

Catholic missionaries take ministry work to U.S. college campuses

WORCESTER, Mass. – After college, Renee Burke-Drazba landed a job in her field and loved it.

But the next year she gave up her teaching job to do fundraising to support herself as a missionary to college students.

“People thought I lost my mind,” she told The Catholic Free Press, diocesan newspaper of Worcester. Now they seem to think, “Someone needs to do it, and it can’t be me.”

Ms. Burke-Drazba is a missionary with the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, known as FOCUS, which began in 1998 and is now an outreach at 33 secular and Catholic colleges in 18 states.

According to the group, its goal is to “reach the Catholics on campus and invite them to see how having Christ at the center of their lives will enrich them personally and give their lives meaning.”

The group spreads its message through missionaries like Burke-Drazba, of Blessed Sacrament Parish in Worcester, who is entering her third year of service at a Catholic university, Seton Hall University in South Orange, N.J., and Danielle McKenna, of St. Joseph Parish in Charlton, who is entering her first year of service at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis.

Ms. Burke-Drazba said she learned about the fellowship when she was a student involved with Catholic ministry at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, and met one of the group’s missionaries.

Ms. McKenna, who recently graduated from St. Anselm College in Manchester, N.H., heard about it from a friend and said it was exactly what she wanted to do.

Each missionary has to raise enough money to cover his or her expenses, such as

food, rent, health insurance and student loans. They live simply, may save some of the money and also tithe.

McKenna's fundraising included appeal letters, telephone calls, personal visits and talks at prayer groups and Masses at her parish.

"It's a challenge to ask for money, because it's humbling to be depending on the generosity of others," she said. "But I'm learning it gives people an opportunity to give. I'm learning that living simply is actually more satisfying."

"You're not really gaining a worldly reward from it," Ms. Burke-Drazba said of this ministry. Her fundraising has included speaking at two churches.

"That in itself is a ministry to others in the church," because it enables donors, called mission partners, to participate in the mission, she said.

Although Ms. Burke-Drazba serves at a Catholic college with a major and minor seminary, the missionaries can do things the priests can't.

"You're basically creating friendships with students," she said. "It is draining, but, seeing the fruits of it, you don't care. Do I want to go on campus to watch Jay Leno at 11:30 at night? No, but if that's what it takes, I'll do it."

In turn, she can invite the Leno fan to Mass, and sometimes religious questions surface during such get-togethers, she said.

Missionaries each mentor, or disciple, two or three students and lead Bible studies for them and other interested students.

Ms. McKenna said she will mentor students and help organize larger gatherings that might generate interest in Bible studies.

She said ministry at the Naval Academy will differ some from what takes place at other campuses because missionaries there are not allowed to proselytize or hang out in dorms or eat in the cafeteria with students. However, they can hold Catholic events and talk about religion to students who bring it up or who practice their faith, she said.

In the upcoming year of talks with students and get-togethers she said her goal is simple: “to bring the love of Jesus and the hope of his life to students.”