

Rise of the New Catholic Colleges

BY TIM DRAKE; REGISTER SENIOR WRITER

[September 23-29, 2007 Issue](#) | [Posted 9/18/07 at 11:31 AM](#)



The Register's annual college guide (see special section) is bigger than ever this year.

And it's no wonder. A Catholic higher education renaissance is in the air, from the new John Paul the Great University in San Diego to Southern Catholic College near Atlanta.

Sacramento University was given a donation of 200 acres of land for their campus, while Ave Maria University just finished building on its new campus in Naples, Fla.

Even older colleges like Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina are seeing new programs — the school is now home to the Envoy Institute, applying Catholic teaching to cutting-edge issues.

But at least seven entirely new Catholic colleges and universities have been created over the last few years. Their foundation has led to a debate about the nature of Catholic higher education and whether the newer schools are altering the landscape of Catholic higher education.

“Growing a half dozen new schools isn't going to reach many of the 85% of Catholic students who are going to schools that are not Catholic-sponsored,” said Richard Yanikoski, president of the Washington, D.C.-based Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, representing more than 200 of the nation's Catholic colleges. “From the Church's point of view, the mission is far larger.”

Yet, it's impossible not to notice the fact that nearly all of the schools established since the Second Vatican Council embrace their Catholic identity in a way much different from the schools founded prior to the council. Most of the pre-Vatican II schools were founded by dioceses or religious orders, whereas most of the newer schools have been founded by lay organizations or individuals.

“It goes back to the renewal of Catholic higher education,” said Derry Connelly, president of San Diego's John Paul the Great University, which is in its second year. “Pope John Paul II said that the only reason a Catholic institution exists is to evangelize. I would have a tough time looking at the vast majority of Catholic universities and saying that their primary goal is evangelization.”

Patrick Reilly loves seeing all the new blood.

He is president and founder of the Cardinal Newman Society, the Manassas, Va.-based organization dedicated to renewing and strengthening Catholic identity at America's Catholic colleges and universities.

He points to the established Catholic universities on the Register's survey to show the impact Catholic universities can have.

"We have seen from the graduates of Steubenville, Christendom and Thomas Aquinas College the immense impact that even a small number of vibrant graduates can have in the Church," he said.

"Throughout the country, a large number of directors of religious education, and people working in parishes, are coming out of these relatively small schools," said Reilly.

"We're also seeing much higher percentages of their graduates choosing the priesthood and religious life. You don't see the secularized Catholic colleges touting their numbers of religious vocations."

He also thinks the new renaissance in Catholic higher education will have an impact on institutionally Catholic schools whose Catholic identity was weakened over the last several decades.

"The impact these schools will have is not in the numbers attending," he said, "but in the great pressure that they bring to bear on other Catholic colleges to meet academic and Catholic identity standards. Ave Maria College has made headlines recently about the impact they are having on the landscape of the town where the school is located.

But the school prefers to look at the impact the new Catholic higher education renaissance could have on seminary enrollments. Nearly half of Ave Maria's first graduating class of seven went on to pursue the priesthood.

"I don't think it's so much that these schools direct themselves to creating vocations," said Nicholas Healy Jr., president of Ave Maria. "When the Catholic faith is taught fully and with conviction by believers, it inspires young people to take up a religious vocation."

Similar but Different

On the surface, the new schools look similar. Most of them are smaller, with enrollments ranging from 30 to 400. Most accentuate the Church's liturgy and sacraments as a part of daily life on campus. Most have separate dorm facilities for men and women. All of them are public about their acceptance of the Church's canon law mandatum for theology faculty.

Most have a predominantly Catholic student body and faculty. And most have a classical orientation leaning toward the Great Books, the timeless books that contributed greatly to the development of Western civilization.

Yet, the schools are distinct not only in their geographic location, but also in how they've been set up. Southern Catholic College is the first Catholic college in the state of Georgia. Wyoming Catholic College is the first in that state.

John Paul the Great University breaks the mold entirely. It is a business and media school focused on new technologies.

The structure of the schools differ, as well.

The University of Sacramento hopes to become a major university focusing on the major academic areas.

Wyoming Catholic, which has a distinct outdoor and equestrian dimension, intentionally hopes to remain small, with a total student body of 400. It's located near the National Outdoor Leadership School in Lander. Its students recently completed a three-week backpacking expedition, with the help of the Leadership School, before the start of the school year to teach leadership skills and build camaraderie.

"The idea is to expose students to God's first book," said Father Bob Cook, director of the college. "Students' imaginations have withered. Getting them outdoors can be a corrective to the types of problems that students come to college with these days."

"There are multiple spectra in which to describe these schools and the audiences they serve," said Yanikoski of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities. "There's room for all these schools. If we doubled the number of Catholic students attending Catholic colleges, we could have another 200 schools."

"What we're seeing isn't a new phenomenon. In every decade there have been new colleges formed. Some have lasted, others have closed or merged."

Reilly said that he has no expectation that all of the new schools will make it. Champion College, a California effort, for example, didn't succeed.

Reilly acknowledged that, saying, "I fully expect that some of these efforts will not succeed. However, it will not be because of a lack of interest in this type of education."

Ave Maria's Healy said there's good reason that the newer schools have set themselves apart from their more secularized counterparts.

"When you realize what goes on at most Catholic colleges, there's an absolute abandonment of teaching the young people a Catholic, moral life," said Healy. "Those schools that no longer retain their commitment to Catholicism and what that means are deceiving students and parents."

In order to get the word out about the newer schools, the Cardinal Newman Society has produced a "Newman Guide to Choosing a Catholic College," which features 20

American and one Canadian college. It features all of the new schools started over the past 30 years.

“We strongly recommend them and consider them to be among the best 10% of Catholic higher education,” said Reilly. “We’re hoping with the guide that we’ll be able to help steer more students to these schools.”

While Yanikoski doesn’t see the school’s founding as novel, what he does see as new is how the newer schools have positioned themselves.

“They are, in their own judgment, countering the dominant trend in Catholic education,” said Yanikoski. “They see themselves as the ‘saving remnant’ of the Jewish tradition — the only thing that stands between chaos and destruction.”

Tim Drake writes from

St. Joseph, Minnesota.