Dear Bearing Witness Students,

You had many other opportunities during spring break that would be more entertaining, enjoyable, restful, and leisurely. All the more reason for me to thank you for taking the "road less traveled" and to choose instead to journey to what is arguably a place where evil once held sway unopposed and unabashed. Unless you are entirely devoid of sensitivity, compassion, and a profound sense of justice, which you are not, you will not return to Marist the same as when you left. How you will be changed will be a work of the Spirit who will direct your gaze, inspire your thoughts, prick your consciences, and ignite your passions to serve all that is good and noble. You cannot do that unless, at the same time, you commit yourselves to oppose that which produced so much misery and ruin which, even now, has touched your soul and wounded it.

Of all the arguments against the belief in a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-loving, there is one that is admittedly the most troubling and challenging. It is the existence of evil. Evil, at its core, is mysterious, and so is grace. Our limited human minds will never fathom either this side of heaven. When we are profoundly touched by one or the other here on earth, the best we can do is be silent. I suspect silence has or will befriend you during your trip. I urge you to welcome this new companion into your lives and to make room for it since God whispers to us in the depths of our being. Only silence can magnify such divine inspirations so that we can hear them.

If you are still with me and if I have not put you to sleep, I would like to share two thoughts with you. The first is this. It is impossible not to stand among the buildings of Auschwitz and not find yourselves transported through time and standing before Jesus hanging on the cross at Calvary. You see, the evil that put innocent men, women, and children into the gas chambers is the same evil that put Jesus on the cross. And Mary, the mother of Jesus, his first disciple and patron of this school, has brought you here for a reason. She wishes to teach you something about how a disciple of her Son handles those moments when injustice and violence appear to win the day and when our best efforts to oppose them are for naught.

A Catholic spiritual writer, Fr. Ronald Rolheiser, OMI, offers a very astute insight from his reflections on Mary standing at the foot of the cross. In his article "Mary Under the Cross," he comments. "In the Gospels, Mary is the next important person to watch after Jesus. She is the model of discipleship because she gets it right, and she gets it right under the cross."

He reflects on the significance of her standing as opposed to lying prostrate. "Prostration, in this situation," he writes, "is weakness, collapse, hysteria, resignation. In the Gospels, 'standing' is the opposite, a position of strength."

While standing at the foot of the cross, Mary could not stop what was happening. Fr. Rolheiser observes, "But she could stop some of the hatred, bitterness, jealousy, heartlessness, and anger that caused it. While it is important to throw ourselves in the face of injustice and to try to prevent it, the reality is that there will be times when darkness will have its hour, and all we can do is stand under the cross. Mary helped stop the bitterness by refusing to give it back in kind, transforming it rather than transmitting it, swallowing hard, and (literally) eating bitterness rather than giving it back…" That is how evil is defeated: by refusing to perpetuate it. That is why the cross for us is a sign of victory and not defeat because the resurrection of Jesus puts all questions to the contrary to rest. Think about that the next time you feel tempted to answer insult with more insults, taunting with more taunting, nastiness with more nastiness.

The second thought is this. You are familiar with the words Jesus says to Peter, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock, I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail

against it." (Matthew 16:18) When you see the power of evil at work in our world, it is easy to feel that it is on the march and advancing as if it were an unstoppable force.

Jesus sees things differently. The Church, meaning his disciples filled with the Holy Spirit and committed to patterning their lives after his, is the unstoppable force for good in the world. Not even the gates of hell can withstand the power of God when the Church, united with people of goodwill everywhere, is on the march. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said it best, "The moral arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." I also like this quote from Fr. Maturin, "Sin is always bad, but we must never underestimate the power of good because we realize the power of evil." You hear in their words confidence in a future victory that will be complete and final, even if darkness will have its hour in the present moment.

Remember those words when you walk among the buildings at any of the concentration camps you will visit. Remember those words against the backdrop of Hitler's words predicting that the Third Reich would last a thousand years. It lasted 12 years, but 12 horrible years nonetheless. Remember those words and put them into practice the next time you see a fellow student being bullied with no one to defend them but you. After all, the victims of the concentration camps were the victims of bullying on a massive scale. The evil of Auschwitz can cast its shadow beyond that place and time, even darkening the classrooms and hallways of our school. That is, of course, if you allow yourselves to be cowed into silence and inaction. That is what happens when people underestimate the power of good because they realize the power of evil.

Well, I must have sent some of you to sleep by now. Should that be the case, I am sure you need the rest. If my words served that purpose, you rest with my blessing and appreciation for having taken the road less traveled and one that may lead you on a path where you will find your purpose in life. Wherever you go, know that you go with God. Seek to serve God's purposes. Live your lives bearing witness to how evil can be defeated and goodness is on the march with such force and determination that not even the gates of hell can prevail against it.

With kindest, personal regards, I am,

In the name of Mary,

Fr. Bill Rowland, S.M.
President – Marist School