable is separated from enduring truth. Today's secular humanism places a high premium on freedom, on tolerance and the total self-sufficiency of the human person. You are not left alone to face these ideas. You have been given the precious gift of faith that can guide you in your search for truth and happiness.

Your college years are the laboratory in which you are set free to experiment with different ideas and values. Alcohol, drugs and sex will present themselves as ways to liberate you from the moral restraints placed upon you since your childhood. As a student, away from your parents, it is easier to go along with everyone else. Stand on your own. "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment" (Ralph Waldo Emerson).

As adults, you are now responsible for your own choices, ideas and actions. Morally good choices bring their own reward. They bring peace to our conscience and harmony into lives. Morally wrong choices inevitably bring guilt and harden our hearts. "Happiness is not a reward; it is a consequence. Suffering is not a punishment; it is a result" (Robert G. Ingersol).

Confronted with the inescapable diversity of beliefs, worldviews, life-styles and moral choices, you are counseled to be tolerant. The United Nations' 1995 Declaration of Principles of Tolerance defined tolerance as the "respect, acceptance and appreciation of the rich diversity of ...ways of

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being human.” Tolerance, as so defined, requires that we accept the convictions of others as true as our own. However, this is not tolerance. It is acquiescence.

Many people do not share our Catholic values and beliefs. Tolerance means that we live with them in mutual respect and understanding. You have rightly been taught not to be judgmental of others. But, this hardly means, that, in the name of tolerance, you are not to exercise any moral judgment at all. Do not let our culture’s deifying of tolerance demonize you when you have the courage to stand up for moral principles and the fortitude to live according to them. Never compromise the true and the good.

In your college lectures, you will hear again and again, like a fugue in a musical composition, the idea that the human person is supremely self-sufficient. The late Harvard paleontologist George Gaylord Simpson said that “Man stands alone in the universe, a unique product of a long, unconscious, impersonal, material process with unique understanding and potentialities. These he owes to no one but himself and it is to himself that he is responsible.” Such thinking is the logical conclusion to the Enlightenment that exalted reason to the exclusion of faith. Man now reigns supreme on the throne vacated by God.

In such an intellectual environment, you will ask yourself, “What do I really believe?” “Does God even exist?” “Is he just some remote force that spun the cosmos into existence or is he truly the personal God of the Bible?” “Is my Catholic faith viable anymore?” Questioning and doubting are part of the reality of being who we are, mortal beings with a desire for something more.

Science constantly asks questions about our knowledge of the empirical world in order to arrive at some new insight or understanding. For many of you, the constant questioning and doubting of the scientific mindset will inevitably spill over into your faith. And this, too, is part of your college experience. Do not be afraid. Doubt is not a stumbling block; it is a stepping stone for faith. “Faith which does not doubt is dead faith” (Miguel de Unamuno).

Your professors will prod you to think, to speculate and to form your own philosophy of life. Some will make you question and doubt what you have learned about your faith. Do not try to go through college with the knowledge of your faith that you acquired in grade school or high school. Take the time to seek out the answers commensurate to your level of education. And, remember as the poet Tennyson would say, “There lives more faith in honest doubt, believe me, than in half the creeds.”

So often we can deceive ourselves into thinking that, if we cannot prove God or understand his ways, we are free to jettison our faith. God is mystery. He is beyond our limited ability to grasp. Even in revelation, God remains concealed. Know this: “that both the scientist and the believer can never be absolutely sure of their position... Anyone who makes up his mind to evade the uncertainty of belief will have to experience the uncertainty of unbelief...” (Joseph Ratzinger, *An Introduction to Christianity*, p. 45).

Great saints have lived with doubt. Prior to her death, St. Therese of Lisieux kept thinking, “It’s all a dream, this talk of a heavenly country, of a God who made it all, who is to be your possession in eternity!... But death will ...only mean a night darker than ever, the night of mere non-existence!” For eighteen months, she believed without seeing, hoping even in the darkness, with no sensible experience of the reality of God. St. Teresa of Calcutta lived in such darkness for fifty years!

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Even the first disciples of Jesus had to face the darkness of doubt. Right at the very moment when the Risen Lord appeared to them on a mountain in Galilee, even then “some doubted” (Matthew 28:17). Faced with the divine, we need humility. Being fully human means never fully knowing. It means living with the discomfort of doubt.

God has left his fingerprints on the beauty and the order of creation and in the love in our hearts. But, there are still those shadows of evil and death that cloud our vision. “In faith there is enough light for those who want to believe and enough shadows to blind those who don’t” (Blaise Pascal). Any proof for the existence of God is only a road that leads you to him, but you can only take that road in faith.

Our faith is more than the sum of beliefs listed in the creed. Faith is our personal relationship with Jesus, the Son of God whom the Father sent. Faith is the surrender of our lives to Jesus, our Savior and our Lord. As Savior, he frees us from our sins and, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, empowers us to love. As Lord, he calls us to commit ourselves totally to him.

Never stop learning about Jesus and what he teaches through his Church. Make the time. But this is not enough. Knowing Jesus as an historical figure is just the beginning. I urge you to know Jesus as Risen and alive. That is what real faith is.

As you come to know your friends by speaking with them, so you come to know Jesus by your ongoing conversation with him. That is prayer. Pray often and anywhere. And, just as with family and friends, you deepen your love by sharing together at table, so too with God, you grow in your relationship with him at the Eucharist. Let Jesus be the Lord of your life.

I hold each of you dear in my prayers, especially at the altar. You have a noble calling as a Catholic. Don’t give up prayer and attendance at the Eucharist. Never stop growing in the irreplaceable gift of your faith lived out in the Church Jesus himself founded! You are God’s gift to our society.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

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

*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*