

CATHOLIC

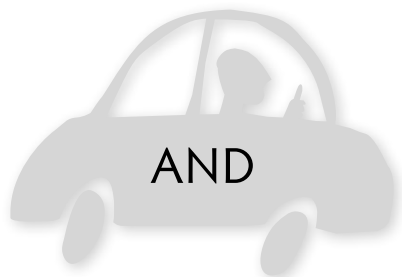


COLLEGE BOUND

5 Challenges and 5 Opportunities

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CATHOLIC AND COLLEGE BOUND

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by George R. Szews

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INTRODUCTION

Here are the three things I remember from my first day at college.

First, my parents and younger brother drove me to St. John's in Collegeville, Minnesota—a five-hour drive from our home in Wisconsin. When my mother saw my room in the oldest dorm on campus, she broke down and cried. “It’s so small and dirty,” she said through her tears.

Second, it was a hot day and my room was on the fifth floor. There was no elevator. My father and brother helped me carry up my possessions while my mother did her best to “clean up” my room with nothing but a roll of paper towels and a bar of soap.

Third, after the move in my parents were reluctant to leave, so my father suggested we get something to eat. We went to the Swan Café, where my brother had a chocolate malt and the four of us had the Sunday Fried Chicken Special. I never ate at the Swan Café again, because the food there wasn't very good.

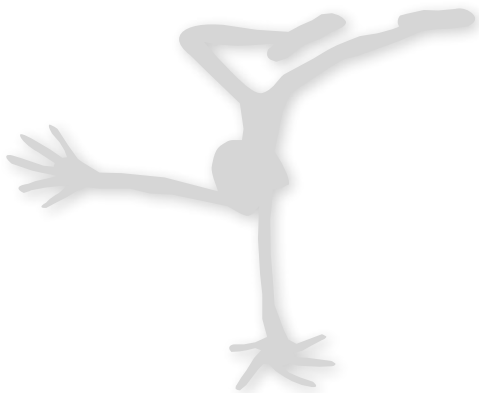
That's it. You'd think I'd remember more about my first day, but I don't. During the next four years, of course, I learned many things that would change what I thought about the world, what I believed about God, and how I wanted to see myself as an adult. But I wasn't thinking in those broad and fundamental terms that first day. I was looking at the world in much simpler terms: I was beginning an adventure in freedom and opportunity; I was leaving home; I was becoming an adult. While book learning was the obvious reason I was going to college, the real reason had to do with growing up

and moving on. Although I should have known that in those four years I would grow independent of my parents and set the course for the kind of life I would lead, what I really thought was, “I hope this is fun.”

How I got to be a campus minister is a longer story than I’m going to tell here. Besides, this booklet is about you, not me. As I write this I have been working with young adult Catholics for almost twenty-five years—all at the same university campus. In those years I have watched thousands of college students come and go; young women and men who had no choice but to deal with the challenges and opportunities of “higher education.” As in all things, some have dealt better with them than others. I keep in touch with former students, partly because I genuinely like them and partly because I want to see how the choices they make in college shaped their futures. I think most of them would agree with a cliché worthy of some cheesy movie but still true: “Now that I am older I understand how important the choices I made were when I was young.”

From my own experience and from listening to and watching so many university students over the years, I’ve concluded that there are a basic set of five challenges and five opportunities every college-bound Catholic encounters, whether he or she attends a big or small, private or public school; lives at home or on campus; is in a Catholic college, a secular college or a college affiliated with another denomination. There is almost no way to skip these ten issues, unless you choose to live under a dark, moist rock for the four years (or more) you are “at school.” Knowing in advance what these challenges and opportunities are may help prepare you to

deal with them and engage them in a constructive and determined way. Even if, like me, you're only hoping college will be fun, you will find that the experience will change you in ways you can neither anticipate nor control. You can, however, either take part in directing that change or just let it happen to you. This booklet is an attempt to give you a heads up and maybe a little bit of advice and encouragement, but the task of responding is yours and yours alone.



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FIRST CHALLENGE

The practice and knowledge of your Catholicism will be tested.

Whether your Catholicism is important to you or you see it as only a small part of who you are, you will be asked about it and tested on it when you go to college. There are groups on almost every campus that make it their goal to engage you at least once a year on the question of your faith in Jesus Christ. If you say you don't believe in him, they will try to talk you into converting or "giving yourself over to the Lord." If you say you are Catholic, they will try to challenge the depth of your knowledge and commitment to your own faith. They may invite you, for example, to a bible study that is theoretically denominationally neutral or to a "praise and worship" meeting that they assure you is open to all Christians or even to people without any faith.

In those bible studies and prayer meetings, you may often feel you know little or nothing about your religion and may begin to question whether or not you are even really Christian. Other students, many of them friendly and filled with good will, may have memorized bible verses and use terms and concepts we don't often use in the Catholic Church. You might come to believe that you don't really "know" Jesus Christ or have not been "born again" and therefore must not have a strong or vibrant faith. This experience will present a real challenge for you. You may either decide you want to toss out your Catholicism in favor of some new denomination or form of Christianity or even some other religion.

Here are some things that might help you face the challenge of having your practices and knowledge of your Catholicism tested:

- Most of the students you encounter in college (unless you attend a Catholic college) don't come from what we Catholics call the "liturgical" tradition. The Mass in fact provides a disciplined proclamation of a broad selection of the scriptures over the course of a three-year cycle. Catholics who go to Mass regularly or even semi-regularly and pay even a modicum of attention to the readings and homilies know more Scripture than they think they do. We Catholics may not be able to recite "chapter and verse" of the Scriptures, but we know the stories and teachings. More importantly, we understand the underlying meaning and the literary forms of the Bible better than many of our Protestant brethren, some of whom are what we call "literalists" or "fundamentalists" in the sense that they insist that every word of the Bible must be taken literally.
- Catholics also come from what we call a "sacramental" tradition. We believe that in addition to Scripture we can encounter God through sacraments, prayer and community. So we have the seven sacraments—baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, reconciliation, matrimony, ordination and the sacrament of the sick. We also have a rich tradition of group and private prayer and devotion, including the rosary, prayers at meals, meditation and contemplation, and other "Catholic" traditions that give us comfort and courage. We also

have what we call “the communion of saints,” which is the community of all those living and dead who believe that Jesus Christ is, indeed, “the way, the truth, and the life,” as he claimed to be. Finally, we have that marvelous invention, the Catholic parish, which is a faith community, usually in a particular geographic neighborhood but sometimes centered around a college campus or other institution, that provides a place where “all are welcome.”

- You need to know that there is no such thing as “denominationally-neutral” Christianity. Every student group that tries to recruit students on a college or university campus receives funding from some concrete denominational church. The materials used in the bible studies, the songs used in the praise and worship services, all come from somewhere. Someone paid to make them available for you. If you follow the funding you will discover which group is really behind the recruiting efforts.
- You can be confident that while you might use different terms to describe your Christianity, Catholics are most certainly Christians. In fact, we claim to be the “original Christians,” in the sense that we can trace our history all the way back to the original disciples. All the other Christian denominations can trace their history back to a time when they or their predecessors broke away from the Catholic Church. It is true that they may have had good reason to do so, since there have been many problems and abuses in the Catholic Church over the centuries and even today,

but the fact is our denomination—the Roman Catholic Church—has as much claim to authenticity as any other, and in many ways we have more. Catholics are committed to ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and cooperation with all people of good will, but we need not apologize or make excuses for our Christian credentials.

- Every Catholic has been baptized and is therefore counted among those Jesus Christ claims as his own. In this sense, all Catholics have been “born again in water and the spirit” and “accepted Jesus as our Lord and master.” Some of our Protestant brethren demand that we be able to name the date and place of this encounter with Jesus, but for Catholics this is an ongoing process, not a one-time decision. We encounter the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, in the Scripture, in our parish community, and in our prayer.
- While you may decide to attend these bible studies or praise and worship services because of the invitations of college friends, you do not have to keep going if you sense that they do not respect your beliefs or religious upbringing, and you are always welcome to invite your new friends to come to Mass or a Catholic bible study with you. If they are unwilling to reciprocate, you might question their sincerity in inviting you to their events.

FIRST OPPORTUNITY

To claim your Catholicism and grow in your faith.

The chapel in which I celebrate Mass four times each weekend holds only about 400 people, so I can tell pretty much each weekend who is there and who is not. That's disconcerting to some folks, comforting to others. Several years ago I noticed a student who would show up for a couple of weeks, and then disappear for months. He would show up again perhaps for a whole semester and then be gone for the next. After he returned from one of his long absences, I stopped him after the service and invited him to go on a walk with me. (I walk every day for exercise and rarely walk alone. I find my daily walks provide an excellent opportunity for me to get to know students and the members of the parish that supports our campus ministry work. I am usually booked for my walks about two weeks in advance.)

The student agreed to go on a walk, and we set a day and time. While we were on the walk, I told the student I noticed this pattern of coming to Mass and then disappearing for long periods. He said, "You really knew when I was or wasn't coming?"

"Yup," I said. "Can you tell me what's going on with that?"

He hesitated for a second or two and then said, "I'm a little embarrassed to tell you this, Father. Those times you don't see me, I'm not sure I believe in God. I really have a hard

time believing there is a God. Maybe there is just nothing out there. And beyond that, the whole story about Jesus. Maybe he was just a good man.”

“There are times you do show up, though,” I pointed out. “What’s happening then?”

“Something has occurred that makes me think: I look up and am surprised by the beauty of a sunset, for example, or my little niece grabs my finger with her perfect hand. Suddenly, I think there has to be a God, and so I find my way back to church. My problem is I can’t seem to keep believing.”

The May this young man graduated, he was in a going-to-church phase. I have no idea what he’s doing now, but I hope he’s come to terms with the fundamental belief: that there is a God and that in Jesus Christ we have seen God’s human face. That day on the walk, I was struck for the first time by how lucky I have been in my life. I have never not believed



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that God is real. I have been angry at God (and the church), I have run away from God (and the church), I have betrayed God (and the church), but I have always known deep inside me—in that place where words always fail us—that God loves me. I know from the many students I speak with that this is not always the case, that students are often torn between believing and not believing. The great opportunity of university life is that you have the time and resources to explore the dimensions of your belief. You can make Catholicism your own.

Each weekend, I not only know who is there at Mass, I watch their faces, looking for clues to the joys and sorrows they bring. I listen to their voices in the responses and songs to try to understand their joys and their worries. I look at the way they sit and stand, how they shake hands during the sign of peace, how they pass the collection basket one to another, and I try to get some idea of the burdens and triumphs they are experiencing.

Here are some suggestions I have developed from all this observation about how to claim your Catholicism and grow in your faith:

- Find a place to go to Mass on or near campus and make a commitment to go on a regular basis. Most large educational institutions have some sort of campus ministry program sponsored by the Catholic Church. On many campuses they will be called the Newman Center or the Newman Parish, named after the great John Henry Newman, an English cardinal and educator. In other places they will have a saint's name. Look in the yellow pages, watch the student newspaper or

bulletin boards for ads, ask around campus. If you go to a small school, there may be no formal program on campus. In this case, get yourself over to the nearest geographic parish or “shop around” until you find one you like. Then make sure you go up and introduce yourself to the priest after Mass. Tell him you are a college student and are looking for a Catholic community to hook up with. If the priest is on the ball at all, he will take your name and try to get you involved in the parish, especially with any other young adults they might have.

- When you go to Mass, participate. Sing, pray, listen. If you have the opportunity, volunteer to be a reader or Eucharistic minister or usher, join the choir, volunteer for a soup kitchen or blood drive. This may sound funny, but when you go to Mass, be sure to put at least a dollar in the collection. I know you might be broke, and I know a dollar isn't much, but you need to do this in order to feel some ownership of your Catholicism. You're no longer living your parents' Catholicism; it has to become your Catholicism now or it most likely never will be.
- Take advantage of educational opportunities provided by the parish or campus ministry program. When you engage a university level education, you begin to think and reason like an adult. Your Catholic education needs to keep pace with everything else you're learning or your Catholicism will be a foolish and outmoded and irrelevant belief system. Much of what you know about Catholicism and Christianity you

learned as a child. You were taught as a child, using simplified formulas and explanations. There is much more to what the Church believes than you could possibly have been taught when you were younger. So, go to a lecture or class or bible study program. Join a book discussion group. Find someone to talk to about theology and Scripture.

- Get to know and spend time with other Catholic students who want to claim their faith as an adult. Opportunities are often maximized when they are shared. There will be women and men who want to explore their faith, who want to make the most of their college years in making Catholicism their own, who want a voice in shaping the church of the future.
- Get to know your parish or campus ministry staff, and let them get to know you. You are in a transition period of your life. You need mentors on your journey. These staff people will listen to your doubts and fears; they have traveled the road you're on with others before you. It's important to have people who know the way ahead and are willing to help you get there.