Fr. John Walls, S.M. spoke at the Baccalaureate Mass before his return to New Zealand. He shared with the graduating seniors how his senior class was very close. They had promised each other that when they came together for reunions or if they should happen upon one another in the coming years, they would ask themselves three questions: Have you kept the faith? Have you served? Have you stayed connected? These questions served as a banner or flag to identify their class and make them distinctive. These questions would help to rally each other to form their values and to live their lives so that people would take notice and follow their lead as if following a standard bearer into battle. He challenged the graduating class from Marist to make those questions their own. He warned them not to be surprised if he asked them those three questions when they returned to Marist and visited him: Have you kept the faith? Have you served? Have you stayed connected?

I promised Fr. Walls that as the alumni chaplain, I would pick up that banner, present it to each graduating class from Marist, and ask that they carry it with them, holding it high for all to see. Let's take a quick look at each of them.

Have you kept the faith?

The evangelist Luke pictures Jesus as resolute and determined to make his way to Jerusalem even though he knew he would be crucified there. For Luke, Jerusalem is important to Jesus and the Church. Jerusalem is the place where Jesus died on the cross. Jerusalem is the place where Jesus rose from the dead. Jerusalem is the place where the Holy Spirit came upon the disciples. If the disciples of Jesus are serious about following Him, they should always be headed toward Jerusalem.

However, the two disciples in the Gospel are going away from Jerusalem and to a small town called Emmaus. That is not a minor detail for Luke. That is his saying that these disciples were going the wrong way. How could that be?

Archeologists have learned that a Roman legion was garrisoned there. So what, you may ask? Well, symbolically, the Roman legions represent a mentality, a mindset that was opposed to the mentality of the cross. The Roman legions symbolized the use of power or force that was brutal, domineering, and coercive. Using today's language, their banners or flags would have had slogans such as: "It's my life, and I'm in charge of it." "It's my way or the highway." 'I'm #1, and you aren't." 'Might makes right." "The end justifies the means." "What God?" and "I don't go to Church. There's nothing there for me."

These two disciples on the Road to Emmaus were leaving Jerusalem because there was nothing in it for them. They were demoralized and dejected by Jesus' death on the cross. They saw no value in staying in Jerusalem.

Whenever the Christian community makes their way to worship on Sundays, to church services if they are Baptist or Methodist, or Presbyterian, or to Mass if they are Catholic, they are making their way to Jerusalem. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is brought forward in time and into the present whenever we celebrate the Mass. The Risen Lord is present to us: in the assembly through the readings of the scriptures, the homily, and in a unique way in the consecration and Holy Communion. The Risen Lord is as present to the believing community as he was to the apostles when he suddenly and dramatically appeared in their midst when they hid in the upper room in Jerusalem. After the church service or the Mass, the believing communities are formally dismissed and sent back into the world, propelled by the same Holy Spirit who, at the first Pentecost in Jerusalem, propelled the disciples to leave the safety of the upper room in Jerusalem and to go to the ends of the world proclaiming that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The point I want to make is this. If you are a Baptist, be the best Baptist you can be. If you are a Methodist or Presbyterian, then be the best Methodist or Presbyterian you can be. If you are a Catholic, be the best Catholic you can be. And that means worshipping on Sundays. Let me be blunt if you find yourselves regularly not making your way to Church or Jerusalem on Sundays. That is a sign that your lives are headed in the wrong direction. You have lost your way.

You might say, "I get nothing out of church or the Mass," echoing the two disciples making their way to Emmaus because there was nothing for them in Jerusalem. Well, let me name those demons for who they are. Their name is Legion. They also called excuses!

Have you served?

Marist School puts a high priority on having our students engage in many service projects and mission trips. Why do we do this?

Maybe some of you have brought food to the Center Presbyterian Shelter homeless men on one of those Friday evenings assigned to Marist. I was there one evening and asked one of the homeless men which shelter he preferred. He said the Center Presbyterian Shelter. He said it was because here they were treated like human beings. He was referring to his interaction with our students and the Marist dads who stayed overnight in a supervisory capacity. After the men were served their meals, our students and parents would join them at their table and have their meals with them.

In the simple gesture of sitting down and conversing with a homeless man, these students and parents are doing what the Pope was doing when he kissed the feet of Aids patients or the face of a man covered with tumors. He and they remind the poor that they are personally known, loved, and cherished by God. It's easy to forget that when you are disfigured, messed up your life, can't find work, fallen on hard times, have no place to call home, and have no one to call a friend. I urge you not to be content with only contributing to charitable causes as important as that is. Make friends with the poor and those in need. Who knows? You may be surprised as to how unashamed they are to pray out loud, to quote the bible, to ask religious questions, and how stalwart they have been in maintaining their faith in God's providence for them. Who knows? Maybe they will be the ones to help you to find your way back to Jerusalem should you have lost your way.

Have you stayed connected?

One of the mothers of an alumna shared with me that her daughter's friends at college from other high schools noticed something unique about the alumni from Marist. Sometimes they would laugh and say, "Oh yeah, you are from Marist! We know. We know." What do they know? They know that there is a bond that connects Marist alumni. The care and concern that Marist alumni have for each other are eye-catching, like a banner that flies proudly in the wind for all to see.

Stay connected with your friends from Marist. Be good shepherds to each other. Watch over one another. If you see that a student from Marist is struggling somehow, reconnect with them. And if you are struggling, feel free to reconnect with your Marist teachers, coaches, counselors, campus ministers, and the Marist priests. Do you think that because you have graduated from Marist, we who have taught, coached, counseled, mentored, and prayed for you will now no longer care and even forget about you? No more so than a mother can forget her child (Isaiah 49:15) or a good shepherd will abandon his flock when danger threatens them,

I attended my first graduation ceremony here at Marist in 2010. While walking out from the Centennial Center, one of the teachers turned to me. She had tears in her eyes. This had been her first year teaching at Marist. The previous year, she had taught at another high school. She said to me. "I have never seen a graduation like this before. The students couldn't wait to leave my former school, and the teachers were glad they did. Here, the students love Marist, and the teachers love the students." That is so true. Please don't forget that. Don't be strangers to us.

Stay connected to us at Marist, to each other but don't stay connected only with your friends from Marist. We expect you to make new friends with all kinds of people.

This morning, I am keeping my promise to Fr. Walls, and I present the banner on which three questions are written. They are meant to rally each of you to remain faithful to your values and live your lives so that people will notice and follow your lead as if following the standard bearer into battle. Remember these three questions whether you attend Georgia Tech, Georgia State, Boston College, Auburn, or Alabama.

Class of 2015, for one, last time, I will ask you the three questions. I want your response to be so loud that you raise the roof of this newly renovated chapel and cause us to renovate the top again. I want your response to be so loud that the students and teachers in the St. Peter Chanel Building, the Ivy Street Center, and Centennial Center will stop what they are doing, look at each other, and ask, "What was that?" I want your answers to be so crisp and sharp that you sound like a flag snapping in the wind.

The third question is: Have you stayed… connected?
The first question: Have you kept the…faith?
The second question is: Have you… served?

Well done!

As Fr. Walls would say, "Good on ya!"