



An Open Letter to My Parents

“A Stranger in a Land Far Away”

By **Nnadozie Onyekuru** ('17)

Dear Daddy and Mummy,

Growing up in our home in Nigeria, I witnessed your generosity to strangers. When you admonished me to welcome the stranger, little did we know that I would be a stranger someday in a land far away. As you know, I have been welcomed here with grace and love.

How time flies, as they say! I still remember the moment I told you of my plans to study the great books in the light of the Catholic faith. It seemed like one of those mind-boggling ideas I was known to bring up every now and then. I told you I had been thinking about it for four years. I was excited. Although strange authors and unfamiliar places were swimming out of my mouth, you did not dismiss my intention.

Of course, you did have some reservations. Mummy, you wondered in your heart what it all meant, but still gave me your blessing. Daddy, you asked how we could ever afford it. When I told you that if you paid for my SAT, God would do the rest, you said you wished you had my faith. The night I had my admissions interview, you delayed the family Rosary so I could take the phone call.

Now that I am here, it is a pleasant burden to speak with you over time zones. You are always eager to hear of the things I have learned. In Sophomore Year, we had great conversations about St. Augustine and our role in the world. In Junior Year, you laughed a lot when I shared some of Aristotle's observations in the *Ethics* and *Politics*.

Daddy, you ask me to pray for your special intentions since Thomas Aquinas College is “close to heaven.” Once you said to me that it would take a while for some people to see the value of my studies, but you already see it. You have always believed that I am one of God's works in progress.

And Mummy, you pray to St. Thomas every day for my studies. You tell me you are not angry with me for leaving home for these years, and sometimes, you are more passionate about the College than I am, even though you have never been here.

When I see parents accompanying prospective students to the College, I remember my trips with Daddy to the boarding schools we chose while I was growing up. I also remember how Mummy accompanied me to begin my previous baccalaureate and asked to see the Catholic chapel at the university. Your sacrifices for your children were not without disapproval from some peers. Some wanted you to let me “grow up.” Now that you have let me be, your example remains a refuge in my times of doubt.

My time here has been fruitful in many ways. As I prepare to conclude my studies, I hope to be a leaven in society as Holy Mother Church dreams for her children. I admire your courage at this crossroad. Although there are many reasons for you to be concerned about the future, you keep encouraging me to make my decisions in peace and freedom. You trust in God's will for me. You believe that He who began the good work will bring it to completion (Phil1:6).

You told me that your faith would never be the same again when I was leaving for Thomas Aquinas College. I am grateful for your support, and I know that our faith will grow again.



With serenity,

Nnadozie

A “Surprisingly Affordable” Education

TAC Graduates Have Among Lowest Student Debt Loads in the Country

“It was around the time that our oldest, Madeline (Freer '12), was applying to colleges, and I met with a TAC Admissions counselor,” recalls Joe Flanders of Muscatine, Iowa. “I told him that the school was exactly what my wife and I were looking for — faithful to the Magisterium, outstanding program. There was only one problem: With raising nine children, there was no way we could afford it.”

Like many parents, Mr. Flanders and his wife, Joan, assumed that Madeline would need to go to a state school. At a homeschooling conference, they shared their concerns with Laura Berquist ('75), an alumna, foundress of Mother of Divine Grace School, and the wife of one of the College's late founders, Marcus R. Berquist.

“She looked me straight in the eye and said, ‘If your children meet the academic requirements, the College will make it happen financially,’” Mr. Flanders remembers. “We took her at her word, and as of today the first three have graduated, the next two are attending, the sixth has just submitted her application, and the last three are working hard because they, too, want to partake of this wonderful Catholic education.”

“Many families think that a public school will be more affordable than the College, when just the opposite is true.”

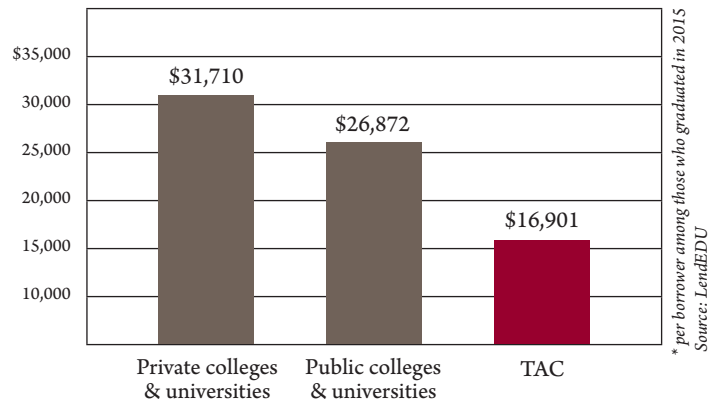
The Flanders' onetime concern is a widely held misconception, says Jon Daly, the College's director of admissions. “Many families think that a public school will be more affordable than the College, when just the opposite is true.”

In August LendEDU, an online student-loan marketplace, published a list of the four-year colleges and universities with the lowest student-debt loads in the United States. Thomas Aquinas College ranked near the top of that list, number 42 out of some 1,300 schools. The average student debt, per borrower, among the College's 2015 graduates was \$16,901 — nearly half of the national average of \$31,710 for graduates of private colleges and universities, and below even the national average of \$26,872 for graduates of *public* institutions.

As part of its adherence to Catholic social teaching, Thomas Aquinas College has been committed, ever since its founding, to admitting all qualified and willing students, regardless of their financial circumstances. This commitment benefits *all* of the College's families — not just those receiving financial aid.

“If tuition reflected the actual price, per student, of operating the College, it would be about \$5,000 a year higher,” explains Parents' Association Director Robert Bagdazian.

Average Student Debt*



“But, thanks to the generosity of our benefactors, we are able to reduce the price, thereby making the College more affordable for everyone, and we haven't raised tuition or room & board fees once in the last four years.”

It helps that, because the College has a fixed curriculum, most students complete the academic program in just four years. The four-year graduation rate for all American college students is just 39 percent, compared to 80 percent at Thomas Aquinas College. As a result, the total cost of education at a typical public or private college, even if its tuition rate is nominally lower than the College's, is oftentimes higher, because students must pay for 2-4 additional semesters.

Then there is the College's financial aid program, upon which some 74 percent of all students depend. “Families make a maximum effort to pay as much as they reasonably can, and students are expected to work to help cover the cost of tuition,” notes Mr. Bagdazian. “But we ask students to borrow no more than \$18,000 over four years, and our benefactors help us make up the remainder through grants. We don't want to saddle our graduates with overwhelming debt.”

The “surprising affordability” of the College, Mr. Bagdazian says, is “good news” that parents would do well to pass along to other families — and help to continue. “This is a large part of why the Parents' Association exists,” he remarks. “We parents recognize that the College has been a tremendous blessing to our families, and we want to return the favor, whether by spreading the word or, through our charitable giving, making this education affordable for others.”

For families such as the Flanders, these acts of generosity have been Heaven-sent. “We are profoundly grateful to all the benefactors for helping us to give our children an opportunity that we would not have been able to give on our own,” says Mr. Flanders. “We thank you from the bottom of our hearts.”

Sending a Beloved Daughter off to College

Without pushing my daughter into the kind of education I had always wanted but didn't have as a poor immigrant, I gained a daughter who appreciates the good in life.

By Luma Simms

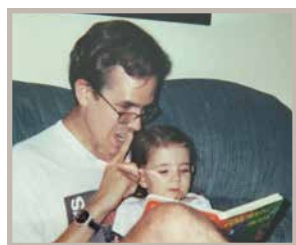
I war against bitterness as a mother. The “bit-
ters,” as I call them, are the Sirens always diverting a mother from the heroic journey of child raising. As a new phase of this epic unfolds, that of sending a daughter off to college, the “bitters” amplify, and resistance requires fresh calls for supernatural aid.



I remember: toddler days spent on the little patio that connected our small, two-story condominium with our garage; there was sidewalk chalk and playing kitchen. I remember her plump face giggling in her car seat through the lens of the review mirror, trying to make a joke and ending with: “I just choking mommy, I just choking!”

Her favorite, recited umpteen times a day was: “What do you call a cow with no legs? Ground beef!” I remember the fussing and crying every night at bath time — she hated having her hair shampooed; the blood-curdling scream the first time a fly landed on her arm. I remember tea time every day with

Walker’s shortbread cookies. And I remember prayers and *Goodnight Moon* every night in the rocking chair. Every night: “Goodnight room, Goodnight moon, Goodnight cow jumping over the moon ...”



Moments that Change a Life Forever

Two discrete moments stand out to me for this particular daughter, instances that gave me a glimpse at how God works through imperfect parents. I’ve always experienced my journey as a mother like one lost at sea. That is why these two moments confirmed to me that God works even through someone like me.

An eye-opening experience came not long after we began attending our local Catholic parish. We were in the car together, my daughter and I, discussing Catholicism and the particular Protestant faith we were leaving. And she said: “When I was

younger I could never bring myself to believe... [but I went] to church with you and listen[ed] to all the theology. I did this out of love for God because I still believed in His love and mercy for us. I also did this because we are called to obey our parents. So I obeyed. But I also thought to myself that when I left for college that I would go to a church that I would choose based on the theology I thought was true.”

A second life-altering moment came shortly after she finished her junior year in high school. We were out visiting family in Southern California when I reminded this daughter that her school had suggested we visit colleges during the summer if possible. My exact words were: “Sweetheart, I know you’re not considering this college, but we are one hour away. I think we should go for a visit. You don’t ever want to say, like I have so often in my life, ‘If only I hadn’t been so stubborn, if only ...’”

She said “yes,” and off we drove to visit Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, California. The College was on summer break and we had no appointment, but their admissions counselor was in, and he took time out of his schedule to spend the afternoon with us. He treated us to lunch at the cafeteria and led us through a tour of the College while talking to us about its history and method of education.

We visited the small old chapel where Mother Teresa had once been, and the new beautiful and serene Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel, including the choir loft and confessionals. He did this even with all our younger children in tow. Our repeated refrain of “Fall back!” went unheeded at times, as the younger kids danced around the poor counselor, peppering him with questions of their own. Much later in the

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Campus Life

All-College Seminar



On the evening of October 7, groups of about 20 students from all classes — seniors and freshmen, sophomores and juniors — came together for the All-College Seminar, where they discussed Sigrid Undset's *Gunnar's Daughter*.

All-College Picnic

On the first weekend of the academic year, the College community gathered on the athletic fields for the annual All-College Picnic. The afternoon began with an inter-class tug-of-war, followed by a refreshing dive on a make-shift slip-n-slide. Finally came the picnic itself — a chance for upperclassmen to reconnect after the summer and to get to know members of the Freshman Class.



Topatopa Hike



A group of students, joined by Head Chaplain Rev. Paul Rafferty, O.P., and Resident Assistant Sarah Dufresne, explored the natural beauty surrounding campus during a late-September backpacking trip to Topatopa Bluff.

Freshman Orientation

Members of the Class of 2020 began arriving on campus on the morning of Thursday, August 25, for the start of the 2016–17 academic year. That evening the College hosted a barbecue for freshmen and their families followed by an ice-cream social for the new students and their siblings.





Nativity of Mary Rosary Procession



On September 8, the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Chaplain Rev. David Gonzalez, O. Praem., led a group of students, faculty members, and their families in a Rosary procession around the campus.



Senior-Freshman Beach Day



Each fall the sophomores, juniors, and seniors take turns hosting welcome events for the new Freshman Class. On the first weekend of September, the seniors led the way by taking members of the Class of 2020 on a trip to the Ventura beach.

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afternoon our daughter sat for a long time talking with him as we prayed for her. You see, for at least a year this was where we had desired our daughter to go, but after learning many hard life lessons, we decided not to push and cajole.

Parenting is about Letting go of that Bike

That night, sitting under the clear, crisp La Crescenta skies in my aunt's yard, my daughter and I sat alone in quiet for a long time. I looked at her and she began to cry: "I had my own plans for my life, and God changed all of them today." When I asked: "Do you feel God's calling to attend Thomas Aquinas College?" She nodded yes, tears streaming.

These are the tears that come to so many of us at different times in our journey, tears happy in God's goodness and calling, at the same time sad as we let go of our desires. This is life, until our personal desires map His perfectly.

When we were on our conversion journey we were warned that our teenager might rebel against us becoming Catholic, so we might want to let her keep attending the church we had been at. That never happened. Without knowing until she said it to us, we also averted a college rebellion.

Without giving in to fearful parenting, I gained a daughter with a solid and strong faith, one who is on her own journey of friendship with Jesus. Without pushing her into the kind of education I had always wanted but didn't have as a poor immigrant, I gained a daughter who is able to appreciate the value of the classical liberal arts, and desire it for herself.

Self-doubt can plague parenting. The "bitters" are always tempting: either to despair or to envy. As a mother it would be very easy for me right now to either envy my daughter for having what I always wanted, or to despair at her leaving and



at the thought that maybe her parenting was accidental, that I won't "succeed" in parenting the other children.

As I continue to sail through this epic journey of motherhood, this is the part where I sail by my personal Sirens, the "bitters." Like Odysseus, I have asked to be tied to the mast of my ship so I may resist their temptation. But the cords that secure me, preventing my soul from shipwreck, are the cords of God's love. Mercy and grace surround me, lovingly binding me.

My ship will soon pass through these troubled waters. I will be able to say "Goodbye, beloved daughter," without the lure of the "bitters."

Mrs. Simms, the mother of Morgan ('20), writes on culture, family, philosophy, politics, religion, and the life and thought of immigrants. Her work has appeared in First Things magazine, The Public Discourse, The Federalist, and elsewhere. Follow her on Twitter: @lumasimms. This story is originally appeared in The Federalist and is republished with permission.

The Perfect Gift ... *A Christmas Novena of Masses*

Beginning on December 17, the chaplains of Thomas Aquinas College will offer a novena of Masses in Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel. Each person enrolled in the Novena will receive a beautiful, personalized card from the College. (Cost: \$5 per card, includes shipping and handling. All names must be received by December 15.)



thomasaquinas.edu/christmas-novena

Experiencing the Life of the College

Campus Hosts First Annual Alumni and Parent Day

For the better part of the last 30 years, Alumni Day has been a fall tradition at Thomas Aquinas College, with graduates bringing their families to relive all that they loved most about their time on campus — the spiritual life, the intellectual life, the fun and friendships. This year, however, the College invited parents to join in the festivities, and the result was the first ever — and first *annual* — Alumni and Parent Day on Saturday, October 8.

“We are always looking for ways to bring parents more fully into the life of the College, and Alumni Day seemed like the perfect opportunity,” says Robert Bagdazian, coordinator of the Thomas Aquinas College Parents’ Association and the father of Daniel (’13), Gabriel (’14), and Samuel (’20). “For parents, it was not only a great excuse to come see our children, but also a chance to get to know the alumni and faculty and to experience, firsthand, the life of the College.”

To that end, the morning began with Mass in Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity Chapel, followed by brunch in St. Joseph Commons. In the afternoon, the College hosted seminars, led by members of the teaching faculty, on Leo Tolstoy’s *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*. “We had to host three separate seminars because the interest was so strong,” notes Mr. Bagdazian. “I think that, for a lot of parents, this was the highlight of the day. We weren’t just hearing about how great the academic program is, we were participating in it for ourselves, working our way through a great book by way of the Discussion Method.”

Due to the ongoing California drought, and the resulting low water levels in the campus ponds, the College was unable to host the annual Cardboard Yacht Race. Instead, children had fun at a bounce house on the athletic fields, as well as at the “Youth Water Olympics,” organized by students, which



included numerous games and a water slide. Parents and alumni, meanwhile, engaged in some friendly competition on the campus basketball courts.

In the evening, President Michael F. McLean welcomed parents and alumni at a reception in St. Gladys Plaza. “This is the first time we’ve combined Alumni Day with a Parent Day, and I think, judging from the success of this event today, we’ll keep doing it in years to come,” Dr. McLean said. “We really do appreciate your participation, your connection with the College, and the many ways in which you support us.” The evening then concluded with an all-school barbeque dinner in the campus picnic area and an ice-cream social in St. Joseph Commons.

“Inviting parents to join us proved to be a great blessing,” says Mr. Bagdazian. “It got the students involved, allowed parents and alumni to get to know one another, and helped to bring the whole community together. We can’t wait to do it again next year!”



Parents' Corner

An Opportunity Missed, and an Opportunity Taken

by Ray Walshe

In 1994 I attended the Commencement ceremony at Thomas Aquinas College. At the time I had known about the school for some years, but I hadn't paid much attention to what it was about; nor had I ever been to the campus. So why come to Commencement? My brother, who some of you may know as Fr. Sebastian (Alan Walshe '94), was graduating. My wife and I drove up to the tiny college nestled at the foot of the Topatopa Mountains to celebrate his latest achievement.

Many of the students at that time lived in trailers. In fact there were only a few permanent buildings on campus. Yet Bill Bennett, a nationally respected conservative scholar and one-time member of President Ronald Reagan's Cabinet, was serving as the Commencement Speaker. When I marveled openly that such a prominent public figure was addressing a class with fewer than 100 students, someone pointed out that Mother Teresa had been the speaker in 1982.

I vividly remember Mr. Bennett's Commencement address, admonishing the graduates not to fall into the trap of seeking happiness as their life's work, but rather to do works that are good in the sight of God and accept what happiness may or may not come from the effort. My brother was the Class Speaker, and though others have said he gave a rousing address as well, I confess I have no recollection of it. I was too absorbed piecing together the attention this tiny college had mustered from such luminaries.

Sometime after graduation I asked my brother to tell me more about the College. As he described its curriculum, methods of teaching, and social environment, I realized that I had missed out on an extraordinary opportunity in my own education. I resolved then to make sure that if I ever had children of my own, they would know what Thomas Aquinas College had to offer before they decided where to go to school.

Sure enough, God would bless my wife and me with two girls. When our oldest, Elaine, reached her junior year of high school, I made a point of insisting that she experience Thomas Aquinas College firsthand, so that she could understand what it had to offer.

It wasn't easy to convince her to take a serious look, but I



persisted and assured her that she need not attend the College, but she did have to know what she was saying *no to*. By the grace of God, she agreed to visit and, in so doing, was drawn to the promise of intellectual pursuits in the context of the Catholic tradition.

When our daughter informed my wife and me that she was applying to the College — and that she had made it her first choice — I was elated.

Elaine entered Thomas Aquinas College as a freshman last fall, and in the last year my admiration of the College has only grown. The contemplative setting, free of the typical distractions

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found almost anywhere else today, will become, I suspect, one of the things that students will miss most after they graduate. The creativity of the social environment — my daughter shared with us the fun she had playing live-action Clue one recent Friday night — with its genuinely respectful interaction between the men and women on campus is such a contrast to the Bacchanalian excess found at highbrow colleges offering “safe spaces” that leave me wondering what they are hoping to be saved from (apparently not themselves).

As a parent and a participant in the Thomas Aquinas College Summer Seminars, I also have been impressed by the unpretentious and grounded nature of the administrators and tutors. They are welcoming and care deeply about my daughter's formation as a godly woman.

God willing, the next time I attend a graduation at Thomas Aquinas College will be in 2019, exactly 25 years from the month I first set foot on campus. Much has changed about the College in that time, but the blessings poured forth from the good and worthy efforts of the faculty and students have made good on Mr. Bennett's advice.