

The Importance of Campus Ministry in the Life of University Students
St. Elizabeth Catholic Church at Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX
Most Rev. Michael J. Sis, Bishop of San Angelo
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This is my first trip to the Diocese of Lubbock since 1994, when St. Elizabeth's hosted the Texas Catholic Student Conference. We had a great time. You were very good hosts then, and you are very good hosts again tonight.

You are so blessed in this diocese with the ministry of Bishop Plácido Rodríguez. How many dioceses can say that their bishop is "the most interesting man in the world?" (Stay thirsty, my friends.) Seriously, he is a wise and joyful leader. He pours love into the hearts of those around him. It is a privilege to know him. We will all miss him very much when he retires.

I congratulate you on your plans to build a new student center here at Texas Tech. This is a great adventure that will do wonders for the ministry. Every phase of the project has its blessings. Eventually you will get down to the details of what to put in the building. There will be lots of decisions to make.

One decision that you will have to make is whether to put paper towel dispensers or hot air hand dryers in the bathrooms. One of our pastors put those hot air hand dryers in the bathrooms when they built their new church. After just two weeks, he took them out.

People asked, "Why?" He said, "They worked well, and it was all fine, until one day I went in there and someone had put a sign on them that read: "For a sample of this week's sermon, push the button."

Some people don't like capital campaigns and building projects. But the building itself is actually very important. I remember, several years ago, when we were building a new center at Texas A&M, Bishop Joseph Galante of Beaumont said something that I will never forget. He said that our buildings are a proclamation of what is important to us. A new Catholic campus ministry center here in Lubbock tells the whole world that what goes on inside there is a high priority for us.

If we, as the Catholic Church, truly want to reach out to Catholic college students, we must compete for their attention while they are enrolled in college. Part of that competition means providing quality facilities where they can gather.

Across the board, Catholics are attending colleges and universities in numbers that far exceed their percentage in the general population. About one-third of all college students in the U.S. are Catholic. Today, Catholic students comprise approximately 35 percent of freshman classes on public campuses. The largest religious group of college students in the U.S. is Roman Catholic. There are approximately 5.5 million Catholic college students in the U.S., with approximately 90 percent attending non-Catholic institutions.

Here's what our Catholic bishops have said about campus ministry: In Empowered by the Spirit, A Pastoral Letter on Campus Ministry, they say:

“Campus ministry is an integral part of the Church’s mission to the world.” (6)
“...cooperation between these two great institutions, Church and university, is indispensable to the health of society.” (7)

The Vatican says that the university is a place where culture is created. And where culture is being created, the Church needs to be present.

Pope Francis says that the Church needs to be present on the frontiers of this world. Campus ministry lives on many frontiers:

- Faith and science
- Belief and non-belief
- Economic systems and Catholic social teachings
- Catholic and Protestant

Campus ministry is building bridges, preparing young adults to be powerful witnesses of the truth of Christ.

There is stiff competition from many other world views on campus. Our students often find themselves between a rock and a hard place:

On one side is the aggressive proselytizing activity of their fellow students from some fundamentalist groups, who regularly invite our Catholic students to leave our Church and join theirs.

On the other side is the culture of disbelief of some of their professors, who show disdain for believers and who want to push religion to the periphery of campus life.

Stephen Carter, in his book, The Culture of Disbelief, says that in the university culture, “religion is too often trivialized, treated as an unimportant facet of human personality, one easily discarded.”

Our response is that “campus ministers must not remain on the margins of the academic community but must accept the call to bring the light of the Gospel to the very center of that world.” (28)

Catholic Student Centers serve three entities: the Church, the Students, and the University itself.

1. The Church

While they are enrolled, Catholic college students often help out in surrounding parishes, as volunteers, musicians, catechists, and youth ministers. Then, after graduation, our students become exceptional parishioners and leaders for the next generation.

2. The Students

We provide a ministry that cultivates, educates, and strengthens their faith. The campus ministry center can serve as a “home away from home.” This is especially helpful on a large campus like Texas Tech.

3. The University

We serve the entire campus community, not just Catholics and students. We add value and retention to the university experience. When we are doing our job well, the university will actually use the presence of our ministry to recruit students.

Catholic campus ministry provides a Catholic presence on campus, not trying to “circle the wagons” and create a safe little enclave, but rather to instill a missionary spirit, to train and equip students, faculty, and staff to be effective witnesses in the university community – in the classroom, on the sports field, in the office, and in social events.

We seek to engage the secular culture with the message of our faith through active dialogue. Bring Christ to the campus, and bring the campus to Christ.

There is an urgent need for campus ministry to help increase the level of the students’ intellectual knowledge of their faith on par with their secular learning. If students obtain a college-level understanding of their career field, but remain with an elementary-level understanding of their Catholic faith, they will become adult children in the faith, stunted in their capacity to give credible witness to Jesus Christ and fulfill their mission in the world.

I have also seen that, wherever we have strong Catholic campus ministry, we have good numbers of converts to Catholicism. The RCIA process at our Catholic centers is producing wonderful new Catholics, who become convinced of the truth of our faith while they are studying at the university.

In all that we do, we need to keep the end product in mind. In this case, it is adult Catholics who are active in the Church for the rest of their lives.

A few years ago, the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate (CARA) did research on what are the factors that lead to a person becoming an active Catholic adult. They compared many different factors, and they discovered something fascinating: Being engaged in campus ministry while in college has a larger impact on one’s adult faith practice than going to Catholic elementary or high schools.

They found that Catholic adults who were active in campus ministry while in college were more likely to:

- attend Mass regularly
- register in a parish
- be very involved in parish activities
- read Catholic literature
- declare that their Catholic faith is one of the most important aspects of their lives.

We are investing in the formation of adults who will live the faith actively for the rest of their lives, and who will change the world for the better.

Campus ministry is an important training ground for future Catholic leaders. These are the people we should be investing in, if we want strong leadership for the Church of tomorrow. They have:

- leadership skills
- academic abilities
- faith commitment

For example, over and over again, I have seen that campus ministry has a key role to play in the formation of healthy Catholic marriages and families.

- It is a place to meet a good potential spouse
- It teaches moral standards for dating and courtship
- It teaches the virtues
- It provides solid marriage preparation

Many vocations to the priesthood, the religious life, the diaconate, and full-time lay ministry in the Church come from our campus ministry centers. A prime example of this is Greg Ramzinski. I knew him when he was a college student. He got to experience himself as a student leader, getting a taste of what it might be like to be a full-time leader in the Church. And look at him now: He is a very effective professional minister in the Church. Greg, I am very proud of you.

Saint John Paul II said, “The future of the world and of the Church belongs to the younger generation.”

The time and energy that we dedicate to our college students is an act of hope. It is an investment in the future of the Church that we all love so dearly. Here at St. Elizabeth’s, you have an opportunity to do something for the Church that will have a profound impact for generations.

Enjoy this historic moment. Then, one day, many years from now, you’ll be able to look back on this moment and say, “I helped make that happen, and I’m grateful to God, because all those thousands of young people are benefitting from what God did, through us, together.