

Papal visit on CUA campus excites Catholic students active in faith

WASHINGTON - Late-night talks with friends about life and faith are common in the dorm rooms of The Catholic University of America. Talking about the Catholic Church in class is pretty normal, too.

But a pope on campus? That's something many students agree is unusual and exciting.

"I can't even fathom the fact that he (Pope Benedict XVI) may be walking up the same stairs that I use to go to Starbucks before I go to class," said Kelly O'Connor, a sophomore early-childhood-development major from outside Philadelphia.

Like the more than 6,000 students at Catholic University, O'Connor found out from a November campuswide e-mail about Pope Benedict's April 17 stop on campus to address U.S. Catholic education officials. The pope will visit Washington and New York April 15-20.

Although students are not invited to the talk, university officials have said the students should be able to see the papal entourage enter and leave the campus.

Ms. O'Connor, who was reading Pope Benedict's "Introduction to Christianity" in a theology class, said she is looking forward to learning more about the pope in his writings, "knowing he will be on our campus before we know it."

Excitement aside, several Catholic University students interviewed by Catholic News Service discussed how they appreciate the universality, timelessness and truth they find in Pope Benedict and the Catholic Church.

Nestled in what is known as "Little Rome" or "Little Vatican" according to District of Columbia guidebooks, Catholic University is one of dozens of Catholic institutions in Washington's Brookland neighborhood. Catholic University is the only university in America founded and operated by the U.S. bishops, and about 80 percent of undergraduate students and 60 percent of graduate students are Catholic.

Annalee Moyer, a theology major and intern at the nearby U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, told CNS that she and her friends “often discuss the latest church issues and our feelings about them.”

Ms. Moyer, a senior from Waynesboro, Pa., said her generation “is really alive in our faith. We try to really dissect it” and not simply take Catholicism at face value, “but understand it.”

“It’s not a stagnant faith, but really an alive faith,” she said.

Ms. Moyer said she actively lives her faith by participating in service opportunities. After participating in a service project in Jamaica, she got together with her friends and “debriefed these sort of situations,” and they asked each other: “What does this mean to my faith? How do we spread this throughout the world?

“This is perhaps the best way to understand and hash out the modern issues that the Catholic Church tackles,” she said.

When asked what issues she thinks and hopes Pope Benedict will address when he is in the United States, Ms. Moyer said the pope might talk about Catholic education or abortion, “the greatest social justice issue in our country.”

Patrick Quintana of Denver, a junior international economics and finance major, said the Vatican has an effect on his life “simply because I am Catholic.”

“However, I’ve only noticed recently what that exactly means for me. Finding strength in the church isn’t simply an issue of obedience to God’s will ... it’s a destination in my search for the truth, a truth that can be found through knowledge and insight from 2,000 years of history, with the Vatican at the center,” he said. “I say this because I’ve struggled greatly in my life as a Catholic.”

Mr. Quintana said his faith has played a major role in his relationship with a Protestant girl. He said he “assumed that an interchurch relationship wouldn’t be a big deal if we were meant to be together” but discovered otherwise. Quintana said belonging to the same church as the girl is important “mostly for the unity in Christ that we desire our relationship to have.”

“The next step obviously was to search for truth,” he said, adding that he keeps finding truth in Catholicism.

Nicholas Berg, a junior from Dover, N.J., is a mechanical engineering major and campus student minister. Berg said he thinks Pope Benedict’s “interest in the field of science can bring more people to study” scientific thought.

“I think he is a great example to people that science and religion can and should coexist,” Mr. Berg said. The pope’s remarks “can also help students like myself see that not all engineers have to sit in an office all day in front of a computer. Our skill set can be used for the greater good in a very unique way such as building homes for those who do not have a satisfactory roof over their heads or a plumbing system for a place which has never known indoor plumbing.

“I get strange looks sometimes when I tell people I am an engineering student and as involved in my faith and campus ministry as I am,” he said. “I’d like to think that I can help to bridge the gap between those who are extremely into their faith and those who quietly practice.”