



## LEADERSHIP SOCIETY DECEMBER UPDATE

You are receiving this letter because you are a member of Saint Mary's Leadership Society, a family of givers who generously contribute \$1,000 or more annually to the university.

Greetings!

As my family prepares to celebrate Christmas, I am nearing the completion of my first year as provost and dean of faculties at Saint Mary's. Last January, Father James Burns invited me to serve this community, and I have been warmly welcomed. While this moment is riddled by the difficulty of economic conditions facing higher education, I am impressed by the heroic efforts of Saint Mary's staff and faculty to navigate these troubled times, all in service to our students. So much good work is done by the people of Saint Mary's.

Our academic goal is to increase enrollment through programs that are nationally recognized and regionally dominant. What makes Saint Mary's special is our dedication to the student as a whole person in the pursuit of truth. Saint Mary's must offer distinctive programs, aligned to our faith-based mission. As a Catholic university, we must lean into our Catholic tradition. Catholic identity enables us to distinguish Saint Mary's as a place where students can encounter God and explore what it means to be in relationship with God. "What is at stake is the very meaning of scientific and technological research," wrote Saint John Paul II of the urgency of a Catholic education, "of social life and of culture, but, on an even more profound level, what is at stake is the very meaning of the human person."

Catholic identity, when properly understood, is not a political position or ideology; thus, it is neither liberal nor conservative. Rather, it is shown in how a university positions itself in relationship to the truth. As a Catholic institution, professors and students ask deep questions together and seek answers about the meaning of life. A Catholic university helps students understand their roles and their importance — in society and within their families and communities — as it strengthens the bonds between students. As a Catholic university, Saint Mary's engages with the struggle of our students (whether they be material, financial, cultural, social, or spiritual), and we offer students answers that contribute to their well-being. We offer a profound respect for human freedom and for each other.

Our Lasallian Catholic identity inspires an intense love for life. I have met alumni, who after many years, still appreciate the sense of spirituality that the Christian Brothers nurtured among them. They live daily the Christian Brothers' admonition, "Let us remember that we are in the holy presence of God." In this context, our dignity does not depend on any social construct or criterion. With Christ, we see each person's dignity as astonishingly great. We are equal to each other, created in the image and likeness of God. Respect for each other is for us a moral imperative.

Concerning our academic initiatives, our Catholic identity shows up in new projects of our university. One strategic priority is character and virtue formation, being led by Dr. Matthew Gerlach, vice president for character and virtue. To serve the evolving needs of future students, Saint Mary's is exploring a new undergraduate major in Catholic education, as well as a cluster of engineering programs, a master's program in clinical psychology, and enhanced online and Minneapolis-based bachelor completion programs.

Our university must be able to respond quickly to the needs of students with dynamic program planning. Father Burns is utilizing a recent gift from the Slaggie Family for innovative, faith-based education to navigate, adapt, and overcome the challenge of declining credit hours in our graduate and professional programs. A special committee — the Financial Accountability and Strategic Thinking Task Force (FAST) — will focus on enrollment strategies and conduct an intensive review of the current and future state of our graduate and bachelor's completion programs. As provost, I serve on this task force to establish metrics, accountability, and transparency for growth and to ensure that this investment reflects our Catholic identity.

Turning now to some of my background, for the last 20 years I have been in university administration, and before that I was a professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Theology in Houston. Prior to coming to Saint Mary's, I was the international director for the Expanded Reason Institute for the University Francisco de Vitoria in Madrid, Spain. My responsibilities included assisting a foundation at the Vatican on international projects related to faith and reason. My academic career continues to focus on the dialogue between faith and reason, the intersection of Christian faith and secular sciences in the pursuit of truth. I have been blessed that programs that I helped develop are now nationally or internationally recognized, and it was while traveling for some of these programs that I met Father Burns. In our conversations, we found a shared vision for Catholic education. Through this act of providence, I am blessed to join you as part of the Saint Mary's community.

As you and your families gather in this season of Advent, as we prepare to celebrate Christmas, I rejoice that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Christianity makes this astounding claim that 2,000 years ago a baby was born, a baby who is the Messiah. In our universe as a huge as it is, in a relatively small galaxy, in a nearly insignificant solar system, around a star that is unimpressive, on a little planet — something smaller than a grain of salt next to a large ocean of the universe — in a backwards corner of the world, came the Christ. In the midst of this collection of insignificance, this child is “the way, the truth, and the life” that opens the path to the infinite Love of the Creator God. We come to God through this intense love of Christ. Christmas is a most astonishing celebration. At Saint Mary's, we recognize that an infinite God is present in our humble lives, and we share this joy with our students and with you. Thank you for being part of Saint Mary's and a part of our Christmas season.

Live Jesus in our hearts, Forever!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Max Bonilla". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Max Bonilla, SSL, STD  
Provost and Dean of Faculties