A Message from Campus Ministry

I have a confession. I love ZOOM! Prior to 2020, I used this platform maybe twice in my life. Now I use it multiple times a day to interact with students, colleagues, and friends. Although I know ZOOM fatigue is real and I have at times experienced it myself, I recognize the blessing of connecting, albeit virtually, in this COVID-19 world.

This month I gathered with sixty-three students safely by hosting a retreat virtually. Without ZOOM, I would need a large arena to space everyone out enough. During Christmas break, I hosted book groups. A few student athletes who are typically unable to participate in many events outside of mass were even able to join because ZOOM meetings worked better with their busy schedules. I even collaborated with other Campus Ministers from across the country to create meaningful virtual programming for students. I looked forward to our weekly gatherings and now consider these people my friends.

The campus ministers, Diane Magliocca, Gary Slifkey, and myself, often talk about one surprise this year is that ZOOM has allowed us to reunite with alumni who no longer live near our campuses. We have hosted prayer groups and mini-reunions; some students even reached out for advice as they apply for new jobs or graduate school. In addition to the virtual programming provided for students, we want to invite alumni to join us for a few spiritual programs this Lent. If you are an alum of any school in the Diocese of Pittsburgh, we would love for you to join our virtual Lenten book study or Lenten Retreat.

Although I long for the day of large gatherings and events without masks, ZOOM has provided me a new avenue to connect. I pray that each of us experience the blessing of connecting in this COVID-19 world.

Sincerely,
Meghan Larsen-Reidy

P.S. Attention alumni! There are two opportunities for you to participate during Lent. There will be a Lenten Book Study on “The Return of the Prodigal Son” by Henri Nouwen and a Lenten Retreat on Friday evening March 26th. Contact Meghan at larsenreidy@calu.edu for more information.
More than 12 years ago, Maria and Megan, college freshman at the time, didn’t yet know about the Newman Center at Slippery Rock University when they arrived on campus. Yet, the new roommates made their way to the local parish for Mass. Fr. Matt McClain, who was Pastor and Campus Chaplain, encouraged them to check out the student Mass and campus ministry at the Newman Center.

Megan met Becky on her dorm floor and invited her to come to Rock Catholic with her and Maria. Lynnette met Megan in a College Writing class and was also invited to come to Rock Catholic where she then met Maria and Becky. Soon the four women attended Mass and Rock Catholic together regularly and formed the bonds of a deep friendship.

“I think the relationship we built through campus ministry was so strong because we shared LIFE there. It was a safe space to be our authentic selves and receive unconditional acceptance, and where we could go deep in sharing our feelings and our faith,” shared Megan. “The upperclassmen who were the student leaders in Rock Catholic created an environment that made that possible,” added Becky. Lynnette emphasized, “It was a place to belong – a ‘come as you are.’”

Through their four years at SRU, these women grew as leaders in Rock Catholic and their close friendship broadened to include many others. Megan, supported by her friends, started a Ladies’ Prayer Group that became a strong, long-standing ministry. They had a huge impact on other women through weekly small-group meetings and a Facebook group for sharing prayer intentions. That Facebook group still exists today, and the women reached out during the pandemic shut-down last Spring to invite other alums to gather for prayer twice a month via Zoom.

But their friendship did not end at graduation. The four women reunited at the Newman Center for annual Oktoberfest celebrations, made road trips to each other’s new homes, and have held Christmas and Summer gatherings every year until the COVID-19 pandemic. When Megan married in 2015, all three of the others were there. It was the same for Maria’s, Becky’s and Lynnette’s weddings spanning the next couple years. And starting with the birth of Maria’s daughter in 2018, all four had their first baby within that year. There are now six babies/toddlers in all, and they are building friendships just like their mommas.

Because of the pandemic, these friends have not been all together since January 2020. The four of them gathered for a recent Zoom call, reminiscing about their college experience, campus ministry and their friendship. “I honestly can’t think of a (good) college memory that doesn’t tie in some way back to campus ministry,” confessed Megan. Becky echoed this sentiment saying, “The Rock Catholic community was the thing I didn’t even know that I needed but am so glad I found.”

Becky, Maria, Lynnette and Megan stay involved with SRU’s Newman Center by giving back their time, talents, and resources to the current students and campus ministry.
Creating a Home Away from Home

A large banner hangs outside the Newman Center at Washington and Jefferson College. It welcomes students and invites them to mass on Sundays and dinner on Wednesdays. Mariana Reyes and Yesica Rodriguez, decided to make their way off campus and across the street to the Newman Center their freshman year. Originally from Houston, they were looking for a place that reminded them of home.

Mariana shared, “The Newman Center and the people involved easily became one of my favorite parts about college. Being from out of state, there were many things I could not recreate from back home. I thought going to mass on Sundays was something that could remain constant and could help me not be as homesick. What I ended up with was an amazing community full of people who were kind and welcoming of anyone who stepped foot in the Newman Center, and I knew right away I would be spending a lot of time there. Thanks to the Newman Center, I have gained friendships, a safe space, and not to mention our amazing Wednesday night dinners where we got to eat home cooked meals. This also helped some of us save a meal swipe (i.e. a meal credit at the cafeteria) for later in the week. I personally have received tremendous help from the people at the Newman Center, especially the campus minister Meghan, whom I would turn to when I had issues at school. Our little space sometimes felt more like home than my dorm room, and with me being home from school due to Covid, the Newman Center is one of the things I miss most from campus.”

Campus Minister, Meghan Larsen-Reidy, has loved getting to know all the students who have come through the doors and strives along with chaplain, Fr. Tom Lewandowski, to create a home away from home. Around crowded tables, college students from every social circle sit together. Meghan loves when people bring new friends. She has become increasingly aware of students who have made the option to reduce meal plans due to financial constraints and makes sure that there are plenty of leftovers for people to take back to their dorms. To make a place feel like home, college students are encouraged to suggest their favorite dishes for meals and to bring their authentic selves to the Newman Center.

Yesica and Mariana along with a few other students offered to make dinner around All Souls’ Day their sophomore year of college. Their family always celebrated Día de los Muertos by remembering their loved ones and displaying pictures; all students were invited to bring a picture that evening with them to display. Yesica shared, “After that my friends and I were able to cook some delicious flautas, rice, arroz con leche (rice pudding), even some conchas (Mexican sweet bread). This day we were able to share our culture with everyone in the Newman Center which made me so happy.”

Although Covid-19 put a pause on dinners and other in person events this school year, students and staff are planning a large celebration when everyone can be together safely again. Everyone is hoping that Mariana and Yesica offer to cook again!

“I now see that the hands that forgive, console, heal, and offer a festive meal must become my own.”
- Henri J.M. Nouwen, Return of the Prodigal Son
A Profound Sense of Belonging

On a campus that provides a rigorous education and vibrant community life it can become easy to push faith aside and place academic achievement and social availability above a lived Catholic faith. Colonial Catholic Ministry (CCM) means that students at Robert Morris University do not have to compromise their faith, their grades, or their social lives.

During a normal year CCM might have field trips, social events, and service projects in and around the greater Pittsburgh area. However, with the COVID-19 restrictions, these events were no longer possible. Though plans had to shift, the virus did not stop CCM from serving the students at Robert Morris University. The Catholic campus ministry program has always had its foundation in the Sacraments, but it has become even more evident this year that Mass on campus fulfills not only the students’ desire to satisfy their Sunday obligation, but it also meets their spiritual needs. As an intern last fall, I was able to see the impact the CCM community has on the Catholic students. The Rogal Chapel is filled to capacity at every Sunday Mass. Student volunteers serve in all the ministries of the Mass: altar serving, reading, and even leading music. Catholic students come together as a community to celebrate Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, and their consistent dedication to the Sacraments has not gone unnoticed. We have even had the privilege of celebrating a few daily Masses, and these too were well attended by the faithful, prayerful students at RMU.

When it comes to academics, the students at RMU are well aware of their responsibilities and are dedicated to working hard and achieving their goals. A large workload plus ministry commitments can sometimes feel overwhelming. What I have learned from my semester at RMU is that when students are unable to attend events, they still feel connected to the community. While this confused me at first, I soon discovered that Gary Slifkey, the director of CCM, regularly reaches out to his students via email and text. Students feel connected because Gary takes time to know students, to reach out to them, and to let them know they are a valuable part of the CCM community. Such a profound sense of belonging lets students take a deep breath and focus on their education without the fear of being left out.

Lastly, all students are invited to participate in CCM events, regardless of their religious affiliation. This inclusivity means that Catholic students do not have to leave their friends behind to run after their faith. Students can invite their friends and include them in the games we play and the times of prayer we share. There is no need to pick between friendship and faith when we can make Christ the center of both.

Colonial Catholic Ministry is and will continue to be a home for students to come together for fun, friendship, and faith. Students can rest assured that they can have a full college experience while remaining faithful to the Catholic Church.

- Angelica Doucet (Intern RMU Colonial Catholic Ministry Fall 2020)