

ALUMNI DAY – 2020

Each year Saint Mary's invites us to gather for these Alumni Days. Without a doubt we will hear the words, "Welcome Home!" But this year our Alumni Days do not follow our customary practices. This year's Alumni Days, this year's homecomings, are different – primarily because they are virtual, like almost everything else these days. Yet your homecoming this year is no less significant for us here at St. Mary's. We are truly pleased to welcome all of you, most especially those of you who are celebrating special anniversaries – like Bishop Malooly and his classmates celebrating their 50th anniversary of ordination. Today we are praying for and thanking God for all our Alumni, ordained, married and single from St. Charles, Paca Street or here at Roland Park. You are all members of the St. Mary's family. Some of our family, your friends and brothers, that you sat with in chapel, are now at rest in our heavenly home. We remember them as well today, with prayerful esteem and heartfelt gratitude.

I have heard it said there are two kinds of people in the world: those who attend class reunions and those who don't! For those of us who do, what brings us back? Why would we even return? The most frequent answer to that question and the most honest is that we get to see old friends, the men we grew up with, the men who supported us in our formative years. To my mind that is a good enough reason to return. But I'd like to think there is something deeper going on as well.

Perhaps some reflections on Mary, our *Sedes Sapientiae*, the patroness of this seminary can help us fill out this picture.

When you enter the seminary building here at Roland Park, the first and most striking image you see is the beautiful statue of *Sedes Sapientiae*, Our Lady Seat of Wisdom. Our patroness stands there as if to welcome us home, closer to her beloved Son. It is the image of Mary and her Child that anyone who has spent even a day in a Sulpician Seminary is surely familiar with. Each of us could say rather playfully that *Sedes*

“hung out” with us in our seminary days. For as you surely remember she literally “hung out” on the wall of every seminarian’s room on all our campuses, as she still does today.

From my earliest days here at St. Mary’s I was struck by the beauty of our *Sedes* statue. Even now 50 years later, I am still intrigued by the fact that a human artist could capture so effectively in cold hard stone such warmth, tenderness and silent devotion between Mother and Child. The intimacy of that relationship is fundamental to the French School of Spirituality and to the Sulpician Liturgical Memorial that we celebrate today: The Inner Life of Mary. The closeness of that relationship is captured as well in Father Olier’s prayer: “Oh Jesus, living in Mary, come and live in your servants.” This closeness to Jesus has been what formation here at St. Mary’s has been about since 1791.

Now let us not forget that today is also designated by the Universal Church as the memorial of Pope St. John Paul II – a contemporary saint who taught us in so many ways to nourish a closer relationship with Jesus. Just two weeks ago we marked the 25th anniversary of his prayerful visit to St. Mary’s and this revered chapel of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple.

The Gospel passage today further highlights the close relationship between Mary and Jesus. Luke describes what we know as one of Mary’s seven sorrows, the “Loss of Jesus in the Temple” – what fear and pain that experience must have brought to a devoted mother’s heart. Then how distressing it must have been for Mary to hear Jesus say, “I must be in my Father’s House.” With those words, Mary had to realize that future separation from her Son was inevitable. Then Luke adds, “His mother kept all these things in her heart.” Clearly, *Sedes Sapientiae* would earn the title, *Mater Dolorosa*. Mary’s inner life was to be engulfed in sorrow because of her unique closeness to Jesus.

Our Holy Father Francis can help us shed some light on the deeper, spiritual significance of our Alumni gatherings and why we return to our Alma Mater.

In one of his Easter homilies, Pope Francis spoke of the need for all of us to return, to return to our beginnings, to return to our own personal Galilee where it all began – where we first realized that Jesus loved us unconditionally and was calling us to follow him. The Holy Father preached:

“This is not to go back in time; it is not a kind of nostalgia. It is returning to that first love, in order to receive the fire which Jesus has kindled in the world and to bring that fire to all people to the very ends of the earth.”

It is to return to that first love, to rekindle the fire!

Sedes Sapientiae is our foremost model of closeness and intimacy with Jesus. It is that closeness to Jesus that we, as seminarians, strove to nourish here at St. Mary's. It was in the intimacy of that relationship that we came to understand the call of Jesus in our lives. And today it is still our beloved *Sedes* who beckons us to return home, to return to the Galilee of St. Mary's to deepen our relationship with her Son.

A few years ago, I was visiting in a parish where an older retired priest, an Alumnus of St. Mary's was living. When he found out I was on the faculty here he began to recall his days here, naming Sulpicians that I knew only from stories I had heard from my first pastor. After a few minutes of conversation, the old priest invited me to follow him. He led me to his office and paused at a *Sedes* statue that was placed on the corner of the credenza behind his desk. He spoke only two or three more sentences, then he fell into silence. We stood there in silence for two or three minutes. From our subsequent conversation, I realized that for this old man that was a moment of return, a virtual visit to the beginnings of his formation for priesthood, a virtual visit to St. Mary's. I remember a

remarkable thing about that experience. Although I knew little or nothing of the St. Mary's the old priest described, I felt a kind of communion, an affinity with him in our shared spiritual and vocational beginnings at St. Mary's. This had nothing to do with buildings, or campuses or programs or individuals. It was something more spiritually profound. It was a return to our beginnings and despite our many differences, we were having a virtual Alumni Day before the *Sedes* who had called us home again.

Certainly, things are different here at St. Mary's today. Almost everything has changed: the programs, the Sulpicians, the faculty, the staff as well as the students. Even the buildings have changed, some are closed, and some have been remodeled and re-purposed. To say nothing of the fact that, for the first time in 230 years, each seminarian will have his own bathroom and shower!

Yet despite so many changes, the *Sedes* who hung out with us when we were young still calls us to return, to return to the beautiful idealism and enthusiasm of our beginnings, not as nostalgia but as an experience of renewal of our closeness to Jesus and to a life of love and service.

Now it seems most appropriate in this Alumni Day Eucharist to thank God for the impressive seminarians here at St. Mary's today and for the faculty that provides for their formation. May these seminarians, like those before them, before them, come to an ever-deepening relationship with Jesus and an appreciation for the long tradition of priestly service that has been the hallmark of St. Mary's for more than two centuries.

My fellow Alumni, whenever we find ourselves praying before the *Sedes*, whether in the atrium of this chapel or simply in the memory of our hearts wherever we are, may we experience a virtual return to St. Mary's, a return to our shared Galilee, our shared beginnings. Where early on we nourished an intimate, close relationship with Jesus, Son of Mary. And may we regularly make our own the prayerful words of Fr. Olier: "Oh Jesus, living in Mary, come, live in your servants."