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Faith Today



Portrait(s) of a campus minister

By Father Joseph Kenna
NC News Service

There is no typical campus minister. Each one is a unique combination of personal gifts and professional training tempered by the demands of a particular campus setting.

Beyond their commitment to ministry in higher education, campus ministers have about as much in common as the coffee drinkers of the world.

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Let me introduce you to some ministers you might meet on a college campus today:

Father Jack, a big man with a big laugh and a bigger heart, supports, challenges and encourages students at a large state university. He is likely to be seen anywhere on campus, from acting in a fraternity talent show to leading prayer at college graduation.

In a student cafeteria, he energetically discusses an idea he has for Sunday's liturgy. Mass is packed every week. Father Jack positively glows when the young adults respond with their ideas.

He spends hours late into the evening counseling. Sometimes it's a lonely freshman away from home for the first time. On occasion, it's a student who admits he is feeling suicidal.

This evening, Father Jack has an appointment with Rosemary, a senior in special education. She is part of what is called a team of peer ministers: several young men

and women who have committed themselves to taking leadership in the Newman community.

The campus ministers meet with Rosemary and the other peer ministers regularly to sharpen leadership skills and to develop strategies on how a few people can act like the leaven in bread, making their Christian values apparent in the academic environment.

Specifically, Rosemary's task is to lead a Wednesday night group of about 10 students through prayer and discussion in her dormitory lounge.

But Rosemary is not talking with Father Jack for any of these reasons. She is a dedicated person who is considering spending time as a lay missionary in Appalachia after she graduates. She has need for some spiritual direction at this crucial stage in her life.

Rosemary is typical of many students who look to campus ministers for support and vocational direction.

Father Jack, who loves his work, is a general practitioner: "All things to all students."

He works on a team with Sister

Brigid, whose accent and twinkle reveal her Irish birthplace, and Ron, the theologian-in-residence.

Sister Brigid, a Religious for more than 30 years, brings special skills of organization and a knowledge of group dynamics to the team effort. Among other responsibilities, Sister Brigid organizes peace and justice programs in cooperation with a Lutheran campus pastor.

Her personal spirituality and deep compassion are immediately evident to students and faculty alike. Sister Brigid spends much of her time in the Student Union. What otherwise could be a cold and potentially devastating academic environment becomes Christian and warm because of her easy availability and accepting presence.

Sometimes Sister Brigid talks with Tom, a freshman from out of state. He confides to her a shaken faith. His history professor says the church played the role of villain in history. On top of this, his dormitory roommate ridicules his Catholicism and wants him to join a bible study offered by a campus group that is

openly hostile to the Catholic Church.

Tom is lonely, confused and hurting despite a tough exterior. For him, Sister Brigid seems like "family," someone he can trust and look to for support in his painful time.

Ron, a recently married campus minister, has an advanced degree in theology. He specializes in helping students deepen their professional preparation by challenging them with solid theology and church teaching.

He runs a popular program. There is great interest in the Catholic Church on campus and many students enroll in formal classes on Catholicism. Students relate well with Ron's enthusiastic love of life.

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It is reassuring to know that 2,000 varieties of Father Jack, Sister Brigid and Tom serve millions of Catholic college students on every kind of campus in the United States.

Whether it is comforting the lonely, defending the rights of Catholic students, teaching theology or providing the sacraments, this marvelous group of ministers quietly and consistently works to meet the spiritual needs of the college community.

(Father Kenna is campus ministry representative in the Department of Education of the U.S. Catholic Conference.)

Vocations

On college campuses across the country, a wide variety of individuals — priests, Religious and laity — go about the business of ministering to students. It is a special vocation, writes Father Joseph Kenna, with special rewards.