

Reflections



DIOCESE OF HAMILTON

A Newsletter from the Vocation Office

February 2004



University Chaplains Link With Young People at *Crucial Time*

A typical Catholic university student may at one moment seriously question and debate major tenets of the faith, only to vigorously defend those same tenets in the next breath.

University chaplains Ania Krysiak and Melinda Szilva witness on almost a daily basis the see-sawing perspective of 20-something students and view it as a universal stage of faith development – not an easy stage, but a necessary one.

"They are often away from home for the first time and it's the first time they can say, 'What is it in this faith that I can claim as my own?'" says Melinda, a 34-year-old chaplain with St. Jerome's University. "Here at St. Jerome's, other students are asking the same questions and looking at what they're going to do with their lives. I think it's a stage all of us have to go through in order to claim our faith as adults."

At St. Jerome's, a Catholic university federated and affiliated with the University of Waterloo, faith issues are discussed in an open but supportive environment not that different from the Catholic schools many St. Jerome's students grew up attending. In the secular university world, however, these students often find themselves on the defensive.

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Young Catholics:

Hope and Challenge for the Church

I recently received an e-mail from a high school student who is considering her life vocation – and in particular, the possibility of a call to religious life. Some of what she says expresses the experience of many Catholic young people as they discern a vocation to the priesthood or religious life.

"A calling from God is probably one of the scariest things that could ever happen to someone. First of all, it's God... Secondly, in North America it means going against everything you were raised to do." She then speaks of one of her friends who she believes is considering a vocation to the priesthood: "We're scared. We don't want to put it into words... For me, it feels like I'm going up against the world. It's so counter-culture... There aren't any maps, or tour guides, or information centers. Everyone is on his or her own journey... You don't know where home is. Not yet, at least."

Many of us have seen the movie, *The Lord of the Rings: Return of the King*. In it, a simple hobbit named Frodo has a crucial mission amidst a struggle against evil. It requires great courage for him to remain faithful to his mission. I meet many "Frodos" out there – courageous

young men and women in our high schools, colleges, universities and workplaces – who are striving to live their Catholic faith in the face of many opposing forces. They offer to our Church a great reason for hope – and they also offer us a great challenge.

We need to make a concerted effort to support the spiritual yearnings of these young people, and to guide their exploration of their vocations.

At the conclusion of the e-mail I received from this young woman, she tells me that despite her fears, she has great confidence in God. "And I love Him," she adds. The great prophets, apostles and saints throughout the ages felt the same fear in embracing their call and continued forward, rooted in the same overwhelming love of God.

This issue of *Reflections* continues our look at vocations and youth, with a particular focus on faith formation among university students.

Fr. Mark Gatto
Vocation Director, Diocese of Hamilton

“Mustard Seeds” Bound to Take Root



Sam Zettel, youth minister

Luke 17:6 *The Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you would tell this sycamore tree, 'Be uprooted, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."*

The story of the mustard seed as a metaphor of something small having a big impact is a perfect fit with Sam Zettel's youth ministry – which is why his parish youth group is named after the well-known parable.

Sam, 25, helped start *The Mustard Seeds* youth group at Holy Family Parish in Hanover six years ago as a volunteer, following a conversion experience that told him working with youth was his vocation.

"I just felt the call of the Lord, telling me to do something different than what I was expecting, which was to study engineering at university. Instead I began volunteering at the parish and it wasn't long after that I was hired as youth minister."

About 40 young people regularly attend the twice-monthly meetings of *The Mustard Seeds* and some are members of an off-shoot musical group of the same name, which performs at conferences and other special events. It's a healthy number for a small community like Hanover, with just one Catholic church, and Sam is pleased but not too surprised at the strong participation level. "Today more than ever, young people are thirsting for meaning and depth in their lives and they're not finding it, so they're reaching out to other sources. I do believe the Church is the only source for them in that search."

He maintains that youth ministry must connect with young people in a way that makes no assumptions about what they know and what they believe. Sam feels that the secularization of popular culture – such as music, magazines, television and movies – has created a gap between what kids are regularly exposed to versus the beliefs, ethics and values of the Church. "More and more we need to look at today's young people as 'un-reached.' We can't assume young people automatically share or know about the same faith values and perspectives – we have to articulate what those are."

Meanwhile, *The Mustard Seeds* youth group continues to grow and develop. "We're reaching out in our own way," Sam says. "That's why we picked our name. With enough faith, even young people with relatively few resources can do great things and in a way, that's our mission statement."

Student Helps Create Catholic Community on Campus

In the midst of studying anthropology and French, and considering a minor in religious studies, Valerie Doyle has spent three years at McMaster University helping to build a faith community for Catholic students.

Valerie, now 22, was looking for an extension of her very active parish life in Cambridge when she arrived at Hamilton's McMaster, but initially found a small group of Catholic students that primarily gathered just to attend Mass.

Valerie and a friend got the ball rolling to create a more active group and are now part of a leadership team of 15 students that organizes regular events and activities for the Catholic Students' Group at McMaster.

There are now monthly get-togethers; a recent discussion topic was: "The Lord of the Rings: The Deep and Catholic Meaning." The students group also works with Diocesan vocation director Father Mark Gatto, Sister Martha Fauteux of the School Sisters of Notre Dame and Sister Mary McIntyre of the Sisters of St. Joseph, to hold an annual week-long "Busy Students' Retreat" each Lent.

"We know students sometimes want to go on retreat and think about Lent but we're always busy with classes," Valerie explains. The Busy Students' Retreat doesn't actually take students away from their studies, but weaves faith discussions and reflection throughout the week.



Valerie Doyle

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University Chaplains Link With Young People at Crucial Time

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Ania, the Catholic chaplain at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, says the Catholic students she works with are called upon to explain, justify and defend their faith to non-Catholic students. "It's a time when they come out of a relatively sheltered environment, within Catholic schools or their own community, and they've never been challenged to defend their faith. You grow up Catholic and you don't even entertain the thought that others might not like you because of your religious background... when I first went to university I was shocked at what some people thought of the Catholic Church — I had never heard a negative perception before. This kind of reaction can create quite a crisis for Catholic students when they get to university."

Perhaps it's no surprise then that university-age students show a marked propensity to delve into faith issues, seeking to understand the history and context of major tenets of Catholicism. "I find that my students want to challenge the Church and know why it's important to believe certain things — why we believe it, what the ramifications are, etc. And they research like crazy, looking for the answers they need," Ania says.

In doing so, she adds, students demonstrate a self-sufficiency and organization level that is quite remarkable.

At Wilfrid Laurier, in fact, the chaplaincy office exists primarily because an organized group of Catholic students approached Bishop Anthony Tonnos to ask for support and spiritual guidance on campus. "They organized themselves and then looked for someone to lead them in catechesis and help them in Bible study. That's how I got involved (Ania is also a pastoral assistant at St. Teresa Avila Parish in Elmira) and now mine is an official chaplaincy position."

Given that university students tend to be at a transitional time in their faith and in their overall lives, the role of the campus chaplaincy office is critical.

Both chaplains say Catholic students who attend university away from their home parish often feel a bit lost at first, and need support to make connections within their faith community. Catholic chaplains can help them with this — in fact, at St. Jerome's the chaplain becomes the students' pastor. Chaplains can also provide a sounding board for questions and debate, and an organizing role for group events such as retreats.

At Wilfrid Laurier, Ania says she finds students "don't yet have a relationship developed with their own

pastors, to approach them and discuss all the questions they have," and that's where a chaplain can play an important role.

Ania strongly rejects any notion that university students aren't interested in faith formation. "They are extremely aware of what they need spiritually — and they are very articulate about it. They're the ones who come to me and say, 'we want to study contemplation as a form of prayer, using the saints as a model' — they amaze me."

She also finds the students she works with at Wilfrid Laurier tend toward orthodoxy and have a general impatience with the pluralistic ideologies that have become popular in recent years. "They are tired of the whole scene where there's no absolute truth. And they reject the stance of their baby boomer parents, which is often, 'I'm a Catholic but I don't believe a lot of the things the Church teaches.' The students say, 'we can't be Catholic in name only.'"



*Melinda Szilva,
university chaplain at
St. Jerome's University
(above) and
Ania Krysciak,
university chaplain
at Wilfrid Laurier
(at left)*



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and it's the first time
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I can claim as my own?'*

*Melinda Szilva,
chaplain at St. Jerome's*

Discernment at University

"I would say there are a lot of students I work with who have a potential vocation, but whether it's to religious life or diocesan priesthood isn't worked out yet," says Melinda Szilva, chaplain at St. Jerome's University. "There are some students who have gone on to a vocation in the Church and also many who have become high school chaplains, parish ministers, etc."

Ania Krysciak, the Catholic chaplain at Wilfrid Laurier, says while none of the students she sees regularly are studying religion, some are contemplating a vocation in the Church.

"Many of them are highly involved in their own parishes back home, as youth directors, retreat leaders and other leadership roles. They are young people who are already closely tied to the Church."

Creating a *Vocation Culture*

In the last issue of *Reflections* we listed questions for youth directors that are included in the Pastoral Plan stemming from the 2002 Continental Congress on Vocations. In the quest to create a "vocation culture," here are questions for young adults to ask themselves:

Questions for Young Adults

- 1** Do I believe in the call God has given me through my baptism? How do I seek opportunities to discover what this call is for me?
- 2** What ways am I seeking to grow in my faith? Am I growing in my life of prayer in a way that will lead me to know my vocation in the Church and in the world, and respond to it wholeheartedly?
- 3** Do I have a passionate belief in the Church and its ministry? How do I invite others to share this belief?
- 4** Do I really believe the Lord continues to call many young people to ordained ministry and consecrated life? How seriously have I questioned if God is calling me to priesthood or consecrated life?
- 5** What is my plan to respond to this call to holiness that is uniquely mine?
- 6** What more can I do to help create a 'vocation culture' in my family? Among my friends, fellow students and co-workers? In my local church?

News! The vocation web site www.vocationinfo.ca has been renovated to make it more user-friendly. Check it out!

Student Helps Create Catholic Community on Campus

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The group attends Mass held by McMaster's Catholic chaplain, Father Jack Hurley, and appreciates his attendance and support for their other faith-based activities.

"I see a lot of students on campus who are searching and trying to figure out where their faith is at this new stage of their life," Valerie says of the growing Catholic students group. "Our group can help them through that transition.

Valerie recommends that parishes in university towns make a special effort to include "away from home" Catholic students. "I think it's important for them to make contact with students and let the students know they're welcome. Invite them to parish events and activities – that's a good first step. Without a parish to go to, some students can feel lost."

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We welcome your comments
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On the Calendar

May 1, 2004

Ordination

The ordination to the priesthood of Adrian Lee is tentatively scheduled to take place at 11 a.m. at Cathedral of Christ the King in Hamilton. Everyone is welcome to join in this joyful celebration.

May 2, 2004

World Day of Prayer for Vocations

Each year, the World Day of Prayer for Vocations is held the fourth Sunday of Easter. It's a day to remember and pray for those who have already responded to God's call to priesthood, religious and consecrated life and to encourage and pray for those whom God may be calling to service.