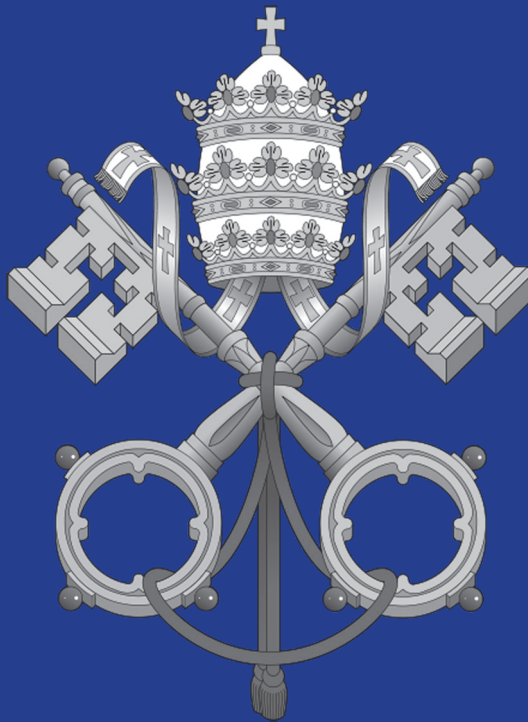


The Enduring Nature of the Catholic University

Commemorating the Anniversary of Pope Benedict XVI's
Address to Catholic Educators on April 17, 2008



A collection of essays on the renewal of Catholic higher education by
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with a foreword by The Hon. Kenneth Whitehead

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Catholic Campus Ministry: Christocentric Accompaniment

Rev. Msgr. Stuart W. Swetland

It began with music. Fr. Karol Wojtyła, a 31-year old parish priest who later would be known the world over as Pope John Paul II, had recently been assigned as an assistant at St. Florian's Parish in Krakow. His duties included the role of campus ministry to the many university students in the parish. But how was he to minister to these students in 1951 Stalinist Poland? He began with music.

By Polish tradition (following the pre-Vatican II calendar), February 2nd (the Feast of the Presentation) ends the Christmas season. It is the “last chance” to sing Christmas carols. On February 2, 1951, Fr. Wojtyła invited some university students to the parish to sing carols. He also began to teach them Gregorian Chant. Soon he had developed a regular student choir for the parish. But Fr. Wojtyła was teaching more than music. The choir practices afforded him the opportunity to begin a real relationship with those who participated in it. Soon these students would also be attending a special Wednesday morning Mass and a Thursday evening conference and inviting their friends. Wojtyła's campus ministry had begun.¹

During this incredibly fruitful time for Fr. Wojtyła's ministry, he developed many of the ideas and themes that would serve him—and through his papacy, the Church and the world—so well in the future. These included his understanding of the relationship of philosophy and theology, his “theology of the body,” and the idea of young adult retreats that eventually became World Youth Days. However, underlying all of these developments was his basic pastoral approach to campus ministry. Fr. Wojtyła made the conscious decision to approach his pastoral assignment through what his biographer George Weigel calls “the ministry of accompaniment.” The young priest would “accompany” the university students placed in his charge as they journeyed from childhood into the world of adults.²

This basic pastoral stance is not without its dangers. Many older adults think the way to relate to the younger generation is to become like them. This runs the double danger of insincerity and foolishness. Fr. Wojtyła's accompaniment was different. While he did truly share his life with the students, even vacationing with them so that he could further instruct and serve them, he never attempted to become like them. Rather, he modeled the life of a fully formed Christ-centered adult so well that he made his students want to be like him. Weigel records that one of his former students, Stanislaw Rybicki, understood this well when he stated: “Today, many priests try to be like the kids. We were trying to be like him.”³

What made Fr. Wojtyła's accompaniment different was that he was not just “hanging out” with the students through some vague “ministry of presence.” Rather his accompaniment was

1. George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc., 1999), pp. 98-99.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 100.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 105.

grounded in a thorough, total embrace of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. His accompaniment was absolutely Christocentric. As one of his students wrote in a pseudonymously signed article in the underground press of the time, Wojtyla taught them “to look at all things in the spirit of the Gospel.”⁴

George Weigel’s massive biography had not been published when I began working in campus ministry in the early 1990s. However, enough of Pope John Paul II’s life and writings were published for me to glean the essence of his pastoral approach. I attempted to focus the entirety of the campus ministries that I had the privilege to serve on “Christocentric accompaniment”—to accompany the students as they made the journey to adulthood and help them focus on the person and teaching of Jesus Christ so that they may begin “to look at all things in the spirit of the Gospel.”

In post-war Communist Poland there were great pressures brought to bear upon the young adults to abandon the faith. If loyalty to the Church could not be eradicated from the young, the authorities at least wanted to isolate Church activities from the rest of society. In particular, they wanted the young to separate their faith from the rest of their lives. Weigel writes, “In Poland as elsewhere, communism deliberately fostered the fragmentation of society and the atomization of its members, the better to maintain political control and the easier to form ‘new socialist man.’”⁵

While the powers that be in the United States have no such official policy, the social and political forces of today have a similar effect on young (and not so young) adults. The affluence in our society tends towards atomization, and various societal pressures tend toward asking of us, either explicitly or implicitly, a separation of faith from life. Catholics and Catholic university campuses are not immune from the temptation to compartmentalize our lives. Faith and the commitment to Christ can be seen as something to be limited to the one or two theology courses that are required of most students. Often these courses, attempting to cover everything and present all theological viewpoints, leave the students even more bewildered and lacking any core understanding of the purpose and meaning of Christ and His Church. Fortunately, many universities (like Mount St. Mary’s where I currently serve) are recognizing this problem and attempting to address the need to integrate faith and life in every aspect of the curriculum and campus life. However, this can only be done if campus ministry is providing the necessary atmosphere and opportunity for students to integrate their lives through prayer, study, and the sacramental life of the Church.

To be authentically Christocentric, the priests, religious, and laity who serve in campus ministry must be people who “think with the mind of the Church” (*sentire cum ecclesia*). All too often people are drawn (or worse, get assigned) to campus ministry who are dissenters or who struggle with fidelity to the Church’s sacramental practices. Perhaps people believe that the best place for such ministers is on a college campus where new and creative ideas are all the rage. In fact, the last place that any such people should be is anywhere near campus ministry. College-

4. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

5. *Ibid.*, pp 104-05.

age students are at an incredibly important and vulnerable time in their faith development. During the ages 18-25 (or perhaps better in our age 18-30), young people must make adult decisions about the faith moving from the inherited faith of childhood toward a “fully owned” adult faith commitment. Hopefully, they will discern their vocation during this period. In addition, they will more than likely form the most important adult relationships of their lives (including meeting and perhaps marrying their spouse). Partly because of our dismal record in catechizing the young, partly because of the nature of this vulnerable time of life, young adults need a “meat and potatoes” approach to campus ministry. They *do not* need dissent and disobedience.

When I first started campus ministry, I took the *Oath of Fidelity* required of new pastors. I did this publicly, in front of a congregation of many of my students including most of the student leaders. I told them that they deserved in justice from their campus ministers two things: (1) the teaching and preaching of the Gospel whole and entire in accordance with the authentic teaching of the Magisterium of the Church and (2) the joyful celebration of the sacraments of the Church in accordance with the Church’s liturgical rubrics and norms.

All campus ministers and ministries should provide the same. It is a basic starting point for effective ministry and models for the students a Christ-like fidelity and obedience. The students will have their faith challenged in plenty of settings and situations; they will hear dissent from many quarters. They do not need to experience it from their campus ministry. In addition, making it clear that the students can expect to hear what the Church teaches and to experience what the sacred liturgy is meant to be, creates a much-needed attitude of peace and serenity in campus ministry amidst what can often be the whirlwind of college life. For too long, generations of college students have had to endure the “fluffiest” of teaching (often at odds with the Magisterium) and the lunacy of the latest fads at Mass. Campus ministers of all types have unjustly imposed their own ideas of “innovation” onto an unsuspecting and unprepared college community. Clown masses, “liturgical dancing,” black lights and gimmicks of all sorts have been forced upon students. The students usually vote with their feet. They do not want, and certainly do not need, at this point of their lives, such novelties. They are looking for some stability, real answers, authentic prayer, and deep spirituality in campus ministry. The gospel provides the kind of answers for which they seek; the liturgy, celebrated as the Church intends it, provides the “living space” for them to come into authentic contact with the Living Lord. Justice demands of the Church’s ministers that we provide it.

Campus ministry must also be a “school of prayer.” Campus ministers need to have a profound prayer life of depth and substance. Of course, all are called to such prayer, but in particular campus ministers will need such a spiritual life because of the demands of their vocation. Long hours, stressful days, constant demands, an almost infinite need for their help and guidance from their students means that campus ministers must be well-grounded in the Lord or they will quickly “burn out” or self-destruct.

But in addition to their personal need for prayer, campus ministers must be a model of prayerfulness for their people. Mark Twain used to joke that politics is all about sincerity—if you can

fake that, you've got it made! Well campus ministry is all about sincerity, and you cannot fake this sincerity. The young, especially the young of the Millennial Generation now in college, can spot a phony at one hundred paces. Many of them and/or their friends have been lied to and betrayed at every turn. They are skeptical of those in authority because they have let them down so often. They long, they search for people who are authentic—people who live what they proclaim.

Campus ministry (and each campus minister) must, as much as possible, radiate Jesus Christ in word and sacrament in everything that it does. This is what Pope John Paul II called for in *Veritatis Splendor* when he spoke of the *sequela Christi*—the following of Christ—in all things. This is the central teaching of one of the finest theologians of the last century, Hans Urs von Balthasar (made a Cardinal by John Paul II), when he wrote, “For this reason, lest everything in the Church become superficial and insipid, the true, undiminished program for the Church today must read; the greatest possible radiance in the world by virtue of the closest possible following of Christ.”⁶ By radiating Christ in all things, campus ministry will give witness to the beauty, truth, goodness, and unity possible in, with, and through Christ and His Church. It will allow the students to flourish in their journey to full adult membership in the Church.

Adult faith formation

During the college years, most people make an adult decision about their faith life. Studies have shown that if Catholics practice the faith during their college years, they will almost always remain an active member of the Church. Conversely, all too many of the fallen-away Catholics began their rebellion during their college years. This is why there must be many programs and opportunities on our campuses for adult faith formation. Bible studies, prayer groups, small group experiences, classes, reading groups, question and answer sessions, individual counseling and spiritual direction, Catholic societies, and professional groups are just some of the ministries that will be needed. Hopefully, campus ministry is supported by a vibrant academic community which is dedicated to helping students integrate faith and life. Of course, an excellent and faithful theology department is essential to this task. One very central moment in adult faith formation is the Sunday liturgy where the homily should be a model of solid, practical, enlightening proclamation of the beauty and grandeur of the gospel.

Vocational discernment

The idea of vocation should be an essential unifying theme for campus ministry. As a young campus minister, Fr. Wojtyła taught his students to view life vocationally. Weigel reports that “he once told Danuta Rybicka, whether one lived in a convent, in marriage, or as a single person in the world, ‘You have to live for a concrete purpose.’”⁷

Not only did Fr. Wojtyła counsel this in personal encounters, but as Supreme Pontiff he made this concept the focal point of his first letter to the youth of the world before the very first

6. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work in Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), pp. 57-58.

7. Weigel, p. 107.

World Youth Day. In this letter he used the story of the Rich Young Man's encounter with Jesus in the gospel (Mk 10:17-22, Mt 19:16-22, Lk 18:18-23):

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up, knelt down before him, and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus answered him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and your mother.'" He replied and said to him, "Teacher, all of these I have observed from my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said to him, "You are lacking in one thing. Go, sell what you have, and give to (the) poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." At that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions. (Mk. 10:17-22)

This well-known story was used by John Paul II to illustrate some central teachings of the Second Vatican Council on vocation.

The story is filled with pathos. Obviously, the rich young man is drawn to Jesus. He sees something in him that touches him and makes him believe that perhaps Jesus can answer his questions. He is willing to abandon his social status by running after this poor homeless, rabbi and kneeling in front of him. He asks Jesus a great question, "What must I do to inherit everlasting life?" How like the young to have such wonderful questions!

Jesus tells him that he already knows the answer: keep the commandments. As John Paul II points out, what Jesus has said to the young man is that he is called, as we all are, to be holy—to be a saint. This is what the Second Vatican Council called "the universal call to holiness." All are called to sanctity. Campus ministry must help instill in young people a genuine "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Mt 5:6).

But the story does not end there. The young man has been trying to live the commandments, to live a holy life, but he knows there is something more. "What more must I do?" Jesus, looking at him with love, tells him he must sell everything, give it to the poor, and then come and follow him. This young man was called to be a radical disciple, like the apostles were, following Jesus wherever he went.

Not everyone is called to such a witness to Jesus. But this man was. This was this young man's *particular vocation*, his unique calling. He refuses and thus "goes away sad." Campus ministry must help students have an authentic encounter with the Lord. They should help and guide students as they struggle to live lives of holiness. They should provide the time and space convenient for student's schedules to frequent the sacraments (especially mass and confession). Campus ministry should challenge students to ask what it is that God is calling them to do and be. Abiding joy comes from following Jesus by doing the will of the Father. Campus ministers should help students discern their particular call so that no one will "go away sad" because they missed or refused God's invitation to greatness.

Forming adult friendships

The college years provide a wonderful opportunity to begin the most significant adult relationships in one's life. Campus ministry should aid students by providing the type of atmosphere where healthy and holy friendships can be formed and deepened. Social events, support groups, peer ministry, retreats, service opportunities, etc. all provide the kind of place and space where Christ-centered friendship can flourish.

Some of these friendships might develop into dating relationships. Campus ministers should encourage young men and women to view dating as discernment. Numerous classes and discussions on the Church's teaching on sex and sexuality ought to be offered. Peer ministry in these areas can be helpful as can presentations focusing on the theology of the body. In their heart of hearts, most young Catholics want to be chaste and to discover who, if anyone, they are called to marry. Campus ministers should strive to help create the kind of atmosphere where it is easy to be good and normal (even "cool") to be chaste.

A healthy campus ministry will also be heavily involved with preparing couples to marry. In many ways, the college campus is a privileged place for such preparation. This will entail coordinating many people to aid in the preparation, not the least of which is several couples who are certified teachers of Natural Family Planning (NFP).

In all these aspects of campus ministry, the goal of the campus minister is to meet the students wherever they are at in their journey with Christ and to accompany them as they move closer to the Lord. Notice that Pope John Paul II started with music. The young wanted to sing popular Christmas carols. That is where he met them. But he did not leave them there. He took them deeper. He introduced them to Gregorian Chant. But what is more, he began from this music ministry to form, holistically, these young men and women into the Christian disciples they were called to be.

The minister often acts as a guide and companion along the way. Sometimes the minister is more akin to a parental figure; sometimes more an aunt or uncle; friend or sibling. But the goal is always a Christ-centered journey by a Christ-centered community.

John Paul II in the end of his "Letter to the Youth of the World" holds up Mary for our contemplation as a model of this type of young adult ministry. He writes,

we have before our eyes the image of Mary, who accompanies Christ at the beginning of His mission among men. This is the Mary of Cana of Galilee, who intercedes for the young people, for the newly-married couple when at the marriage feast the wine for the guests runs out. Then Christ's Mother says these words to those serving at the feast: "Do whatever he tells you." He, the Christ. I repeat these words of the Mother of God and I address them to you, to each one of you young people: "Do whatever Christ tells you."

Mary accompanies the Church as we travel to our heavenly Cana. She intercedes and protects, guides and acts as a model of faithfulness. May all of us entrusted with the apostolate of campus ministry imitate her as she imitated her Son and Our Lord.

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