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# FOUNDATIONS

## Saying Goodbye is Christ-like

BY TROY WOYTEK, CAMPUS MINISTER

*To love at all is to be vulnerable....If you want to make sure of keeping [your heart] intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket of your selfishness. But in that casket...It will not be broken – it will become unbreakable... The only place outside of Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from the danger of love is Hell. C.S. Lewis, The Four Loves*

**E**very year around graduation as I meet with students who are graduating this quote in one way or another runs through my head. As the goodbyes begin again I cannot help but think how careless I was with my heart starting four years ago with this class or any class that came before it, as they came in as freshmen or new graduate students. I was setting myself up to get hurt; for a broken heart. But I had something in common with every student I met with; they too were suffering from broken hearts. Many don't want to face that reality though, after all, saying goodbye is hard. But that was the risk we took, or at least I hope we all took that risk, to give our hearts to each other in relationship and community, knowing that



one day we would all say goodbye to each other. That really is the pattern of life, giving our hearts away and then saying goodbye. As Henri Nouwen puts it in *Turn My Mourning Into Dancing*,

***“Life is a school in which we are trained to depart.”***

Every goodbye we say is not only training for the last goodbye, which is death, but it is also the potential for new life within us. And that is why I don't regret for a moment the risk I took in making my heart vulnerable. All those dorm visits, late night conversations at the CSC, Ursa's after Mass, retreats, walks in the park: they were all worth it. Saying goodbye to the class of 2013, or to any class that came before or will follow, to any relationship I've ever had, to places once



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lived, experiences of the past, and dreams once dreamt, has always taught me at least one thing: every goodbye can be claimed as the way of the cross that leads to new life, to resurrection, to a greater connection with God.



Of course that doesn't make saying goodbye any easier. Avoiding goodbye and all the pain that comes with it would be the safe choice, just as not giving your heart away would be. But this is the work of evil, to avoid mourning and grief, to create distractions in times of transition so as to be unavailable to the present, to put off our goodbyes and refuse to move on. Oh, it is true that goodbyes are painful, but whether you say goodbye and let go or not, the reality of leaving will still take place. **However, the difference will be that if we hold onto the past as unfinished business, without truly saying goodbye to it, then we cannot fully embrace the new life that exists in giving our hearts away again.** We will be holding something back from others and from God.

By saying goodbye well, we open ourselves up to the possibility for new growth, a gateway to learning about the ways in which we failed or succeeded, a passageway to gratitude, and an entrance into healing. We allow the spirit to convert our hearts into someone who is aware of the past, does not fear the future, and is fully present to *the present*.

## Goodbyes ≠ Forgetting

Goodbye of course doesn't mean forgetting. Henri Nouwen states, again from the book cited above,

*"We first look backward to see how our lives seemingly unrelated events have brought us to where we are. Like the people of Israel who repeatedly reflected on their history and discovered God's guiding hand in the many painful events that led them to Jerusalem, so we pause to discern God's presence in the events that have made us or unmade us. For*

*by not remembering we allow forgotten memories to become independent forces that have a crippling effect on our functioning and relating and praying..*



*....Forgetting the past is like turning our most intimate teacher against us."*

Every relationship we have been a part of, every experience we have had, is carried with us into the next relationship or experience. We can either use them to create space for new love and life within us and around us or let them dominate our consciousness by never letting go of the past, by never saying goodbye well.

## Lessons of Goodbye

So what do goodbyes teach us?

They teach us that love is worth it. The pain we feel when we say goodbye is a testimony to the love that exists between friends, family, and communities. Goodbyes show us that love is real. They show us that the feeling within us that wells up with warmth and joy in the midst of great conversation, wonderful meals, vulnerable moments, late nights in the dorms, tears, laughter, smiles, hugs, shared prayers and more – **was real love.**

And what do goodbyes challenge us to do?

The season of Easter (where we see Jesus challenging us to seek new life after each letting go) can give us some direction. The Easter season



demands that our goodbyes call us to always choose to give our hearts away. Goodbyes challenge us to go out to the next stage of our lives and make

room for new love, new life, new growth, new relationships, all aided by the memory of a love that has been let go. Goodbyes call us to form relationships that are worthy of future goodbyes.

### Christ Said Goodbye Too

It is tough to say goodbye to so many relationships, so many wonderful people, so many experiences of faith, conversation, sadness, joy, laughter, smiles every year around graduation. It is extremely difficult to say goodbye to someone who has died or to a lost relationship. I can deny this reality and resist saying goodbye, but my hope is to love like Jesus, for he too had to say goodbye,



*“It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not*



*come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you. Amen, amen, I say to you, you will weep and mourn, while the world rejoices; you will grieve, but your grief will become joy.” Jn 16:7, 20.*

The goodbye of Jesus is an invitation to understand that our life is a constant departure from what we enjoy temporarily (even over many years) to what we will enjoy one day forever.

*“Goodbyes call us to form relationships that are worthy of future goodbyes.”*

### Question Box

- 1) What is the pattern of how you say goodbye to people when transitioning in life?
- 2) What scares you about saying goodbye?
- 3) Is there anyone you wished you could say goodbye to that you didn't get a chance to or a goodbye that left you unsatisfied?
- 4) How do you say goodbye to someone who has died?



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