

Franciscan University: Fertile Soil for the Faith



Pre-theologate students at the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio, gather for evening prayer in this 2009 file photo. (CNS file photo)

When I was a student at Franciscan University, I remember hanging out with my brother's roommate, Father Michael Gaitley (best-selling author and national speaker), playing intramural volleyball with Jason Evert (author and international speaker on chastity), passing Steve Skojec (founder and editor of OnePeterFive) in the cafeteria and having intense spiritual discussions with Father Jeffrey Kirby (author and media personality).

I also remember pulling pranks on Bob Lesnfsky (missionary to urban youth and Catholic Hip Hop artist), going on camping trips with Paul Coakley (inspired the Catholic world with his holy death), being quizzed on Catholic history by Bryan Mercier (Catholic speaker), traveling around Europe with my roommate Will Bloomfield (founder and editor of the Catholic Art Series) and visiting the off-campus house of two graduate students, Matthew Leonard (author) and Michael Miller (film director and fellow at the Acton Institute).

My wife, who didn't attend Franciscan, is always surprised by how many people I know when we attend a large Catholic gathering. I am not trying to name drop, but demonstrate that over the course of a few years at Franciscan, I befriended numerous individuals who would go on to become leaders in the Catholic world - speakers, authors, bloggers, intellectuals, teachers and religious.

My Franciscan connection is with many more people than just those who went on to become "Catholic famous." Franciscan formed countless individuals who now serve as the backbones of their local Catholic communities.

Who's that young priest everyone is excited about? He is a Franciscan graduate. Who is that young mom running the homeschool association? She is a Franciscan graduate. Who is that dynamic youth minister that is great with the kids? He is a Franciscan graduate. Who is that young sister, inspiring the next generation of young women? She is a Franciscan graduate.

What makes Franciscan University so special? Catholic scholars have speculated on the nature of a true Catholic culture. They write on living in the High Middle Ages, the climax of Catholic civilization, and they describe the dynamism of American

Catholic parishes in the early part of the 20th century. If you are wondering what a Catholic community entails, you don't need to speculate about a historical era. You can rather visit Steubenville, Ohio.

I was fortunate enough to go to college in the late 1990s and early 2000s before the popularization of cell phones and the Internet. I checked my email once a month at the university computer lab. We only had access to a few televisions, and I only watched a movie once every couple of weeks. I was completely detached from modern secular culture. Moreover, the campus is on a hill, physically separated from the local town, and there are not many reasons to explore the surrounding area, to put it nicely.

On this little hill rising up from the banks of the Ohio River, the students, staff, religious, and faculty of the university have created a small but vibrant Catholic subculture. The student body is 99 percent Catholic, and the faith is actively lived out. The sacramental life is vigorous with nearly universal attendance by students at Sunday Mass (98 percent), and daily Mass is attended by more than 700 students. Confessions are held by seven or eight priests, four times a week, with long lines of students. The mercy chaplet is prayed daily at 3 p.m., and numerous public rosaries are recited each day. My personal favorite was the walking rosary around campus, which took place nearly every evening.

Catholicism is physically present on campus. Every residence hall has a chapel with the Blessed Sacrament, and one chapel has perpetual adoration. The campus is filled with religious imagery, including the Stations of the Cross, a tomb for the unborn, a Marian Grotto, and numerous outdoor statues. Crucifixes adorn the wall of every classroom, and dorm rooms often contain images of students' favorite saints. Around the necks of students and staff, you'll catch a glimpse of miraculous medal or scapular.

The college has a system of small groups, called households, in which members commit to attending religious activities – daily Mass, rosary, retreats – and foster a sense of accountability. I had friends who were on the verge of being kicked out of school their first semester because of excessive drinking, but after joining a household, they were regularly attending daily mass at 6:30 a.m., a changed person. Numerous other organizations exist on campus to promote the culture of life, vocations, evangelization and service endeavors. Dozens of students leave in the evening to help the local homeless population, or an equally impressive number drive to Pittsburgh to protest prayerfully in front of an abortion clinic every Saturday morning.

A strong Catholic culture is created at the university with its own practices and traditions. You might hear students talking about heading over to the "Port" to pray, slang for making a holy hour at the replica of the Portiuncula on campus. Students

finishing an 11 a.m. class might naturally make their way to noon Mass as a group. As the events unfolded on Sept.11, 2001, one of the chaplains set up an altar for eucharistic adoration, and as I approached the altar, I saw hundreds of students kneeling and praying for those impacted by the events and for our country. Catholicism infuses every action at Franciscan.

Some are critical of Franciscan, and there is a valid critique that it is financially challenging to attend the college. Yet as one friend put it, your soul is worth it. Others claim that it is a Catholic bubble and does not represent the real world, which baffles me. Why would you want to send your teenager into the real world? Do you think it is better for an eighteen-year-old to go to a secular school and experiencing drinking and loose sexual morality, all in the name of experiencing the real world?

To use a military metaphor, Franciscan is like Catholic boot camp. You would not want an untested and ill-prepared teenager to be sent into a battle zone like Iraq or Afghanistan without any preparation. Similarly, you do not want to send your child out into the world without a strong faith. The students who graduate from Franciscan, for the most part (there are always exceptions), are prepared and ready to encounter the world without becoming part of it. My experience showed me that Franciscan is fertile soil for the faith and helped generate the next generation of Catholic leaders.

[Click here to learn more about Franciscan University.](#)