

Colleges Keep It Catholic Amid the Epidemic

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Ave Maria University in Ave Maria, Florida (photo: Father James Bradley/Wikimedia Commons/CC BY 2.0)

[Patrick Reilly](#) Blogs August 29, 2020

While avoidance of COVID-19 has forced many schools and colleges to shift to online classes this fall, a few faithful Catholic colleges are attempting in-person education — and they are making extraordinary efforts to preserve the spiritual life on campus.

Impressively, the fast-growing Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, doubled the number of priests on campus this year and added additional Mass times to help offset limited seating in the campus church due to COVID-19 restrictions. There are now four Masses on campus every Sunday and three every weekday, including a new 9:00 p.m. weekday Mass.

“At Benedictine College we are committed to providing a dynamic, faith-filled environment for our students,” says Father Ryan Richardson, associate chaplain at Benedictine College. “I like to advise students to be intentional about prayer, sacramental life and Christ-centered community.”

The campus ministry office at the University of Dallas in Irving, Texas, is also adjusting to best serve the spiritual needs of students. Since the university altered its class schedule this fall to better ensure student safety, it also changed its Mass and Confession times to be available to the most students. A Sunday Mass was added, and campus chaplain Father Thomas More Barba says he is open to adding more as needed.

Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia, decided that its education “can only truly be offered in-person, with our students studying together and challenging each other to be better leaders and better Catholics.” Its reopening plan received laudatory remarks from the Virginia State Council of Higher Education, and the college even proceeded with its week-long summer conferences for prospective high school students, immersing them in the faith and giving a taste of Christendom’s courses and faculty.

Also opening in-person this fall is Ave Maria University in Ave Maria, Florida, which had the distinction of never fully closing its campus last spring when the COVID-19 epidemic began. “Sacramentally, after only a six-day hiatus, our community returned to receiving our Lord in the Holy

Eucharist,” reported President Christopher Ice. “We live-streamed Mass daily out of our St. Sebastian Hall Chapel and distributed Communion outside,” he said.

Belmont Abbey College in Belmont, North Carolina, is “ensuring students have access to the Sacraments and to Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, even though our spaces might look a little different with social distancing,” says campus minister Sarah Gohn. The college also plans to make frequent use of outdoor space and small-group Bible studies.

“In a time when people in our world are feeling very isolated from one another, we know that Christ still unites us as brothers and sisters and that we have communion with one another through the Eucharist,” Gohn says.

Prayer, sacrament and community

Such opportunities are important for young adults, whose faith is seriously endangered. After college graduation, nearly 75% of Catholics do not believe in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. And even among those who attend Catholic colleges, nearly one in eight Catholic students leaves the faith by graduation.

It is crucial that students preserve their faith in college. But even more, the college years are a time when students should be formed for sainthood, and that requires a lot more than simply “holding on.”

Prayer, the sacraments, and community are key to helping students keep the faith on campus, according to campus ministers at Catholic colleges across the country. And it's very difficult to find the support students need, even at a Catholic center at a secular college. Faithful Catholic colleges like

those recommended in The Newman Guide offer a truly Christian environment, where students are free of the toxic lifestyle at many colleges today.

“At the University of Mary, I see every week more and more students who are ‘catching’ the routine of prayer, visiting the chapel, attending Holy Mass, going to confession,” says Father Craig Vasek, chaplain for the athletic teams at the faithful college in Bismarck, North Dakota. “Even if people aren’t doing it, they are seeing people, hearing of people, and it brings God to mind.”

He recommends that college students “go to Mass and a chapel more than just your Sunday obligation. It changes things. Daily study of the Catechism with daily practical application, or even monthly ones, to establish a new virtue each week or month.”

“Surround yourself with others who are striving to live their faith,” he adds. “You are who you hang out with. Don’t be the best person in your friend group — I mean, strive to be — but if you are the best person in your friend group, who is going to call you upward?”

Gabriel Salamida, coordinator for household life at Franciscan University of Steubenville in Steubenville, Ohio, agrees. “Community is absolutely vital during one’s college years. Students are ‘on their own’ for the first time, and they are faced with an opportunity to grow into a better version of themselves.”

More than 900 students at Franciscan are a part of its faith household system, which connects students to accompany one another on their faith journeys. “Jesus didn’t draw us into relationship with him to keep our faith to ourselves. If we don’t share it, then our faith will die,” Salamida says.

Don't be a statistic

At secular universities, students are often taught by professors who push ideologies that are contrary to the faith. They are surrounded by a binge drinking and hook-up culture on campus and in the dorms. Access to campus ministry offerings may be limited and vary in quality.

At a faithful Catholic college, students see the integration of the faith across campus. They are formed in mind, body and soul for this life and for the one to come.

“College is such a time of questioning and growth, and attending a faithful Catholic college allows young people to find the answers to their deepest questions in Christ and his Church,” says Gohn. “I have so many peers who abandoned their faith in college or allowed it to dwindle, because when challenged in their faith, they had no community around them to support them, and they were easily swayed by alternate ideologies.”

Students should “not simply have the mindset of keeping the faith, but growing it,” advises Austin Schneider, director of campus ministry at John Paul the Great Catholic University in Escondido, California.

“In the spiritual life, staying where we are at is stagnation and ultimately leads to a weak, tepid faith,” Schneider says. “Instead, Christ calls us forward and draws us by the beauty of his love. Holiness isn't simply keeping or maintaining the faith. Holiness means gaining momentum, accelerating toward Christ.”

While many students will tragically lose their faith on campus this year, others attending faithful Catholic colleges have the support they need to grow into sainthood. A Catholic college

that fully embraces its mission — and sadly many do not, so investigate carefully — can do so much good for the souls of students.

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