

# Back to School

## The Fellowship of Catholic University Students

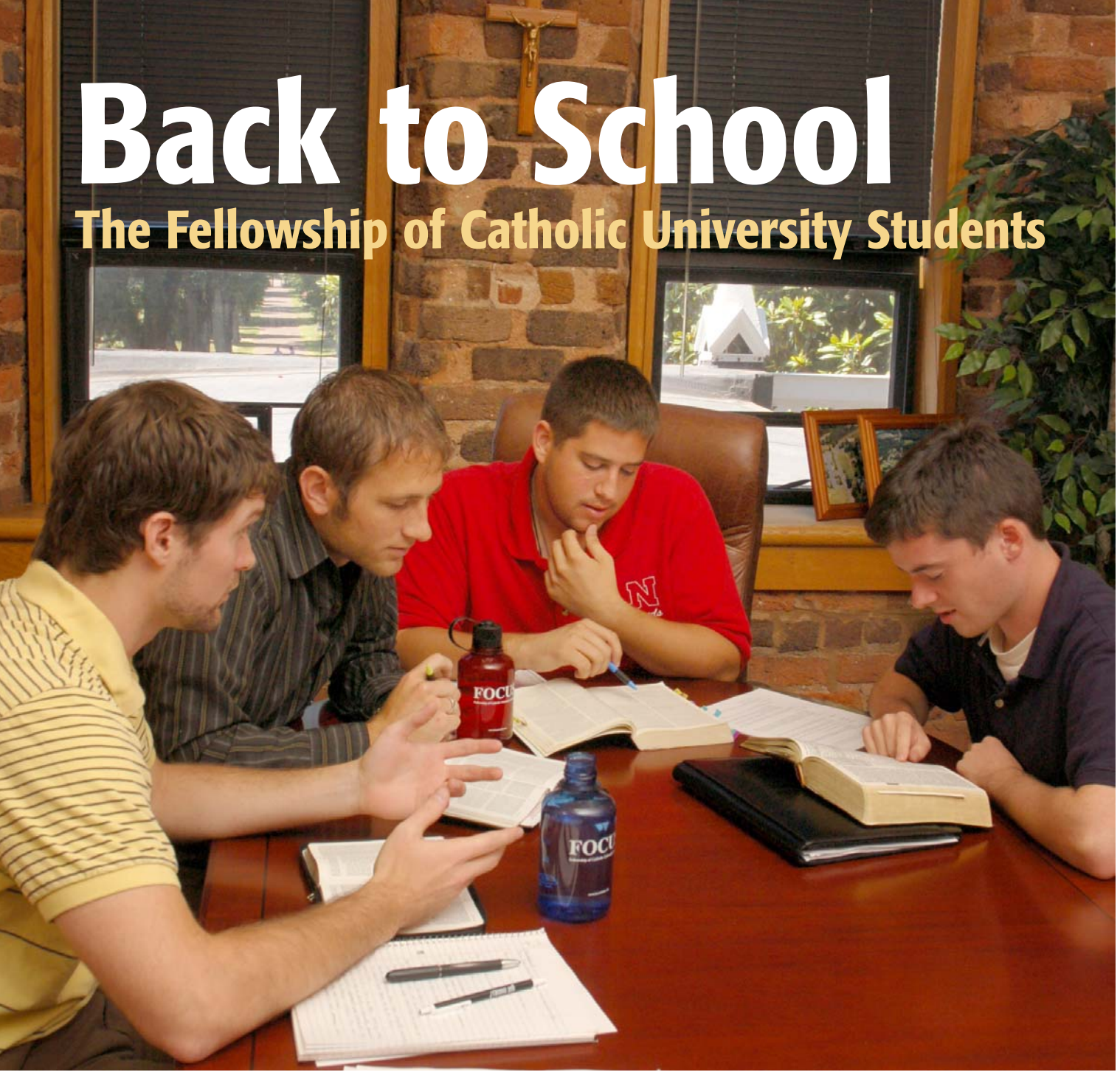


PHOTO FROM FOCUS

Across the country, recent college graduates are heading back to campus to share the Catholic faith and transform the culture for Jesus Christ.

BY AMY SMITH

**200** MISSIONARIES. 39 CAMPUSES. 21 STATES. Thousands of students. In 10 years.

From the United States Naval Academy to the University of Colorado and schools in between, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, or FOCUS, is making an impact on Catholic and secular campuses across the country.

The Denver-based organization celebrated its 10th anniversary in January 2008. It has come a long way since it began with two staff members at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas.

Equipped with Church teaching and Scripture, the missionaries, who are recent college graduates, go to campuses to share the Catholic faith.

Reflecting on the past decade, FOCUS founder and President Curtis Martin is encouraged. "To see the breadth and depth of their talent and

the heart and soul this young generation brings, it's like a lightbulb plugged into a power source," he says.

"There's power in their spirit of joy and love. They literally glow in the dark. It's one of the most exciting things in the world, and we have a front-row seat to see what God's doing in young people's lives."

### 'Be Soldiers'

Just as FOCUS was getting started, Martin had the privilege of receiving advice from Pope John Paul II. "I asked him for advice that I could share with the young people with whom I was working," Martin recalls.

"He said, 'Be soldiers.' Over the last 10 years we have been reflecting upon that. We recognize the need to lay down our lives in the spirit of loyalty and dignity that a soldier has for his cause. The primary battle is for our hearts—for loyalty to Christ—so that we can go build up the Kingdom."

This sentiment is echoed by Mara Ruane, a second-year missionary serving at Vanderbilt University in Nashville. "We want people to know that, yes, you're swimming upstream, carrying the cross, but you're not alone. We have to remind ourselves we have fellow soldiers to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with, who can hold us up to bear the truth."

### The Mission

The FOCUS mission statement reads: "To know Christ Jesus, and to fulfill His Great Commission, by first living and then communicating the fullness of life within the Family of God, the Church."

"FOCUS's mission is to help fulfill the great commission, to reach the whole world for Christ," explains John Zimmer, FOCUS senior director for staff development. "At the same time we recognize that college campuses provide a great opportunity for two specific reasons: They're where the next generation of leaders are currently, and they are unique environments—for about four years people are all in one place, very available, and we can walk on campus and have them available to minister to. If we can reach them during this 'critical decade,' we can impact the world for Christ."

The decade between 16 and 26 is a critical time in life, Martin says. "Young people are making life decisions and values are tested. They decide whether to reject or accept Catholicism. Will the Catholic Church have a seat at the table when they're making decisions?"

Martin knows this well, having drifted away

from, then returned to, the Catholic faith during college. "By the grace of God I came back," he says. His own experience prompted his desire to reach out to college students.

Ruane has seen the importance of the work in a matter of months.

"We just show up with the truth of Christ, and it's so attractive that people can't resist him," says the Ave Maria University graduate who previously worked in Catholic theater. She sees Christ as the one who goes out on the campus bringing souls to himself, bringing into her path those he wants her to minister to.

### Christ-centered

FOCUS gives credit where it is due: Jesus Christ. "He is the model of what we're doing. Jesus shared the gospel by coming and living with his disciples," Martin notes. "We are actively placing missionaries with their peers on campus to live and invest in the students. A radical presence is so necessary."

Key to that is a personal relationship with Christ. FOCUS staff spend an hour before the Blessed Sacrament each day, in addition to other prayer time and Mass.

"If we are going to talk to people about God, we need to talk to God about people," Martin explains.

### 'Sharing Our Very Selves'

Missionaries make an initial two-year commitment, but many serve longer. They evangelize by developing friendships with students.

"FOCUS missionaries seek to practice 'incarnational evangelization,' entering into students' lives just as Christ entered ours," explains Katie Crane, a University of North Dakota alumna who served three years at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and is now pursuing graduate studies.

"I led my Bible study on the center of our campus in the student union and could frequently be found in animated conversation with students in the dorm cafeteria or the local coffee shop," Crane says. "But my favorite moments were the divine encounters that take place in the space between the regularly scheduled appointments, like the time I was on a run with a student and our conversation about world hunger and Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*

(Left) Missionaries gather for Bible study at the FOCUS new staff training. On campus, Bible studies are generally held in the evenings, with eight to 10 students in each study.

(Below) On November 9, 2007, FOCUS founder and president Curtis Martin was presented with the 2008 Award for Outstanding Catholic from the Catholic Leadership Institute.



PHOTO FROM THE CATHOLIC LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

awakened a desire in her to pursue economics and bring the light of the faith to bear on pressing global issues.

“Or the time I ran into a woman from my Bible study walking back from the library and was able to provide her with encouragement she needed to end a difficult relationship. Or the time I was teaching one of my students and her friend how to crochet, and we ended up spending half an hour talking about John Paul II’s teaching on femininity.”

Missionaries are, above all, present. “One of the great things that FOCUS brings to college campuses and students is the ministry of presence—our ability to be available to them on campus,” says Angela Telthorst, FOCUS Midwest regional director, who participated in FOCUS as a student at the University of Illinois, then served as a missionary at Williams College, Bradley University and the University of Illinois.

“We’re showing them it’s possible to live an authentic Catholic life on campus, that it brings great joy and peace to be fully alive in Christ, and helps you become a great student, athlete, friend and leader to your peers,” she says.

As they develop friendships, the missionaries invite students to their Bible studies, which are generally held in the evenings, with eight to 10 students in each group. The studies focus on such topics as salvation history, apologetics, virtue and books of the Bible.

Social events from barbecues to sports bring students together in Christian fellowship. FOCUS also hosts large-group outreach events featuring skits, music, testimonies and a short teaching.

The concept of discipleship is particularly important to FOCUS. Missionaries mentor a small number of students one-on-one, helping them continue to grow in virtue and Christian leadership. These students go on to lead their own Bible studies and share the faith with their peers on campus, including discipleship.

“The impact of sharing our personal relationship with Jesus Christ is powerful,” Ruane says. “We can begin to watch students having conversions while we’re sharing our very selves.”

Ruane references 1 Thessalonians 2:8: “With such affection for you, we were determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our very selves as well, so dearly beloved had you become to us.”

### Transforming the Culture

Given the current culture, reaching young people is crucial, Martin says. “It’s a population of walking wounded,” he reflects. “The Good News is that, because this is a generation of walking wounded in a culture that has tried to live without God, they’re open and hungry for God—prepared to hear and receive the message and the truth, to be given new purpose and a life of hope.”

According to a 2003 survey conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California–Los Angeles, 52 percent of students reported attending religious



PHOTO FROM FOCUS BY JOE HERCOK



PHOTO FROM FOCUS

services often in the year before college. By junior year, just 29 percent reported regular attendance.

And a 2001 HERI survey of students at 38 Catholic colleges found that more than two thirds of Catholic freshmen at Catholic colleges attended religious services frequently but, by senior year, frequent attendance dropped to 13 percent.

“The front lines of the New Evangelization are on campus,” Telthorst says. “There’s a tangible sense of the spiritual battle for the hearts of young people. We have to have a sense of urgency.

Thousands of students are dying spiritually and are in desperate need of the gospel. People are hungry for God, and we need to evangelize so that students truly understand the faith.”

### Expanding the Mission

FOCUS’s mission has extended to the athletic field. Varsity Catholic, an outreach to athletes, just finished its first year at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and its first year at Seton Hall University in South Orange, New Jersey.

“Given how big a piece of the culture



PHOTO FROM FOCUS

(Above left) Students on a mission trip to Ireland gather with their Irish counterparts to help promote a pro-life message outside a family planning clinic in Limerick.

(Above) FOCUS members enjoy a game of baseball during staff summer training.

(Left) FOCUS students from the University of Maryland gather on board a bus bound for the FOCUS National Conference in January 2008.

sports is, we can use that to spread the gospel message, bringing sports back to what they should be—a school of virtue helping the athletes grow in character,” says Thomas Wurtz, director of Varsity Catholic and an eighth-year missionary and graduate of Benedictine College. “We want to revamp the culture of sports and share the faith to and through the athletes.”

FOCUS extends beyond campus. Since summer 2004, its mission program has sent staff and students around the United States and world during spring break and summer vacation to serve the poor through a variety of service projects, along with sharing the gospel.

“FOCUS missions provide a unique opportunity for college students to put their faith into action in a powerful way,” says Kristen Fausey, past coordinator of FOCUS missions and special projects, who led a trip to India this summer. “Our goal is to provide college students with the opportunity to have

a profound encounter with the person of Jesus Christ, not only in the faces of the poor they serve but also as they move deeper in their prayer lives while on mission.”

The latest ministry is Camp Wojtyla, launched in summer 2008. The Colorado-based camp offers high school students the opportunity to study the faith while participating in outdoor adventures.

### Souls Reached

Alexandra Kale, now a FOCUS missionary at the University of Minnesota-Duluth, found the missionaries’ commitment to Christ moving as an undergraduate psychology major at a large state university.

“You can really see their joy. Seeing the joy they have left me wanting to have that joy, too,” she says. “FOCUS translates everything about faith into how you live life, that it is all Christ-centered.” Kale graduated this past May from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

The Christian witness of the FOCUS missionaries and other students has been an inspiration to Joanna Brady, who graduated this spring from Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa, with a double major in public relations and Spanish.

“My involvement with FOCUS has led me closer to Our Lord in prayer, in leading a Bible study and in virtuous friendships, challenging me to some-

thing deeper and encouraging me to continue running the race to which we are called,” Brady says.

As Andrew Lawrence, a 2008 music education graduate of Illinois State University–Normal, notes, “Being involved in Bible studies and fellowship with solid Catholic role models helped me to see that living out our faith is our greatest calling.”

Witnessing students’ spiritual growth is a blessing for the missionaries.

“It’s so exciting to share the hope of what’s going on with the youth, the examples of students leading heroic lives, the miracles taking place every day on campus,” Telthorst says.

Ruane notes how a Bible study discussion on pro-life issues helped a young woman explain the Church’s teaching on abortion in class. “It’s a great blessing to see how Christ is forming these girls, giving them a desire to know him in the fullness of the Catholic Church.”

Crane cites the example of a young woman who returned to the faith and is now a student leader with FOCUS. “She went to Confession for the first time since second grade. She comes to daily Mass. She has a sense of peace and meaning to life that she didn’t have before,” Crane says.

Adam Cesarek, team director at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois, enjoys showing students how to evangelize—and then seeing them take initiative. He recalls a dorm outreach: “I got to stand back and watch them start conversations—and that is just one opportunity of seeing how it works. It’s exciting. It’s not my job to win over 6,000 students. I can’t do that—but what I can do is invest in the men in my study, especially two or three, disciple them in the way of Jesus, working with them, talking with them about apologetics and then have them teach others.”

Through their service, God extends powerful lessons to the missionaries.

“God invites me to give of myself to others, which helps me understand myself as a daughter of God, and that’s true happiness,” says Telthorst. “When one is living according to God’s will, happiness is a result of that—it’s a fruit

of living his will, that authentic joy of being taken care of by God.”

Adds Crane, “I’m watching the Holy Spirit move hearts, and it’s exciting! I wake up, and it’s like, ‘What are you going to do today, Jesus?’”

### **Building Up the Church, One Campus at a Time**

FOCUS ministers with the blessing of the local bishop and the support of the sponsoring campus ministry or Newman Center. Clergy attest to FOCUS’s contribution.

“They’ve really done a great job of helping to locate, invite and engage Catholics on campus,” says Father John Sims Baker, chaplain of the Vanderbilt Catholic community. “I’ll get a call from a student asking if Father will be around for Confession—and I’ll think, ‘This is FOCUS at work.’ It’s been a very positive thing.”

Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver also recognizes the benefits. “Rather than expecting that college will be a time of loosening religious beliefs and morals, FOCUS seeks to fortify students’ Catholic beliefs and invites them to know God’s love as expressed through prayer and good works,” says Archbishop Chaput, who serves on the FOCUS board of directors.

“Once you put young people in touch with those things, you give God a lot of room to work in their hearts and minds. FOCUS helps students to see the destructiveness of the wild ‘live-and-let-live’ college lifestyle and gives them the tools of Christian formation and friendship,” he says.

Campus ministries contribute financially to the missionary teams. And missionaries help raise funds for their salaries, sharing campus news with and praying for their sponsors.

Jan Driscoll and her husband, Paul, of Boulder, Colorado, have been supporting FOCUS since 1999. “Looking back on my years in college, I would have loved to have had FOCUS on campus,” she says. “They have their hearts toward God and are wonderful leaders, on their way to helping change the campus and the world.”

FOCUS’s approach has garnered the attention of others, including the Exton,



PHOTO FROM FOCUS

FOCUS missionaries raise funds for their salaries, as well as share campus news with and pray for their sponsors.

Pennsylvania-based Catholic Leadership Institute (CLI). “FOCUS is helping people know Christ. That’s an amazing example of what a leader should do,” says Matthew Manion, Catholic Leadership Institute president and CEO.

Last November, Curtis Martin was one of four recipients of the CLI’s 2007 Awards for Outstanding Catholic Leadership. “We believe that the place God calls us is where our deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet,” Manion explains. “Curtis has found that place. Curtis exhibits great joy with his work with FOCUS.”

Stephanie Wood, coordinator for NextWave Faithful, an online Catholic young-adult outreach, and host of *NextWave Live* on EWTN Global Catholic Radio, applauds FOCUS for ministering to “the generation of transition.” Wood says of the missionaries, “You can relate to them, look to them as role models to see what it means to be a Catholic young adult.”

### **Going Forth**

FOCUS missionary and student alumni have gone on to witness their faith beyond campus.

Kate Jiron says FOCUS helped prepare her for Catholic marriage and motherhood: “One of the things that helped me with my vocation was actually seeing how the families associated with FOCUS were living, making Christ

the center of their families. I thought, ‘I want what they have.’ That helped me pursue virtue as a single person at the time and helped me know what I was looking for in marriage.” She and her husband, Keith, now have two children.

Jiron, who served with FOCUS at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln and Illinois State University, is among a number of missionaries who found their call to marriage through FOCUS.

Others have discovered vocations to the priesthood and religious life. As of summer 2008, 142 men and 42 women have entered houses of religious formation, including Dan Kogut, a seminarian for the Diocese of Lansing, Michigan, at Sacred Heart Major Seminary in Detroit. Kogut served at the University of North Dakota and the University of Colorado–Boulder.

“Being in a job where for two years my whole life was helping the Catholic faith come alive for people gave me a vision for evangelization and a desire to do that with my whole life, to build up the Church and reach out to the world,” he says.

### **The Next Decade**

FOCUS foresees expanding to 100-plus campuses and adding approximately 500 staff in the next 10 years—and, God willing, internationally too.

“We’ll go wherever the Lord leads us,” Martin says. “We want FOCUS to grow. It’s a springboard to the culture. It’s amazing to see young men and women who have gone forth to have an impact on the culture. I believe the fruit of these leaders will begin to blossom in the next decade—as they become lawyers, doctors, educators, moms and dads—radiating the love of Christ in the world. The culture can be transformed, leavened by people who have been transformed by Christ to lead others forward.” A

**To learn more about FOCUS, visit [www.focusonline.org](http://www.focusonline.org).**

Amy Smith is a freelance writer from Geneva, Illinois. Her work has appeared in the *National Catholic Register*, the online Catholic magazine **4marks.com** and *True Girl*, a magazine for Catholic teens.