



ST JOHN'S COLLEGE

ESTABLISHED 1866

Commemoration of Marie de l'Incarnation

30 April 2020

Dear friends,

Christian communities have long had a custom of setting aside certain days of the year for remembering important events and recalling the lives of significant people. Today the Anglican Church of Canada commemorates Marie de l'Incarnation. A 17th century Ursuline nun who came from France to Quebec City and founded both a religious community for women and the first European-style girls' school in North America. The story of Marie's life is one with more drama, controversy, and parallels to St John's College than you might first expect, but better the subject of a history lecture than a letter from the college chaplain.

A major part of Marie's work was the establishment of communities and facilities where the girls and women of New France—both indigenous and settler—could receive an education in a safe, supportive environment. (The curriculum included the Roman Catholic catechism, French and Latin literature, and civility. Critical learning for young women of the 1600s!) This work was an important part of her life as a nun; it was the concrete expression of the vows she made on entering her life as a religious. Marie's path from being a widow to becoming a nun included a period common to people considering entering religious communities, referred to as 'testing the vocation'. This period of testing the vocation is a chance to give being a monk or nun a test run, as it were. To see whether this life is really what the person feels called to spend their life doing.

St John's College is intended to be a place similar to the school Marie de l'Incarnation founded, though more than 2,000 km distant and about 100 years later. Our college is intended as a safe, supportive environment where people, no matter their place of origin, can receive a good education. After all, colleges are made to educate. But in the time that is spent at St John's, there are also many opportunities to test a variety of vocations.

This may not happen in the structured way that it did for Marie, but the opportunity exists. One can try being a number of things in the different groups and activities available to students: an organizer, a leader, a writer, an artist, a musician, an athlete, a social

butterfly, a recluse, a clown, a wallflower, and myriad other things. Within the security of the college community, people can experiment, learn, and discover what is of real interest to them, what comes naturally, and what really isn't for them. There exists the opportunity to try things out, to test one's vocation, and to discover who one is, sometimes with very unexpected results!

Our alumni have come to St John's College for an education, but the focus, the major, sometimes even the faculty change. Sometimes the degree never gets completed, but the connections and learning and experiences at the college lead that student into the career and roles that will shape the rest of their life. How many alumni came to St John's looking for an education and left with a spouse?

Our current circumstances are not what any of us thought we might be dealing with when the academic year started in autumn. The experience of living through a global pandemic is one that gives all of us cause to ask many questions about what is and is not important to us; about what we need and what we could do without; about what our true priorities are. We are all testing our vocations in a most unexpected way, but for those of us who are Johnians, we do it knowing that we are in this together. Our students, fellows, and staff are finding new ways to connect, to communicate, to teach, and to learn together. Even if the format has changed, the core desire and intention for a safe, supportive community in which to learn and explore, not only our subjects of study but ourselves, remains a firm foundation.

May you be safe, healthy, blessed, and blessing.

Yours in Christ,

The Revd Andrew Rampton
Chaplain