

FAITH MATTERS

ISSUE 9

A PUBLICATION OF AVE MARIA MUTUAL FUNDS

KEEPING THE FAITH IN COLLEGE

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Every year, as crystalline autumn skies replace the shimmering canopy of summer, students across the country settle into new schedules and routines. It's a time of hopeful and sometimes anxious transition – especially among families of college freshmen. And for mothers and fathers who are Catholic, that teary goodbye at the hugging tree is also time to meditate on a hard truth: that all one's parental love and care might be insufficient to keep a son or daughter Catholic on campus.

It's true that American colleges and universities remain the envy of the world, true too that they represent to most families a

dream incarnate. But it's also a fact, proven many times over, that many Christian students carry their faith away from home – only to lose it somewhere amid those paths crisscrossing the quad.

Why is college so often a destroyer of even the most patiently cultivated faith? The answers aren't exactly obscure.

For one, a ferocious new secularism is ascendant in the wider world, especially on non-religious campuses. According to its dictates, Christianity just isn't something enlightened people "do." This unacknowledged yet widespread prejudice can't help but percolate down to every

young Catholic seeking the approval of new peers. Everyone wants to be liked – or at least not vilified, as defenders of the faith so often are. Thus simple anti-Church bigotry, and the understandable if unspoken fear of inciting it, have become powerful engines driving many a college student out of church.

There's also the fact of ubiquitous temptation, of course. As novelist Tom Wolfe showed brilliantly in his dark classic about college life, *I am Charlotte Simmons*, the "toils and snares" of temptation are writ large away from home. Students, including students of faith, can't help but notice. People do not typically say goodbye to religion after giving their creed a good long mature think, only later realizing that they're now freed up for some pretty exciting things. No: like other human beings who have no problem with faith until it gets in the way of something they really, really want, most young people typically run that sequence in reverse: wanting to enjoy those pretty exciting things, they go for them by tossing their religious upbringing overboard.

Hence social stigma crossed by widespread temptation equals a lot of students "deciding" that they've lost their faith. Faced with these uncomfortable realities,

what's a Catholic mom or dad to do? The answer can only be to treat a child's entry into college as you would any other spiritual battleground, and arm them for it.

The great news is that recent years have seen an outpouring of excellent books, all responding pre-emptively to anti-Catholic prejudices and other challenges faced by today's churchgoing students. Austen Ivereigh's *How to Defend the Faith without Raising your Voice* is one such helpful companion to slip into the backpack. Aurora Griffin's forthcoming *How I Stayed Catholic at Harvard: Forty Tips for Faithful College Students*, is another fine and happily entertaining choice.

There are also classics that remain as fresh and invigorating today as when they first appeared – and if anything, given the tone of the times, even more compelling. Michael Novak's *Tell Me Why*, in which the master theologian answers his daughter's questions about faith, is packed with wisdom wonderfully and painlessly delivered. George Weigel's *Letters to a Young Catholic*, just revised and re-issued in paperback, is another beautifully readable book that no college student should be without, both for its heart and for its tantalizing tours of some of the great Catholic sites of history.



Students of literary bent might also appreciate being transported back to a time when Christians were not only entrenched in some of the world's greatest universities, but also producing some of the most beloved works of the past century. Philip and Carol Zaleski's new book *The Fellowship* charmingly details the heyday of C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and other greats in the set known as the "Inklings." Lewis and Tolkien also take center stage in another winning new book, *A Hobbit, A Wardrobe, and a Great War*, by Joseph Loconte. *Literary Converts* by Joseph Pearce – a thorough catalog of the great Christian conversions among leading British thinkers of yesteryear – is

another classic for the intellectually inclined grads and undergrads.

In addition to learning the lesson from such volumes that religious faith and intellectual sophistication can indeed go hand in hand, today's students might also draw comfort from knowing that even global fame and adulation did not spare these writers from anti-religious prejudice; Lewis and Tolkien and company, like many practicing Christians today, knew the snobbery of tony unbelief. But that didn't stop them from adding gold to the stores of world literature – another lesson that Catholic students can take to heart.

In more good news, they will also find moral and social ammunition awaiting them in the form of groups that have sprung up just for people like them – resources that did not even exist a generation ago, and that are transforming the experience of college for the good. FOCUS, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, has spread in a few short years to over 100 campuses around the country. The interdenominational Love and Fidelity Network is another excellent source of ideas and camaraderie for like-minded students around the country. And of course the electronic tapestry of the internet bring the faithful together as never before. Sites like *First Things*, *thecatholicthing.org*, *Ignatius Insight*, *Aleteia*, *Patheos*, and many more can amount to daily reality checks for sons and daughters struggling to keep the faith. Be sure that students know some links before leaving home, and suggest that they subscribe.

In addition to arming sons and daughters through the likes of these, Catholic mothers and fathers would do well to arm themselves, too. For those considering religious colleges and universities, start by understanding that they aren't all alike. Knowing Catholic from Catholic Lite (WHICH RAPIDLY DEVOLVES INTO

CATHOLIC NOT) can make all the difference between young adults who will go on to raise the next generation of the faithful – and those who will instead check “none of the above” when surveys ask for their religious affiliation.

Finally, help your grown children to be happy warriors. Praise these young men and women for their courage in bucking the sloppy secularism of the times. Let them know that you know they are entering a more challenging era than most of their middle-aged parents had to endure. For better or worse, there's no more Catholicism-as-usual in America, on campus or anywhere else – and with enough energy and courage, moral and intellectual armament, we can all pull toward making that a good thing.





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