

# Ex Corde Ecclesiae

by [Jeff Ziegler](#)

In an April archdiocesan newspaper column, Archbishop Wilton Gregory of Atlanta, echoing the views of many parents, expressed concern about the effects of university culture on the faith of Catholic young adults. "Often the university campus," he wrote, "is not merely secular or non-sectarian so much as it can be hostile to or censorious of religious belief and faith." "Even some of our Catholic universities," he added, "struggle to retain their Catholic identity."

This loss of Catholic identity at Catholic colleges across America is often traced to the Land O' Lakes Statement on the Nature of the Contemporary Catholic University, which twenty-six influential figures in the academic world signed in 1967. "To perform its teaching and research functions effectively," they emphasized, "the Catholic university must have a true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community itself."

The fifteen years that followed witnessed the founding of several Catholic colleges that in contrast emphasized their Catholic identity. These colleges — Thomas Aquinas College (1971), Magdalen College (1973), Christendom College (1977), Thomas More College of Liberal Arts (New Hampshire, 1978), and the College of Saint Thomas More (Fort Worth, 1981) — were all lay initiatives. In the decade after Pope John Paul II's Apostolic Constitution on Catholic Universities (*Ex Corde Ecclesiae*), a religious order — the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity — established Our Lady of Corpus Christi (1998), and that same year, Ave Maria College was founded in Michigan. As *CWR* reported in its December 2002 issue, "high land prices, tight zoning regulations, and adverse community sentiments" led to the subsequent opening of Ave Maria University in Florida. During the decades following the Land O' Lakes Statement, other new Catholic schools, including Cardinal Newman College (St. Louis), held classes but eventually had to cease operations.

Since 2005, three new Catholic colleges — one in the Archdiocese of Atlanta — have opened their doors, while a fourth is scheduled to open this fall; each has the approbation of its local diocese. Vastly different in their academic approaches, they are united in their desire to be faithful to the teaching of the Church.

## University of Sacramento

The University of Sacramento, an initiative of the Legionaries of Christ, opened its doors in January 2005 with forty students and held its first commencement ceremony two years later. Presently offering one degree program — a Master of Arts in Education with an emphasis in catechetics — the university's enrollment now stands at eighty.

According to Deacon Ray Helgeson, the university's director of academic programs, these programs were established "primarily in response to the expressed needs here in the Diocese of Sacramento." Bishop William K. Weigand, who has led the Diocese of Sacramento since 1994, said two years ago that the university's founding "is wonderful news for everyone in the greater Sacramento area, but especially for the more than 500,000 Catholics who live within the Diocese of Sacramento."

Students enrolled in the master's program are required to take nine core courses and one elective and write a thesis. The degree program's foundational classes include courses in Catholic thought, catechetical foundations, biblical interpretation, educational philosophy, and the role of Scripture and liturgy in catechesis.

In addition, the university offers a certificate in catechetics for teachers in Catholic schools and religious education programs and is launching an executive master's degree program in global leadership and ethics. University board member Fr. Thomas Berg, L.C., executive director of the Westchester Institute for Ethics & the Human Person, told *CWR* that while this "global dimension is characteristic of current graduate programs, we hope to make it a fundamental aspect of the undergraduate programs when launched."

Asked to compare the university's academic environment to that found at other schools, Deacon Helgeson says:

I think many colleges and universities today have fallen to the mores of the culture, and so much of what the culture is advocating . . . The "dictatorship of relativism" is permeating our society and our everyday lives. This relativistic mentality by its very nature lacks a firm foundation to build upon, not only for the future, but to provide for what is essential in our society today. I think a number of our Catholic colleges and universities have also fallen in this regard.

However, the focus must not be on where we are falling short, but rather what can we do to renew the culture, what can we do to renew society. Society and culture must always be built upon truth. The perennial work of a university has always been to educate, to lead its students and others in the pursuit of the true, the good, and the beautiful; and once found to display and proclaim this through all the various disciplines and other means at its disposal. The University of Sacramento exists in order to provide this opportunity.

At present, the university is a nonresidential school with temporary headquarters in a downtown office building. The school's current programs, said university president Fr. Robert Presutti at the commencement ceremony, are the foundation of what he hopes will become "a university of 7,000 undergraduate and graduate students, many of whom will be residing on a beautifully master planned 200-acre campus."

Most faculty members' primary affiliations are with other institutions. Faculty members interviewed by *CWR* praised the University of Sacramento's strong Catholic identity. Dr. Stanislaus Dundon, a philosophy professor at California State University, Sacramento, says that all involved, from "students to the president, are deeply committed Catholics

who intend to use their education to accomplish Christ-like goals. Their intellectual demands are high, but there is not the air of 'career orientation' you might find in any graduate school, Catholic or secular. Every student seemed to be devoted to the sacraments and orthodoxy in theology."

Dr. Kenneth J. Howell, director of the Institute of Catholic Thought and adjunct religious studies professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, says that "the university attracts students who are deeply committed to learning and who wish to foster the life-giving message of Jesus Christ within the world." Dr. Alberto Ferreiro, professor of European history at Seattle Pacific University, agrees: "There is an air of devotion that envelops the milieu; the staff, students, administration, and students radiate the joy of being Catholic." The students, he adds, "have a deep desire and hunger to learn the Catholic faith and put it into action. It has been a joy to teach them."

Teaching and learning at a non-residential campus makes for an atypical university experience: faculty member Fr. Edward Pepka, a diocesan priest, says, "I just popped in and out on Monday evenings. No campus, no campus life." Still, he recalls fondly, "My students were all older men and women, mostly professionals, some teachers. All were highly motivated and contributed actively to their education. I never had to pull teeth. It was a pleasure."

"It seems to me," he continues, "that the Legionaries are free of the secularizing influences that have infected many small and large Catholic schools in our country. I hope they succeed."

### **Southern Catholic College**

While California's Catholic population stands at 28.8 percent of the overall state population, Georgia's Catholic population is among the lowest in the nation at 5.1 percent, according to statistics published in the latest *Catholic Almanac*. With no Catholic college in Georgia or neighboring South Carolina, but with an increasing population and a relatively vibrant Catholic culture — the two Georgia dioceses are statistically among the most vocation-rich in the nation, as documented in *CWR* articles published in 2005 and 2006 — Tom Clements believed the time was ripe to found a college there. "We were not created to counterbalance any other institutions," Dr. Jeremiah J. Ashcroft, Southern Catholic College's president, told *CWR*. "We were created because there was not a Catholic college in Georgia."

After selling Conduit Software in 1999, Clements devoted himself to the task of founding the college, which opened its doors in September 2005 on a 100-acre campus in Dawsonville, a town sixty miles north of Atlanta. The college had an inaugural class of seventy students and currently has 144 students; ninety-five freshman and transfer applicants have been accepted for the fall of 2007.

Since its founding, Southern Catholic College has sought to emphasize its Catholic identity. "Our board of trustees is dedicated to the college being faithful to the Church's

Magisterium," Dr. Aschcroft says. "To assist us the board created a board of fellows whose sole purpose is to provide oversight of our Catholicity."

"There is an excellent relationship between the archdiocese and the college," comments Patricia Chivers, communications director of the Archdiocese of Atlanta. "Southern Catholic College is a tremendous asset to the State of Georgia and contributes to the life of the archdiocese by offering the opportunity for a college education in a Catholic environment in Georgia to families who did not have this option before."

Even with its strong Catholic identity, foreign languages professor Dr. Michael Smith observes that "the tone of Southern Catholic is very subdued" compared to that at a Protestant university at which he previously taught. "We Catholics [here] are not as 'demonstrative' or 'charismatic.'"

Southern Catholic College has five majors — business, English, humanities (history, philosophy, and sacred theology), integrated sciences, and psychology — and offers an extensive integrated core curriculum. All students are required to take four courses each in English and history, three courses each in theology and philosophy, and additional courses in art history, math, science, and a foreign language.

"I believe that Southern Catholic is more committed to the liberal arts education than most other institutions," says history professor Dr. Andrew Stern, who holds degrees from Georgetown, Harvard, and Emory. He observes:

It seems to me that all students, regardless of major, view these courses as integral to their education, not merely as requirements to be endured. If the business majors do not want to be in my Western civilization class, they at least do a good job of disguising the fact.

Even more significantly, however, I think that Southern Catholic is unique in that its academic program is so closely integrated into all other aspects of campus life. What takes place in the classroom is just one part of how we prepare students to be informed, compassionate, and faithful individuals and citizens. This is possible in large part because of the college's size. We professors see our students not only in the classroom but also in chapel, in the dining hall, and about campus. I think the sense of community we have here helps students integrate the academic component into the other aspects of their lives.

"All of the students," adds science professor Dr. Elaine Bailey, "are highly motivated to succeed and work very hard to achieve this. They go above and beyond what is required of them. One of the greatest things about this college is that the students appear on campus to be one big family," with professors "working toward the same goal, giving the students that background that they need to become successful and moral leaders."

Other faculty members contacted by *CWR* praised the college's esprit de corps. According to business and economics professor Trudy Dawkins Morlino:

I have found at SCC something I haven't found on many campuses with which I'm familiar: a true sense of camaraderie and giving. My colleagues are the most generous people I have ever had the pleasure of working with. Their dedication to their Church, community, and our family of students is above reproach.

"Most of my students," she adds, "attend Mass daily and place a high value on the time they spend in prayer. This transfers to the classroom as well as to outside activities."

Dr. Ashcroft believes that his college's "academic curriculum contributes to spiritual development by challenging students to learn to use faith and reason [in the words of Pope John Paul] 'like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth.'" The college's mission, he continues, "is to produce moral and ethical leaders who will enlighten society and glorify God. An integrated education based on both natural and revealed truth is the best means to bring moral clarity and spiritual discernment to a generation equipped to lead in the midst of a cultural crisis of relativism and ethical chaos."

Student blogger Brian Kemple (socath.blogspot.com) concurs: the college, he says, is "one of the most well-rounded places I've been, in terms of academics and spirituality. Each feeds off the other, and both are tied together by the students and faculty."

"Although there are certainly issues on campus," he said to *CWR*, "the problems of the school, due almost entirely to its youth, are being ironed out as it grows and gains experience. At the moment, the chief issue is that we're so tight-knit, and in such an intimate environment, that personal relationships can be very strenuous at times."

### **John Paul the Great Catholic University**

Since Pope Pius XI's 1936 encyclical on motion pictures, the Church's teaching office has turned its attention repeatedly to the communications media. In his last apostolic letter, Pope John Paul II offered the following challenge: "Do not be afraid of new technologies! These rank among the marvelous things — *inter mirifica* — which God has placed at our disposal to discover, to use and to make known the truth, also the truth about our dignity and about our destiny as his children, heirs of his eternal Kingdom. Do not be afraid of being opposed by the world!"

John Paul the Great Catholic University — originally named New Catholic University — was founded in response to the teaching Church's repeated exhortations to use the media in the service of the Gospel. The school opened its doors in San Diego in September 2006 with thirty students; sixty new students are expected to enroll in the fall of 2007.

The university's Web site explains that the school's curriculum is "a radical blending of Catholic spiritual, ethical, moral and social principles, with world-class and cutting-edge creativity and innovation in the culturally influential fields of communications media, media-enabling technology, and business." The university currently offers two bachelor's

degree programs: communications media (with an emphasis in entertainment media) and business (with an emphasis in entrepreneurial business).

John Paul the Great's curriculum has twelve required courses in the humanities, including seven in theology and three in the masterpieces of literature, art, and music. During their junior and senior years, students are expected to work together in self-selected teams to create a business.

As is the case with the University of Sacramento, most faculty members at John Paul the Great's faculty have their primary affiliations with other institutions; they also tend to have extensive experience in the communications industry or business. Film professor Fernando Alessandri is a producer with Once Upon a Time Films; digital media professor Tom Dunn has won four Telly Awards for excellence in his field. Finance professor Alan Lane, who also serves as the university's chief operating officer and chief finance officer, is the former president of Business Bank of California and Southwest Community Bancorp.

Film professor Chris Riley also works as director of the writing program at Act One, Inc., which trains and mentors Christians working in mainstream film and television. He commented to *CWR*:

What strikes me about the academic milieu at JP Catholic is a real, joyful seriousness about faith combined with an approach to education that seeks practical, real-world applications for knowledge. I think those two things go hand-in-hand: a faith that is lived out in everyday life, and knowledge that is immediately applied to everyday situations . . . The students at JP Catholic impress me as surprisingly knowledgeable, serious about their learning, and willing to engage in the learning process in a way that requires critical thought, energy, and risk. I love it.

Derry Connolly, the university's president and founder, earned his Ph.D. at Cal Tech, spent fifteen years working in industrial research and development for IBM and Eastman Kodak, and served as an associate dean at the University of California at San Diego. Viewing "faithfulness to the magisterial teachings of the Church as a 'black and white' issue," Dr. Connolly says his school seeks to "inspire students to apply [these teachings] in the lives they live [and] the communities they touch, and to bring more souls to God . . . Our core spiritual drive is helping our students to get to know Jesus in Scripture and in the Eucharist — preparing them to take Jesus into the world."

Rodrigo Valdivia, chancellor of the Diocese of San Diego, says that Bishop Robert Brom "has given his consent to include the word 'Catholic' in the name of the university. The Diocese of San Diego does not endorse or promote the university, since it has an independent Board of Trustees." At the same time, Valdivia told *CWR*, "John Paul the Great University contributes to the life of the diocese by offering yet another opportunity to students from the area and beyond for college level studies in a Catholic setting. The presence and participation of the students and faculty at local events further edifies the local community."

Freshman Matt Salisbury describes the university's "unity and moral vibe" as "very, very strong. I'm not just saying this; there really is something that sets this group of students apart from others I've seen and been in. And while students aren't afraid to live their faith, most of them are absolutely serious about building successful careers in the entertainment industry or as businesspeople. It's a profoundly Catholic, profoundly professional college."

Offering a glimpse of life at the school, the student who blogs under the *nom de plume* Basil (jpstudent.blogspot.com) told *CWR*:

At the beginning of every quarter, everyone cleans their rooms and apartments, goes to morning Masses every day, does all their homework on time, and is generally in a good mood. Towards the end of the quarter, the rooms get messy, etc. But it all works out well. Our RAs are awesome, and they somehow have kept these media-loving, bursting-at-the-seams kids under control.

Basil concluded his comments with words not frequently heard at other schools: "I have to go make a movie now."

### **Wyoming Catholic College**

The 1970s saw the founding, rapid growth, and forced demise of the University of Kansas's Integrated Humanities Program, one of the boldest experiments in restoring classical liberal education. Dr. Robert Carlson, who received his Ph.D. from Kansas, preserved the memory of the Integrated Humanities Program in his moving 1995 chronicle *Truth on Trial: Liberal Education Be Hanged*.

Today, Dr. Carlson serves as academic dean at Wyoming Catholic College, which will bring to life in a Catholic context many of the insights of the Integrated Humanities Program. According to the college's Web site:

The curriculum and campus are devoted to the formation of the whole person. Studies include the classics of imaginative literature, history, mathematics, science, philosophy, fine arts, and theology. They employ the great and good books as well as the natural created world, effecting a rich combination of intellectual and experiential or poetic knowledge. Students' imaginations are enriched and their capacity for wonder deepened .

..

In this Catholic tradition, emphasis lies not in the dissemination of information, but rather with the development and perfection of the intellect, the passions, and the will, enabling students to approach and embrace the good, the true, and the beautiful throughout their lives . . . The faculty and college will be faithful to the Magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church and the repository of faith handed down over the past two thousand years.

Assistant academic dean and theology professor Dr. Peter Kwasniewski told *CWR* that a threefold attentiveness to the intellect, the senses, and the spiritual life distinguishes Wyoming Catholic College from other Catholic liberal arts colleges. "The single most notable or unique feature of WCC," he says, "is the way it seeks to educate the whole person by combining (a) an integrated four-year liberal arts Great Books academic curriculum, (b) an outdoor adventure program for the cultivation of the body, the senses, and the imagination, and (c) ongoing spiritual formation that involves the learning of *lectio divina* and a practicum in Gregorian chant, liturgy, and spirituality."

Dr. Kwasniewski adds, "It is hard enough to find a good Catholic college that offers even one of these; there is for sure no college that combines all three."

Though the college is independent from the local Diocese of Cheyenne, a diocesan priest (Fr. Robert Cook) serves as the college's president, while Cheyenne Bishop David Ricken serves as chairman of the board and appoints one third of the board members.

Bishop Ricken said to *CWR* that he hopes that some graduates "will be able to stay in the diocese after their graduation and to assist us with religious education programs, assist us as teachers in our Catholic schools, and to help us in general ministry of the parishes." Joining Bishop Ricken in his support for Wyoming Catholic College is Archbishop Charles Chaput of Denver, who wrote recently, "I recommend Wyoming Catholic College to parents, students, and teachers as a school that educates the whole person — mind, body, and spirit."

Wyoming Catholic College will open its doors in August 2007 at a temporary campus in Lander, a city of 7,000 near the center of the state. The freshman class will have a maximum enrollment of thirty-two, and students from fifteen states have been accepted into the program. A three-week intensive camping and hiking trip — led by instructors from the National Outdoor Leadership School, and accompanied by a chaplain — will precede the beginning of classes.

This encounter with God's grandeur in nature, administrators hope, will lend itself to the development of a contemplative and liturgical spiritual life that is grounded in the best of Catholic tradition, including the authentic teaching of the Second Vatican Council. Dr. Kwasniewski explains:

We seek to be at the deep center of the Church — with Pope Benedict and with the bishops in union with him, such as our own beloved Bishop Ricken. This means, concretely, we want to be at the forefront of the "reform of the reform" when it comes to liturgy; we want our students to be steeped in the best of Catholic culture and tradition, especially in sacred music and in a love for Latin; we want them to be Eucharistic and Marian in their fundamental spirituality . . . The only thing we insist on is maximal fidelity to Vatican II, which in turn means, as that council itself insisted, maximal fidelity to the whole breadth and depth of Catholic tradition.

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