

Campus Ministry: A beacon of faith

I recently had the privilege of celebrating the dedication of the beautiful new chapel at the St. Paul Newman Center at North Dakota State University. After a long journey of planning, fundraising, and construction, the priests, students, staff, and benefactors of the Newman Center at NDSU were overjoyed to be able to pray in their new chapel, which is the heart of Catholic campus ministry at the university. The previous Newman Center building served the university well for more than 50 years, but the university has grown, and so have the needs of its students and faculty. Everyone at the St. Paul Newman Center can be very proud of what they have worked so hard to build.

The Diocese of Fargo is blessed to have vibrant campus ministry at the two largest universities in the state, NDSU and the University of North Dakota. The St. Thomas Aquinas Newman Center at UND had its own rebirth after a flood and fire more than 20 years ago. Both of these campus parishes are spiritual homes for students, staff, and families at the universities. They are bright beacons in our diocese where the gift of faith is lived and handed on to young adults. They offer a faith community and a home away from home to young people who are often far away from their own families and parishes.

Our campus parishes are called “Newman Centers” after St. John Henry Newman, an English scholar and cardinal of the 19th century. He was a chaplain at Oxford University, and a rising star in the Anglican Church. But after a long journey of prayer, study, and discernment, he embraced the Catholic faith and entered the Church at great personal cost. As a Catholic priest and scholar, he believed that religious faith and the study of theology have an essential place in higher education, because God is the source of all truth, and our intellectual journey would be incomplete without God. He became a great proponent and defender of the Catholic faith in his own time, and Catholic campus ministries all across the country have been named for him ever since. Newman’s theology has been an important influence in the life of the Church, and his sanctity was recognized when he was canonized a saint by Pope Francis in 2019.

The vast majority of our Catholic college students attend secular colleges and universities, so Catholic ministry on those campuses is vitally important. During their college years, the students face a multitude of challenges to their faith, both in and outside of the classroom. Catholic faculty members and employees too can face challenges to their faith. College campuses and programs often present themselves as places of open-minded discussion and tolerance, but that’s not always true when it comes to religion. The Catholic faith in particular comes in for challenges and even ridicule from the secular culture of higher education. But the earliest modern universities were established by the Catholic Church, so Catholic campus ministry has a natural home in that setting. Campus ministry can be an important support to those who are striving to live their faith and grow in their understanding and love for God.

During their college years, these young people take important steps into their adult lives. They not only prepare for a future career, but they are often discerning their vocations as well. Many will marry someday, and there are countless stories of Catholic young people who met their future spouses at the campus Newman Centers. Others are considering a call from God to the priesthood or religious life. Many of our priests and religious sisters and brothers were encouraged and supported in their discernment through their participation in campus Newman Centers. In fact, I was one of them. And there are times when a big university can be a little overwhelming and impersonal, so our campus parishes offer a place where students can find friendships and community that are built on faith and common Gospel values.

One of the sad facts of our time is the attrition of young adults from the practice of their Catholic faith. Many college students, when they are on their own, drift away from an active faith life, and an alarming percentage leave the Church for good during this time of their lives. This may be due to the undermining influence of the college culture, or a lack of understanding of the truth and goodness and beauty of our faith. In either case, the presence of Catholic campus ministry and the witness of faith-filled young Catholics can make all the difference to a young person who is wrestling with questions of faith and meaning in their lives. And the good news is that many other young people discover the Catholic faith for the first time during their college years. Once again, the presence of a Catholic Newman Center can offer them a place where they can encounter the love of Christ and the youthful, faith-filled presence

of his Church right there on campus. They discover that they are loved and that they have a place in God's family.

Our Newman Centers have flourished over the years because of the support of many generous alumni and benefactors throughout our diocese. When we support our Newman Centers, we are supporting young Catholics who already are an essential part the Church, and others who are just finding their way. I'm grateful to those who give so much to keep our campus ministries thriving in the Diocese of Fargo, and I ask you to join me in praying for all the young people who are seeking God on our college campuses.