

Fall Convocation
September 1, 2008
Rev. Michael C. McFarland, S.J.

Members of the Holy Cross Class of 2012, I am pleased on this occasion formally to receive you into the College community. We are tremendously excited to witness the amazing things you will achieve over the next four years.

You arrive here today full of questions, surrounded by new faces and unfamiliar buildings. There are, of course, the more immediate issues of making friends, establishing a comfortable routine, and figuring out where Beaven Hall is. There are also the bigger questions of how you will share your gifts and talents, how you will make them real and effective in the world, how you will build a life that is meaningful and significant for yourself and others.

Don't worry. You are not alone. These larger questions are ones young people have faced for centuries. This summer, you read "A Pilgrim's Journey: The Autobiography of Ignatius of Loyola," the founder of the Jesuits and therefore our spiritual forebear. The cover of the book is a painting of a man on a mule stopped at a fork in the road, arms extended, contemplating which path he should take. It is a wonderfully appropriate image, because not only was Ignatius' life shaped in a dramatic way by the choices he made; but his lasting influence has been based largely on how he taught others to make their own choices.

As you know, one of Ignatius's most significant choices occurred at Montserrat. At the shrine of Our Lady of Montserrat, Ignatius lay down his sword and shield at the feet of Our Lady and began his pilgrimage, a moment captured in a carving downstairs. It was a defining moment in his life, and one that would impact generations of men and women who would follow after him.

But even after that he had to make many practical choices on how to follow Christ. Early on a lot of them were ill-considered and led to setbacks on his quest. He learned from these mistakes as well, as a result of which he came to a much more thoughtful and sophisticated understanding of what it takes to make good choices. This process, which in Jesuit language we call discernment, is at the core of Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises*, on which Jesuit prayer is based. We use it also in our own retreat and spirituality program here at Holy Cross, especially its crown jewel, the five day silent retreat.

Discernment is meant to provide the two key elements needed for good decision-making: a clear and worthy sense of purpose and the freedom to pursue it.

First we need purpose. You can't choose the right path if you don't know where you are going. For Ignatius the ultimate goal was to "praise, reverence and serve God." Many of you will be able to identify with that because it is part of your tradition and you find it personally meaningful. For others, if that is not something you can relate to directly, you should see it as an invitation to understand and articulate what your ideal is, what gives your life meaning and purpose, what you find most worthy of your generosity and commitment.

Once you know where you are going, freedom is what allows you to stay on the path that leads you there. Sometimes people think freedom means freedom from constraint or authority. I am free if no one tells me what to do. That is the adolescent's view of freedom. True freedom is freedom from distractions. I am free if I am so in tune with my inner purpose that nothing can draw me away from it. Ignatius was well aware of all the seductions that can pull us off course. He had indulged in most of them at one time or another. Certainly the desire for money and material comforts can distract us, as can the desire to be popular and attractive. Not that any of these are necessarily bad, but they are at most the means to an end not the end itself. Sometimes we have to give them up to reach the ultimate goal. If we can't let go of them we will never get there. But even an idealistic attachment to self-sacrifice, if it becomes an end in itself, can distract us from our goal. Ignatius, soon after his conversion to following the poor and suffering Christ, lived a life of severe self-denial and almost killed himself in the process. He finally realized that even his penances were getting in the way of carrying out God's will, so he moderated his practices. Later he spent a fair amount of time cultivating wealthy friends, in part to get the resources he needed to do his work. Wealth and poverty were both gifts to be used in serving God.

You too will face many choices, especially at this stage in your life; and how you handle them will have a tremendous effect on your happiness and success. What kind of career are you interested in and how will you prepare for it? What will your major be? What courses will you take? Who will you take for your friends? How will you allocate your time? What will you do to relax? Will you use alcohol or drugs, and how much? What activities will you be involved in, and what will be your level of commitment? Whose advice will you listen to? How committed will you be to learning? Will you be faithful in carrying out all your responsibilities? Every day will bring new choices, choices that really matter. That is why it is so important that you develop an understanding and practice of discernment.

Essential to this whole process of discernment is developing a habit of reflection. That means always looking below the surface, seeking out the deeper meaning and significance of what is happening in your life and sorting out the many attractions, desires and feelings that motivate you. This practice of reflection is how you can keep your sense of purpose rooted in your consciousness and recognize what gets in the way of achieving it, so that making the right choices becomes instinctive. Like any good habit or capability, the power of reflection is built up through practice. It is important that you take advantage of some of the many opportunities you will have here to engage in reflective practices so that you build and strengthen your capabilities.

Your first steps in your journey will be shaped to a large extent by Montserrat. Our decision to name this first-year experience Montserrat was not coincidental. We really do hope that this is for you the beginning of a pilgrimage that takes you to new heights and gives you a new perspective on yourself and your world. The next four years will be transformative, helping to shape the rest of your lives. We ask you to reflect this evening on what it is you must leave behind to begin this journey. We are not asking that you leave your old life behind...your family, your friends from home—they will be important as you continue on your way, serving as cheerleaders, models and counselors as you encounter new questions and new decisions. But we do want you to leave behind those things that hold you back and prevent you from being your

best self. Maybe you need to let go of someone else's expectations of you, or the idea of who you think you *should* be, not who you want to be. You might let go of a mistake you made in the past, one that you haven't gotten past. It is time to begin a new part of your life. When you leave here tonight and place that stone on the altar, be mindful of what it is you are letting go of and leaving behind so that you can begin this journey free to find your path to realizing the great possibilities you have been given.

St. Ignatius, by mastering discernment and learning to follow God's will as it was manifest in his own experience and inspiration, went from being a minor footnote in the life of his family and neighborhood to being a major force in the history of Europe and the world. This invitation to inquiry, reflection and discernment that we offer you today is an invitation to live powerful lives, lives of real significance, like the generations of students who have occupied these seats before you.