

Fr. Timothy Backous on Failure  
September, 2000

One of the trickiest moments in life is an experience of failure. Usually, one's first inclination is disbelief. "This can't be happening to me." A second inclination might be to blame everyone else within a five mile radius. A third, and certainly more ominous response, is to shut down and wallow in our bitterness.

The truth is that failure is a common staple of life, but it always seems to take us by surprise. What makes it especially difficult for the college student, however, has to do with your ongoing struggle to leave childhood behind and enter the world of adulthood. Just behind you is an experience of failure that would be smoothed over by gentle hugs, encouraging words or mountains of ice cream. Fresh in your memory are those times when friends, siblings or parents quickly dismissed our mistakes as "things to put behind us" with assurances that "everything will be OK."

But now, just a short time later, we are left to face our failure from a startling new perspective: we must accept it as our own. We have no one to hide behind, no one to blame, no one to mitigate the circumstances.

It is my experience that college students find this acceptance of failure to be one of the toughest parts of growing up. When one fails a class because of a poor or lackluster performance, it is much easier to blame the professor as being unreasonable or even "a jerk." When relationships crash and burn, it is much easier to blame the other person involved as the perpetrator rather than look to our own selfishness, carelessness or indifference.

Whatever mistakes or failures we encounter as students (and you WILL find them) the sooner we accept the responsibility for them, the faster we grow. The more able we are to own up to our failures, the less likely we will be to repeat them.

Moving from childhood to adulthood has its perks but it also pushes us to the front lines of responsibility. The truly wise among us are able to accept the freedom of being an adult and at the same time demonstrate courage in claiming our own mistakes.