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## An Open Letter of Congratulations to the Students of Xavier University

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AN OPEN LETTER OF CONGRATULATIONS

TO THE STUDENTS OF XAVIER UNIVERSITY

FROM P. H. RATTERMAN, S.J., VICE PRESIDENT, STUDENT AFFAIRS

AND PATRICK J. NALLY, DEAN OF STUDENTS

XAVIER UNIVERSITY, CINCINNATI, OHIO (45207)

JUNE 1, 1970

United States Attorney John N. Mitchell recently characterized the academic spring term of 1970 as "the saddest semester" in our nation's history. Historians will find it difficult to fault the Attorney General's observation. In the course of this spring over two hundred university and college campuses were forced to close and countless others were upset by serious campus disruptions.

At Kent State University and Jackson State University students were killed by National Guard and police units. On countless other campuses buildings were burned, offices occupied, students and faculty threatened as classes and other university functions were violently disrupted. The priceless educational opportunities of millions of students were interrupted or abruptly terminated as campus radicals boasted three years ago when they proclaimed, "We will grind the American educational system to a halt." Spring, 1970, did indeed witness a "sad semester" for American higher education.

Through the entire 1969-70 academic year, Xavier University managed to keep its campus open and functioning without disruption. Classes were suspended on only three occasions (October 15, May 5 and 18). On each of these days the dropping of classes was sanctioned by the President of the University after extensive consultation with faculty, staff and student leaders. On all three occasions, regular class schedules were interrupted to provide adequate opportunity for the entire campus community to reflect upon the timely and, at times, deeply personal concerns of its members. Xavier University by no means went through the 1969-70 academic year as though it were insensitive to the issues which so disturbed the nation, other campuses and our own students. However, the University did manage to recognize, study and intelligently react to the deepest concerns of its constituent members in a manner befitting a truly academic community.

FOR THE VERY IMPORTANT RESPONSIBILITY THEY SHARED THROUGH 1969-70 IN HELPING THE UNIVERSITY RESPOND TO THE TENSIONS OF THE TIMES ACCORDING TO THE HIGHEST ACADEMIC TRADITIONS, WE SINCERELY CONGRATULATE THE XAVIER UNIVERSITY STUDENT BODY.

Now that the semester is over, exams finished and campus tensions eased, it would be well if we reviewed together some of the qualities which accounted for Xavier's comparatively successful year. We suggest this for a simple reason. Unfortunately there is little reason to believe that campus turmoil will decrease throughout the nation in the years ahead. What can Xavier University learn from its 1969-70 experience that will prepare us for the years ahead?

#### The Ability to Make Perceptive Critical Judgments

The one factor that helped most to preserve an academic atmosphere at Xavier University throughout the year was the repeatedly

demonstrated ability on the part of students to make perceptive critical judgments. Calm was not obtained at Xavier by suppressing the discussion of controversial issues. Or was it maintained by curtailing the appearance on campus of advocates of radical and even revolutionary views. Advocates of both far right and far left ideals spoke on campus in the course of the year. The campus was visited by proponents of extreme violence. Discussions were at times tense. The relative merits of various positions were hotly debated. By no means was there unanimous agreement at the end of every discussion.

However, what did manifest itself in the long run was an insistence on the part of Xavier students to know the facts and then to search for a deeper understanding of whatever disagreements remained. Xavier students were not sheltered from controversy. Rather, they learned how to handle it. John Courtney Murray asserts that the ability to disagree rationally is a mark of high civility. The ability to disagree rationally and to search for deeper understanding, such as befits an academic community and best prepares a man for life, was obvious throughout the year on the Xavier campus. The ability of Xavier students to make critical, truly perceptive judgments in sometimes tense circumstances was the outstanding characteristic of the Xavier campus through 1969-70. To this quality more than to anything else, Xavier must attribute its relative calm while turmoil characterized so many other campuses.

#### Responsible Student Leadership

In the course of the last two years, Xavier University has developed programs for extensively involving effective student participation in University decision-making processes. Through 1969-70, especially when time did not always allow for decisions to be made through normal channels, very few decisions were made without student consultation and involvement. Time and again student leadership proved itself valuable particularly in providing insights which were essential to an understanding

of the complexities of the problems at hand.

Another area where responsible student leadership proved itself invaluable concerned the relationship of the University to alumni and parents, so many of whom find today's campus problems incomprehensible in terms of their own experience and background. The ultimate argument in such cases must be students themselves. If student leaders appear reasonable and rational to alumni and parents, their faith in the University remains unshaken. Thanks to our campus student leaders--and this would include literally hundreds of students--the faith of alumni and parents in Xavier University remains strong.

#### Spiritual Dimension

So much is said today about college students considering religion irrelevant. The Xavier experience for the past year did not confirm this view. It is interesting to recall that the memorial Masses on the Mall for the Kent State and Jackson State students--one of these at 1:30 A.M. attended by over six hundred students--were spontaneously requested by the students and on all occasions drew sizeable University congregations. When Xavier students wished to express their united concerns and deepest convictions, they sensed that the most meaningful expression was to be found in the Church's liturgy.

A great deal of study in the years ahead will be required to determine how Catholic faith and liturgy can be related more meaningfully to the needs of Xavier students. There must be some means whereby Christ's message urging men to love one another can be made more relevant to student insistence that the inequalities and injustices of our American way of life be remedied. The messages so complement one another.

Increased Sensitivity -- Urgently Needed

In an address in the University Center Theatre in late May, Mr. Thomas A. Foran, U.S. District Attorney (Chicago), labeled America's racial problem "the real cancer of our society." The continuing anguish which our Xavier University black students experience as a result of this societal "cancer" is so little understood by the white members of the University community. For instance, summer jobs will be difficult to come by this year for college white students. According to U.S. Labor Department studies, jobs are traditionally much more difficult for black students to find just because they are black.

However, the deepest concern of Xavier's black students is not for themselves but for their families and friends who live in ghettos with little prospect for economic and social advancement. The consequent frustration of the black students is little understood. By some means Xavier's white students must come to a greater sensitivity for this very real suffering on the part of an increasingly sizeable segment of the Xavier community. Through 1969-70, some limited progress was made toward this deeper understanding. However, there is still so much to be done in this regard.

What Lies Ahead for Xavier?

As has been remarked earlier, there unfortunately seems little reason to believe that disruptions on American university campuses will decrease in the year(s) ahead. What then are the prospects for Xavier University? Good, if we can manage to "keep it cool" as we did through 1969-70.

The experience of 1969-70 provides a tremendous advantage as Xavier faces the future. There has developed on the Xavier campus

in the midst of so many disruptions on other campuses, a widespread University consensus that issues must be faced and causes urged through rational discussion, such as is traditional to academe. As an increasing number of the Xavier University community experiences a sense of pride in the true academic character of the Xavier campus, the future appears more and more promising.

As long as this consensus for rational discussion prevails at Xavier University, the fears of some parents and alumni that Xavier students are being exposed to disquieting ideas can be dismissed. It is not the function of a university to protect students from ideas which might upset them. It is the function of a university to help students to face honestly and to examine critically all ideas which confront our society and our nation. It is the special function of a Catholic university to help students bring the insights of their faith to this confrontation and examination. This is what Xavier achieved through 1969-70. With God's help, this is what Xavier University will continue to do through the years ahead.