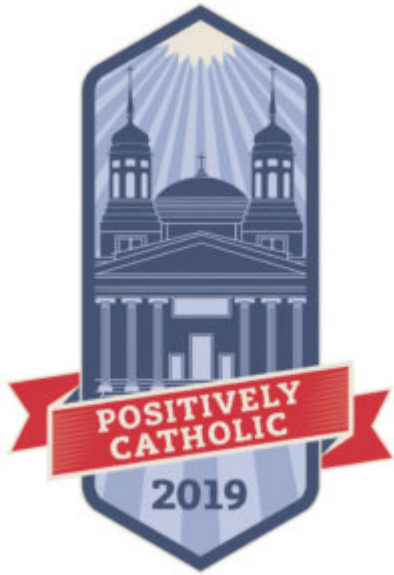


Missionaries share faith from Annapolis to Emmitsburg to Towson

Third in a Series



Caroline Byrne used her first semester at Mount St. Mary's University as an opportunity to try different things, not always making the best choices.

Her faith background, which included Sacred Heart School in Glyndon and then Mount de Sales Academy in Catonsville, was sound, but as a young adult, she was unsatisfied with her spiritual life, she said.

As the end of her first semester in Emmitsburg, Byrne registered to attend SEEK – a five-day biennial Catholic conference sponsored by FOCUS, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, an organization which has 700 missionaries on 153 campuses in the United States and five countries.

Three of those campuses are within the geographical footprint of the Archdiocese of Baltimore: the Mount, Towson University and the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis.

With the help of its missionaries and other students involved with FOCUS, Byrne came to devote herself to God.

“I couldn’t live two lives,” Byrne said. “I had to pick a path and walk it.”

Her sophomore year, she said, was one of learning and receiving; praying with Scripture was pivotal in her “transition of heart” and in developing a personal relationship with God.

“The more I got to know our Lord, the more I wanted to devote my life to him,” she said, adding that she came to notice a difference in how she viewed her peers around campus. “I’m seeing souls, and these souls don’t know what they’re missing.”

Byrne wanted to share that feeling and teach others about God’s love.

As a junior and senior, Byrne led FOCUS Bible studies for female underclassmen. As her May 2016 graduation approached, she was encouraged by a FOCUS missionary to apply for a full-time position with the organization.

“Being a missionary was already what I was doing as a student,” Byrne said. “Once I leave FOCUS, I will always be a missionary, regardless of whether I have that title or not.”

Commitment

Most FOCUS missionaries are recent college graduates; some are married, with families.

“As long as you’re called to the mission, you’re called to the mission,” Byrne said.

A FOCUS missionary makes a two-year commitment to go anywhere there is a need; it can be extended on a yearly basis. If not married or engaged, the missionary must participate in a one-year dating “fast” – a break from dating or romantic relationships. If one is in a serious relationship, it requires taking a step back.

Byrne, who was engaged before she started mission work, was able to stay close to home and fill a need at Towson University. Now she is in her second year as a missionary at the Naval Academy, where her assets include familiarity with the military life, as her husband, Dan, is an officer in the Maryland National Guard.

FOCUS missionaries have anything but a 9-to-5 job. For Byrne, a typical day includes a holy hour; a “power hour,” which includes walking the Academy grounds

while praying the rosary; team meetings; one-on-one meetings with members of the Brigade of Midshipmen; prepping for events; and evening activities, such as the Catholic Midshipmen Club and Bible studies.

It is a full-time job, one that includes benefits and a salary – albeit one fundraised entirely by each missionary.

Win, build, send

FOCUS targets its evangelization on college campuses, as students generally have ample free time, are open-minded and are questioning seemingly everything.

“They’re making decisions that are affecting their life and their future,” Byrne said.

Missionaries work in three waves: win, build and send. “Win” involves creating authentic friendships with students: saying hello, grabbing coffee, going for a run or hitting a Zumba class. “Build” focuses on smaller group catechesis: prayer, Bible study and entering into one-on-one discipleship, where a missionary mentors a student through conversations. “Send” comes when mentored students reach out to their peers. For many, it is natural to want to share with others, as Byrne did.

FOCUS follows a model of multiplication: rather than one person who can reach many, a few touch a few more on a more personal level. “You will reach the campus and the world faster and more effectively,” Byrne said.

When serving Towson, a public institution, Byrne and the missionaries used hands-on evangelization, such as sharing meals with random students in the cafeteria. It was challenging, Byrne said, as most of the 20,000 undergraduate students are “headphones in, heads down.”

Towson has an advantage in the Newman Center, which acts as a home base for missionaries and a place for chance encounters. Emily Winner attended the first Mass of her freshman year at the center; it was also her first encounter with FOCUS missionaries.

“It can be really hard to make friends (when entering college),” said Winner, a sophomore Mass Communications major. “The missionaries are very good at just living life with students and making them feel loved. ... They are honestly my best friends (and) are amazing tools that help me learn how to share my faith on campus.”

Winner was not involved in evangelization efforts before FOCUS. Now, she is in discipleship with a missionary and leads Monday night Bible study.

“It can be scary to be Catholic on campus (but) there’s something about having the missionaries – they’re not afraid,” said Winner, who was able to develop a relationship with Christ personally through the missionaries. “How could I not share that?”

Father Matthew Buening, the Catholic chaplain at Towson, said the FOCUS missionaries are of great assistance, especially with outreach.

“(They) scoop up people (who would) run away if they saw me walking towards them,” Father Buening said.

Different strokes

The Naval Academy’s structure requires more creative evangelization.

Missionaries are not allowed to eat with midshipmen in Bancroft Hall, which magnifies the simple act of bringing them a meal from off-campus. Missionaries not only braved the elements to cheer them during a physical readiness test (PRT) the frigid morning of Feb. 9, they fueled them the night before with a pasta dinner.

According to Byrne, midshipmen who share their valuable free time with missionaries are ones who truly want to deepen their faith. Thirty-six percent of the approximately 4,500 midshipmen identify as Catholic, typically the largest denomination at the Academy.

While 70 percent of Mount St. Mary’s students are Catholic, not all are active. Claire Whitehead is the FOCUS team director at the Mount, after serving two years at the U.S. Military Academy. While the service academies attract men and women who

must fulfill a service commitment upon completing a degree, the Mount draws a variety of students in a liberal arts environment.

That range of experience, she said, “makes you aware of the different ways you can love and serve the different types of people.”

Whitehead was among the Mount missionaries accompanying more than 80 of its students to the SEEK conference in Indianapolis Jan. 3-7, which drew approximately 12,000 students.

“It was so cool to see their encounters with the Lord,” Whitehead said.

The conference, she said, draws the most faithful students, as well as those who are questioning and non-Catholics.

It was the same conference that served as the turning point for Byrne, who attended as a Mount freshman.

“FOCUS is changing the world. ... (It) has practical methods of teaching the basics of our faith,” said Byrne, who noted that the missionaries are ready to walk with the many “complacent Catholics” in need of formation on college campuses. “We need more students to say ‘yes’ to Jesus.”

Email Emily Rosenthal at erosenthal@CatholicReview.org