

Student Apostles

One segment of the lay population that is too often overlooked by Church leaders and official documents is Catholic college students. Kevin Ahern reflects on the apostolic vocation of the student

By: Kevin Ahern

For over a century, Catholic college students have played an important, yet all too often underappreciated, role in the life of the Church. Inspired by their faith and moved by their youthful idealism, young Catholics have sought to live the Gospel in a wide variety of ways—from establishing small faith communities on college campuses to launching national and international campaigns promoting social justice.

Every day around the world, millions of undergraduate and graduate students are living out a truly apostolic vocation, one that is rooted in the call of Christ and that takes shape in four key relationships.

First and foremost, their vocation their relationship with God. Young adulthood forces students to make the faith their own—either to affirm or rethink childhood beliefs. Campus faith sharing groups, RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adult) programs, liturgies, retreats, lectures, spiritual direction, and other programs play an important role in helping young adults deepen their relationship with God.

A second dimension of the student vocation is to deepen one's knowledge of and relationship with oneself. Here is a unique opportunity to grow in self-understanding and acceptance. The guidance offered by student communities and supportive campus ministers can be extremely helpful in ensuring that this period of self-exploration does not fall into patterns of unhealthy behavior.

Third, in calling students to witness to Christ among their peers, the student vocation calls students to deepen their relationships with others at an interpersonal level, including friendships and healthy romantic relationships.

Finally, a vital part of the student vocation is to deepen their relationship with the broader world through social action and engagement. In the Decree on the Lay Apostolate, the Second Vatican Council speaks to the important apostolic obligation that lay people, especially young adults, have in engaging in social action. With their energy, idealism, and free time, students are in a unique position to take on different forms of social action, locally, nationally, and globally.

Every year in the United States two major actions bring together thousands of Catholic college students in order to draw attention to two very different issues. In January, pro-life activists gather in Washington, D.C., for the annual March for Life. Catholic students from campus ministries and pro-life clubs always form an active and visible part of the march. Similarly, every November, thousands of Catholic students, many from Jesuit colleges and universities, join the annual vigil and protest of the U.S Army School of Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia.

In addition to these highly visible events, Catholic students around the world are energetically addressing issues of social concern through their participation in the International Movement of Catholic Students (IMCS-Pax Romana). As the officially recognized lay movement for university students, IMCS and its national affiliates, such as the National Catholic Student Coalition, have been helping to empower students since

students founded IMCS in 1921. Today, this international network brings together over 75 national associations from around the world, addressing everything from the empowerment of young women in India to the development of HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns across Africa. Additionally, IMCS student leaders represent and advocate on behalf of students at various global meetings, including at the United Nations, World Bank, and Council of Europe.

Still, the majority of student social action takes place more locally, as students live out their faith through various volunteer and service learning opportunities. For example, at Boston College, hundreds of students sign up for one or more of the many social action and service programs sponsored by the Office of Campus Ministry—including Appalachia Volunteers, 4Boston, the Arrupe International Program, the Urban Immersion Program, and Loyola Volunteers. Even at colleges with far fewer resources than Boston College, Catholic students find ways to get involved and serve their communities.

Given the complexity of life today, Catholic students, now more than ever, need to discover this sense of the student vocation. They need to discover what it means to be a follower of Christ. Experience shows that it is not enough to bring together a few students for “youth days” or to organize occasional liturgies and retreats for them. A proper and effective engagement of students and young adults in the life of the Church calls us to find ways to empower the young people themselves to create, participate, and lead faith communities themselves, on and off campus. Such a task is challenging in several ways.

The primary challenge is to empower students to see themselves as active and responsible members of the Christian community. This awareness is difficult in the United States, where so many aspects of our culture discourage responsible student citizenship. Thus it is essential to find and train student chaplains and campus ministers with the skills necessary to support this kind of student ownership. Empowering students means giving them responsibility, even if that means risking that they will make mistakes.

An additional challenge comes in finding ways to support students financially and logistically in their apostolic vocation. Unfortunately, the Church’s financial situation in the aftermath of the clergy sexual abuse crisis and the recent worldwide economic downturn has greatly impacted the student apostolate around the world. Budgets for campus ministries and student groups have been cut, campus ministers have been laid off, and in some cases, entire ministries have been eliminated.

A further challenge occurs after the students graduate and seek to become involved in their local parishes. Sadly, many young adults, especially those coming from vibrant Catholic student communities, find it difficult to integrate into local parishes which, too often, are not as welcoming to “empowered” young adults as they need to be.

Catholic students and young adults have an important vocation in the life of the Church both personally and collectively. In light of the many difficulties facing the Roman Catholic Church today, these young and empowered Christian leaders can serve as a much needed source of hope, not only as the so-called Church of tomorrow but also as the young Church of today.

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