

So Far, So Catholic

John Paul the Great Catholic University: A Progress Report

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With a name like John Paul the Great Catholic University, it has to be good.

And authentically Catholic.

Derry Connolly, the new school's president and co-founder, knew that when he began planning an institution of higher education that would prepare business and media professionals to advance the "New Evangelization" called for by the late Holy Father.

Classes opened at the San Diego school last fall. How does the progress report look so far?

"I'm an optimist, and I say it's going wonderfully," says Connolly. "The best part is the students, in terms of their commitment to the Lord. We were hoping for students who are true to their faith. God has been very good to us, sending lots students for whom faith is first and foremost."

Connolly points out the numbers who attend daily Mass. Of an incoming class of 30 students, at least two-thirds participate in Mass, adoration and the Rosary every day.

"All the religious activity is optional," notes Connolly, so it's "a good measure of their commitment to the Lord."

Freshman Mollie O'Hare from Colorado has discovered the university is already going beyond her expectations both spiritually and academically. She's delighted with "the whole spiritual dynamic of the school."

"I love to be able to talk to my peers about the Catholic faith," O'Hare explains.

She points in particular to theology classes led by professor Michael Barber, who has written two books for Emmaus Road Publishing and who blogs at singinginthereign.blogspot.com.

O'Hare says she's also edified by the way the school links spirituality with academics. Her delight is apparent as she describes the school's vision of using the media for God's greater glory and applying and living the teachings of John Paul.

According to its website, the school offers degree programs in "communications media, media-enabling technology and business, forming students and preparing them for a participation in the world of media."

"John Paul the Great told us to reach beyond what we are," says O'Hare. "We need to strive to be more holy, take back the media and reach people with it."

Mass-Media Mastery

A happy Matt Salisbury from Green Bay, Wis., agrees the university's name is well chosen. "The Pope is the one who brought the light of Christ and the Church to the media," he says. "We're following his footsteps in the sense of learning to use the media as a tool of evangelization — bringing that Catholic, moral presence to it."

Salisbury says he was attracted to the way Catholic life is blended with studying entertainment media and business, forming savvy and creative pros who can change the world by shaping mass-media messages.

Salisbury has been more than pleased with his first months in San Diego. He's already putting the graphic-design skills he brought with him to good use, doing part-time website design for Catholic Youth World Network and its Catholic Kids Net, ConQuest and Challenge club sites.

Of course, the vibrant spiritual life of "JPCatholic," as the university is already familiarly called, adds several pluses for him and others, from the nightly Rosary to the daily Mass at nearby Good Shepherd Church, the school's local parish. Some evenings students gather for praise and worship at Sunset Cliffs on the ocean.

Salisbury finds another plus in the encouragement the school gives to get involved in volunteer opportunities in the Catholic community. That led a group of students to teach CCD classes at Good Shepherd and another group to work for passing Proposition 85, California's parental-notification initiative.

"There's a sense of closeness and fellowship really amazing for me to see in college," Salisbury finds. "We're all serious about our faith."

For Alan Lane, who teaches business math and is the school's chief operating and financial officer, going from daily Mass with his students directly into his math classroom brings blessings he could only have guessed at.

"The ability to bring Jesus Christ in the workplace is something I tried to do in my own business career," Lane says. "Now to be able to bring real life examples from my business career into the classroom and to pray in class shows there are always opportunities to bring Christ into the workplace — and vice versa."

The fairly smooth early sailing doesn't mean the new university hasn't already come through a few squalls.

"Everything we do has been a challenge," says Connolly, "particularly things to do with government agencies." Approval from the state took twice as long as it normally should, and every legal hurdle seemed unnecessarily elevated.

For example, it took nine months to obtain a permit from the city to operate a school. In fact, classes had been in session six weeks before the permit was granted.

Connolly praises Good Shepherd Church for its help during those anxious first weeks, when the parish loaned use of its hall for classes.

He's also grateful to San Diego Bishop Robert Brom, who has been supportive and has celebrated Mass at the school.

Another challenge came in recruiting faculty. The school sought people well-versed both in business and new media — especially those who'd built new-media companies. At the same time, instructors needed to demonstrate a desire to live out the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Persistence paid off. "All of the faculty we've got now are totally committed" to the Catholic faith, says Connolly. "They're here because of their love for Christ."

The lesson he and the other founders learned in the three years it took to bring their vision to fruition was the importance of "sitting back and trusting in the Lord."

"He absolutely delivers," says Connolly. "He will send you what you need when you need it."

Or, as Pope John Paul might have paraphrased that sentiment: "Be not afraid. Put out into the deep of the 'Net.'"

Staff writer Joseph Pronechen writes from

Trumbull, Connecticut.