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Being Religious

This afternoon I stand before you to talk about the Grad at Grad quality of being Religious and how it relates to my life and my Loyola career. From the moment I looked at the written qualities of a Jesuit high school student at graduation, three of them stood out as significant in how they related to my own experiences. The first is that a student at graduation is beginning to take more responsibility for exploring and validating one's own faith, which reminded me of being open to growth. The second is that a student at graduation is beginning to form a Christian conscience and evaluate moral choices, and can reason through moral issues with increasing clarity, which brings back memories from sophomore morality class. Lastly, a student at graduation is at the beginning stages of understanding the relationship between faith in Jesus and being a "person for others," which completely embodies the interdependence of faith and service.

To begin with, what exactly does the phrase, "being religious" mean? I have never liked the idea that if you simply go to church every Sunday, pray every day, and follow all the rules, you are "religious". The journey towards becoming a religious individual is a gradual one, and starts from when we are born, for me, literally, when my parents named me Christian Peter. At the age of three I was in the first class of "atrium" students, an elementary catechism class for children ages three to six. Many of you might be thinking... "three? When I was three I was playing with legos and had no attention span at all...isn't that a bit early for religion classes?" Well, you're not entirely wrong; a three year old is a three year old, and I distinctly remember

using the figures of the apostles as action figures. Nevertheless, I realize now that my atrium class not only gave me a basis for my understanding, but also my faith. As I grew up, I continued to have catechism classes, which attempted to look at a more general view of my faith. Although I was intrigued by the history of the church, I still didn't understand what these classes were really about, because the highlight of my week was getting free cookies and orange. More recently, I came to realize the immense difference of taking an action for the incentive, instead of the cause itself.

Moving on to my Loyola career, I transferred as a sophomore into my first Jesuit school, at which there were three distinct differences from my previous schools: retreats, theology classes, and the service of others. Besides a mandatory choir performance at a nursing home, I had done nothing even close to service. It sounded like one of those things I wanted to avoid if possible; I mean logically it made no sense...who wants to serve when you can be served? I also expected to be bored by theology classes, which I figured I must know everything about already. Needless to say, I was not bored when it came time to take Mr. Palladino's first test. I quickly came to realize that there were many areas I knew little about, especially scripture. Similarly to service, I knew nothing of retreats...besides the fact that the word "retreat" sounded counterproductive. Ironically, I found out that they literally mean taking a step back out of daily life to re-examine or remember where God belongs in my day. I remember going into my sophomore retreat not knowing most of my classmates, and coming out sure that this school is where I belong.

Returning to the grad at grad qualities, how does "beginning to take more responsibility for exploring and validating one's own faith" have to do with my life at

Loyola? As a child, I went to church, said my prayers, and went to catechism class, but the fact of the matter is that I did those things because I was being told to. This quality of the grad at grad is the realization that being religious is not motivated by anyone but myself. As a growing adult, I questioned everything that I had “believed” to see if I even understood why I was believing it. This process was the validation of my faith, and the realization that being religious meant that I believe because I choose to.

The next grad at grad quality of a student is, “beginning to form a Christian conscience and evaluate moral choices, and can reason through moral issues with increasing clarity.” Unlike the previous quality, I chose this because I have felt strongly about moral matters very early in my life. Whether it be debates in school or even arguments with brothers, I have always enjoyed talking about an issue that has no clear cut answer. As a sophomore in morality class, I got a chance to view moral issues such as child slavery with the Christian conscience that I gained through my understanding of the church’s social justice teachings.

Finally and most importantly for myself, a student at graduation is at the beginning stages of understanding the relationship between faith in Jesus and being a “person for others.” I hope that just rang a bell for you, because we’ve all heard “men and women for others” many times before, but my concentration is on its mutual dependence upon faith in Jesus. In other words, throughout the service that I complete in my Loyola career, I will recognize how I am not only serving myself and others, but also God. For those of you who have gone on service trips to Camden, you can appreciate the feeling of waking in the morning and asking yourself, “how

can I serve more people better today than I did yesterday?" I know I can say that I look forward to returning to Camden tonight, to see the faces of those I can help tomorrow.

You might be asking yourself, "What can I do to be more religious?" As students at a Jesuit school, how can we grow spiritually without also being open to growth, loving, committed to doing justice, and academically excellent? I believe this is best represented in the Jesuit motto: *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam*. If we are open to grow fully in all areas, then we are truly doing everything in our lives for the greater glory of God.