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Sharp Focus

University Catholic Outreach Marks 10 Years

BY ANTHONY FLOTT

Mara Ruane is a 26-year-old Catholic missionary. Sometimes that takes a while to sink in with folks.

“Normally,” Ruane says, “people’s response to me is kind of a shock and an awe, and they repeat the word, ‘Catholic?’”

Catholic indeed. A 26-year-old revert to the faith, Ruane is in her first year with one of the most successful Catholic missionary groups of the past decade — the Fellowship of Catholic University Students. Familiarly known as Focus, the organization was founded 10 years ago as an outreach to secular and Catholic college campuses.

And that suits Ruane perfectly.

“I think part of the reason that I really feel a calling to work with my generation is because in my own life I’ve seen how easy it is to lose the faith and how quickly it becomes foreign,” she said. “What really grabbed my attention about Focus was their mission amid what is a very hostile environment: to go into a place where the moral stance is tested and to go there onto the college campus and know that I’ll be engaging students who are at a time in their life when they’re evaluating everything they’re raised to believe.”

Focus missionaries like

Ruane step into the fray armed with the faith and traditions of the Church then focus on small group Bible studies, large group leadership training, and one-on-one discipleship.

“It’s a movement to reclaim our culture for Christ, and Focus has a great model to do this,” said Ruane, a missionary at Vanderbilt University. “I’m drawn to the fact that Focus in a very tangible, real way is a possible response to taking our counter-culture and bringing it in front of the crowds and watching conversions happen. Not masses of people, but instead touching one individual at a time.”

And conversions are starting to multiply. Focus has a presence on 33 campuses in 18 states, ranging in size from 700 to 40,000 students. Headquartered in Greeley, Colo., it boasts 170 full-time staff, including administration — all of which is very close to the 10-year plan President Curtis Martin presented to his board of directors upon founding Focus in 1998.

“We’ve been able to make good on that 10-year plan,” said Martin, who in November was one of four recipients of the Catholic Leadership Institute’s Awards for Outstanding Leadership. “The goal has been spiritual multiplication. It’s not rocket science to plan out. Basi-



The Rosary is said at the end of a class during new staff training for the Fellowship of Catholic University Students. Tyler Kolden photo Curtis Martin, founder of Focus, makes a point in a key-note address last March in Denver. CNS photo/James Baca, Denver Catholic Register

cally, each person can have their life transformed by Christ and go out and share that message and invitation with two or three other people. Then we experience not incremental but exponential growth. That’s exactly what we’ve experienced.”

Focus isn’t resting on its laurels, either. At the start of 2008 the organization will begin celebrating its 10th anniversary with its National Student Leadership conference in Grape-

vine, Texas. The group anticipates more than 3,000 university and high school students to attend the Jan. 2-6 confab.

Speakers will include Father Benedict Groeschel, *Bella* star Eduardo Verástegui, Catholic athletes Mike Sweeney of the Kansas City Royals and Olympian Rebecca Dussault.

Missionary Multipliers

The appearances by Sweeney and Dussault point to

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the most recent Focus endeavor — Varsity Catholic. Launched at the University of Nebraska, the group will function as an outreach to both Catholic and non-Catholic student-athletes.

Overseas expansion could be a possibility, too. “We’re in conversation with a number of countries,” Martin said. “England, Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, Canada.”

Wherever it goes, the missionaries are sure to follow. They are the heart of Focus.

“They have such an incredible joy. I’ve loved every Focus missionary I’ve ever met,” said Alex Kale, a senior at the University of Illinois. “They all had a profound impact on me.”

So much so that after mentoring two fellow students for three semesters and leading Bible studies for two years she has decided to become a Focus missionary herself. She’ll join their ranks with a campus assignment after graduating next year.

She hopes to return the grace bestowed on her when she first encountered Focus as a freshman.

“I knew the basics about the faith, but I didn’t have a prayer

life or anything like that,” Kale said. “I wasn’t comfortable talking about my faith or being openly Catholic when I met people who weren’t afraid to be openly Catholic and actually living their life to spread the Catholic faith. That was really cool. That was really awesome. I was very drawn to them.”

Said Martin: “We’re affording people in their 20s and 30s the opportunity to really have amazing opportunities in leadership.”

Father John Sims Baker would agree. Chaplain at Vanderbilt University, he spent part of last summer at missionary training at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kan.

“They do a very good job of what you might call in sort of business terms, ‘quality control,’” Father Baker said. “They train the students well, the missionaries well. They support them well. They keep track of them. It’s kind of risky business, frankly, to take young college graduates and put them in such a vulnerable and perilous position they’re in, and I’ve been impressed with the way Focus prepares them for that.”

Focus arrived at Vanderbilt

this fall at the invitation of Nashville Bishop David Choby. Prior to that, Father Baker was a one-man show ministering to Vanderbilt’s Catholic students, 30% of its 11,000 enrollment, he estimated. “By far the most Catholic place in the state of Tennessee,” Father Baker said.

Focus came and “they’ve really hit the ground running,” he said.

Ruane and the three other missionaries begin their day together praying the Liturgy of the Hours, followed by prayer, spiritual reading and Eucharistic adoration. Then they head to campus, hitting the more populated areas.

So far they’ve been attracting up to 60 students for a weekly bible study, have helped promote a new retreat program, and begun a monthly large group event, “Night Vision,” with speakers. To boot, daily and Sunday Mass attendance has really picked up, said Father Baker.

All of which has led Father Baker to recommend Focus to a Catholic chaplain at another campus.

“Certainly if it worked for me then it would at this place,”

Father Baker said. “For me, it’s honestly a Godsend.”

Added Ruane: “We really have just been in awe of how God has moved the campus.”

Martin frames the effort as a battle between the culture of life and culture of death. Young people, he says, are the key to victory. Focus wants them on their side.

“I really believe we’re serving an anointed generation,” said Martin. “This generation that came of age under the leadership of Pope John Paul II is a truly evangelical generation, and the grace that they’ve been given by Christ is the key to our success. The world is filled with a lot of bad news, but the really good news is that the generation that is coming up is hungering for the truth and beauty and good news, and the Gospel is the place that has the greatest concentration of good news and truth and beauty anywhere in creation.

“You put those two things together, the Gospel and those young people, and that makes a nuclear bomb look like a firecracker.”

Anthony Flott is based in Papillion, Nebraska.