

The State of Catholic Higher Education

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The Newman Guide gives the Cardinal Newman Society the opportunity to highlight Catholic colleges which consistently and enthusiastically embrace the mission of Catholic higher education.

But what about the Catholic colleges that are not included?

The reasons why we have chosen not to profile other Catholic colleges vary with each institution, most ranging from a lukewarm Catholic identity to serious scandal. Generally, however, families seeking a Catholic education outside the colleges identified here will discover a sad state of affairs.

Most Catholic colleges have secularized considerably over the past 40 years, such that anyone who attended these colleges in the 1960s or earlier would scarcely recognize them today. It is no surprise that more than half the colleges in *The Newman Guide* were established after 1970, most in reaction to the rapid decline of faithful Catholic education in this country.

The good news is that a nationwide renewal of Catholic higher education is underway. Not only are new, faithful Catholic colleges springing up—bishops, religious orders and lay leaders are planning to establish several more in the next decade—but nearly every Catholic college in the United States has increased attention to its core mission. We hope to be able to recommend even more colleges in the near future.

How does knowledge of these trends help families who are currently seeking a Catholic

college? A basic understanding of the state of Catholic higher education today is valuable not only as a precaution, but also as confirmation of the great treasures we have in the 21 colleges profiled herein.

Identity Crisis

Notwithstanding the great strides the Church is making with regard to Catholic higher education, currently most U.S. Catholic colleges that are not in this *Guide* fall into two categories. First, most of them have retained some degree of Catholic identity, but their leaders seem preoccupied with other concerns—such as conforming to a “feel good” sort of spirituality, ensuring diversity in the student body and faculty, providing career training or simply keeping the doors open. Second, there are many other historically Catholic colleges that have been seriously compromised by disdain for the Church and active dissent from Catholic teaching. This latter group is smaller but includes most of the large Catholic universities.

In either category of institution, the curricula and official policies of the colleges are not well-designed to effectively uphold Catholic identity. Even a small number of problematic faculty, staff or students have significant opportunities to push the envelope and loosen a college’s historical ties to the Church. We see this time and time again, with college leaders scratching their heads about what went wrong.

A student at the typical Catholic college will find:

- ❖ a significant number of faculty who may appreciate theology, philosophy and the arts as useful for presenting ideas and critiquing others' ideas, but who reject any claim to truth outside the natural sciences;
- ❖ a curriculum featuring a broad course selection with some required courses but no integrated core and little exposure to the Catholic intellectual tradition, unless the student majors in philosophy or theology and actively seeks appropriate courses;
- ❖ a religious studies or theology department including faculty who dissent from Catholic teaching and offering courses with no clear indication of whether they are genuine Catholic theology courses;
- ❖ a faculty with a significant portion (sometimes a large majority) of non-Catholics and non-practicing Catholics, often including openly homosexual and dissenting professors;
- ❖ guest lecturers, often with a decidedly liberal-progressive point of view, including pro-abortion politicians and others whose public actions and statements oppose Catholic moral teaching;
- ❖ a campus ministry that is generally weak and understaffed, minimizes catechesis and spiritual formation, and often plays loosely with Catholic teaching and the liturgy of the Mass—which is attended by a minority of Catholic students;
- ❖ student clubs which often include some that oppose Catholic teaching, usually on abortion or homosexuality, and few (if any) that provide opportunities for spiritual growth;
- ❖ coed residence halls with some restrictions

that are generally ineffective in discouraging sexual activity and alcohol abuse; and

- ❖ campus health and counseling services that are under no obligation to support Catholic moral teaching.

Some of this may astonish you. It is, in fact, a list of the more common concerns. We have identified much more unusual and appalling problems, both at large universities and at small, seemingly traditional Catholic colleges. These include homosexual film festivals, transvestite drag shows, conferences featuring pagan rituals and New Age workshops, lectures by notorious pornographers and pro-abortion activists, etc. Once the door is opened, there is no telling what might come in.

How Did It Happen?

For several centuries, fidelity to the Church was largely taken for granted at Catholic colleges and universities—but the secularization of Catholic colleges in the U.S. transpired quickly in the span of a few decades.

It is no exaggeration that higher education grew out of the Catholic Church. The great medieval universities in Europe were established, funded and staffed by Catholics. For centuries, Catholic colleges around the world have been among the most highly respected.

The Church's involvement in higher education has also had its critics. In 1852 this led the Venerable John Henry Cardinal Newman, the celebrated convert from Anglicanism, to publish perhaps the best-known defense of Catholic higher education.

In *The Idea of a University*, Cardinal Newman argued that a college should have education for its own sake as its only objective, thereby fostering "growth in certain habits, moral or intellectual." With its promise of

“teaching universal knowledge,” a college cannot rightly exclude any branch of knowledge—most importantly theology, which teaches truths that make sense of all other truths. The Catholic Church cannot rightly be excluded from an active role in higher education, because the bishops have the authority and responsibility to ensure the integrity of theological teaching and the dialogue of faith and reason.

Contrary to Newman’s vision, American higher education has largely followed the model of the German research university. This means that even many small colleges are concerned with faculty research and publication as well as teaching; emphasize faculty freedom and departmental independence over interdisciplinary studies and an integrated core curriculum; and underemphasize theology, philosophy and the arts.

To their credit, most of the Catholic colleges held on to their Catholic identity even as the leading Protestant universities, including Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Dartmouth, and many others, abandoned their initial Christian foundations. The Catholic colleges stayed Catholic primarily because the college sponsors, officials, faculty and students were almost entirely Catholic. The curriculum and campus culture largely reflected the interests and culture of the Catholic Church.

It was the turmoil of the 1960s and the aftermath of Vatican II that threw into disarray the Catholic culture in the U.S., of which college campuses were a microcosm. The G.I. Bill, other financial aid programs and new taxpayer funding for public universities enticed growing numbers of Catholic students to forego Catholic education. Meanwhile, the aid programs brought increasing numbers of non-Catholic students to Catholic colleges, which also began to hire non-Catholic faculty. Soon Catholic colleges were faced with an identity crisis.

Competition for students and a desire for greater acceptance by secular colleges led 26 American college officials, scholars and bishops in 1967 to produce the “Land O’Lakes Statement.” It publicly declared Catholic colleges’ independence from “authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself.”

The aftermath was shameful. Bowing to the anti-authoritarian movement of the 1960s and the interests of increasing numbers of non-Catholic students and faculty, most Catholic colleges watered down their emphasis on Catholic identity and their expectations for moral behavior. Fearful that courts would restrict government funding to faith-based colleges—a fear that never materialized on the federal level—college officials removed crucifixes from the classroom walls and reorganized under boards of trustees outside Church control. Conforming to secular academia, they whittled away at their core curricula and focused on preparing students for successful careers.

The resulting problems at Catholic colleges can largely be summed up into two categories. First, Catholic colleges embraced a distorted definition of “academic freedom” such that it is difficult to imagine what offensive speech or perverse activity might not be protected by it, so long as the ever-changing priorities of political correctness are not violated.

Second, most Catholic colleges have abandoned responsibility for students’ moral, social and spiritual development. The operating principle for most American colleges was once *in loco parentis*; today colleges provide campus facilities, support services and some programming for students, but most without clear objectives for personal growth or moral standards to define a Catholic campus culture.

Reform and Renewal

It seems this very damaging period may have reached a turning point. The courage and vision of Pope John Paul II helped slow the momentum of secularization and, we hope, reversed the trend.

The 1983 revision of the Code of Canon Law created a new section for Catholic colleges, including the requirement that any Catholic theology professor must have a *mandatum* (or “mandate”) from the local bishop, affirming that they will teach within the full communion of the Catholic Church. Students now have reasonable assurance of the orthodoxy of theology professors at colleges that require the *mandatum* or which at least strive to hire theology professors who are obvious candidates for the *mandatum*.

In 1990, Pope John Paul II issued *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, the apostolic constitution on Catholic higher education, by which he defined what constitutes Catholic identity at Catholic colleges. More than a statement of principle, the constitution’s General Norms are binding on Catholic colleges as an application of Canon Law. *Ex corde Ecclesiae* gives each local bishop the legal authority and responsibility to declare a college “Catholic”—or in the case of a persistently wayward college, to remove the Catholic label. It requires that every “official action or commitment of the [college] is to be in accord with its Catholic identity.” Catholic professors are “to be faithful to, and all other teachers are to respect, Catholic doctrine and morals in their research and teaching.”

The results have been encouraging. Even though compliance with *Ex corde Ecclesiae* varies widely, most Catholic colleges are taking steps in a positive direction. The Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, which once argued that *Ex corde Ecclesiae* is unworkable in the U.S., now pledges to im-

plement it. Many U.S. bishops are pushing quietly for reform, and in more than a few instances have publicly decried scandal on Catholic campuses. Lay Catholics have also urged reform—more than 20,000 of them as members of the Cardinal Newman Society, and others through local efforts and alumni organizations.

The unity of faith and reason continues to be a key theme for Pope Benedict XVI, who—like his predecessor—is a scholar with great appreciation for Catholic higher education. As philosopher Ralph McInerny has said, “It sometimes seems that the only voice insisting on the power of human reason is that of the Holy Father.” His great intellect and insight are having their impact especially in theology courses, and college leaders are intently watching the former Vatican prefect who successfully defused the liberation theology movement and disciplined wayward theologians.

The renewal of Catholic higher education is slowly becoming reality, despite the doubts of some of the Church’s brightest observers. But it will take many years to reach completion.

Distinctively Catholic

In the meantime, one of the most exciting developments in the Church today is the establishment of new, faithful Catholic colleges. We are in the midst of a new wave of colleges, with plans underway for several more in the coming years. An earlier wave in the 1970s gave rise to Christendom College, Thomas Aquinas College, and others that have since built strong reputations. Each of the new colleges is unique and offers something special to Catholic families: one concentrates on the increasingly important New Media, three serve the rapidly growing Catholic popula-

tion in the South, one emphasizes the outdoors and stewardship of nature, etc. Finding one's niche at a good Catholic college is becoming much easier.

Also very exciting are the colleges that have maintained or restored their Catholic identity despite prevailing trends in the opposite direction. More are joining this group, but the ones profiled in this *Guide* deserve praise for their heroism, often amid much scorn from faculty and officials at other Catholic colleges.

Many of the schools in the *Guide* provide an outstanding education in the Catholic intellectual tradition by means either of studying the Great Books of Western culture or through a core curriculum that coherently integrates the traditional liberal arts disciplines. These point to a renaissance of traditional Catholic education, an encouraging development.

What makes these colleges different from largely secularized Catholic colleges? A few examples:

- ❖ Instead of graduating students with no substantial exposure to the Catholic intellectual tradition, the colleges in the *Guide* generally have a strong core curriculum or several requirements to study faithful Catholic theology and philosophy.
- ❖ Whereas most Catholic colleges gamble on the maturity of students to refrain from sexual activity, the *Guide* colleges set clear expectations for moral behavior with same-sex residence halls or visitation policies that are strictly enforced. For example, the Franciscan University of Steubenville pioneered an innovative "household" program that encourages students to support their peers in healthy Christian lifestyles.
- ❖ About ten percent of Catholic colleges annually host the morally offensive play *The Vagina Monologues* as part of a national

fundraiser to support the worthy cause of preventing violence against women. The colleges in the *Guide*, however, strive to build a Catholic campus culture. Very Rev. David O'Connell, C.M., president of the Catholic University of America, said the *Monologues* has "become a symbol each year of the desire of some folks to push Catholic campuses over the edge of good and decent judgment." The University of St. Thomas in Houston instead presented a play, *Traffic in Women*, written by English professor Janet Lowery to bring attention to the centuries-old problem of trafficking women for prostitution, pornography or domestic labor.

Catholic families, then—and others who are attracted to the benefits of a Catholic education—have good opportunities for a college education that is steeped in the Catholic intellectual tradition while offering a moral campus environment. Already today there are 21 excellent colleges profiled in *The Newman Guide* which feature a variety of charisms, academic offerings, numbers of students, locations, extracurricular programs and more. For future students, the numbers of faithful Catholic colleges are increasing.

The renewal of historically Catholic colleges, which built their reputations upon the dedication of faithful Catholic leaders and faculty, is essential. Whether or not you are a student or graduate of one of these colleges, your prayers and support for renewal will have an important impact.

But today, with this *Guide* to 21 excellent colleges, we also celebrate the rising tide of Catholic higher education which Cardinal Newman so fervently hoped for: "[T]his is our hour, whatever be its duration, the hour for great hopes, great schemes, great efforts, great beginnings . . . to recommence the age of Universities."