

Who Is Catholic? New conservative colleges say existing institutions lead students away from the true faith
By BURTON BOLLAG Naples, Fla.

Colloquy Live: Read the transcript of a live, online discussion with David O'Brien, a historian of American Catholicism at the College of the Holy Cross, about the staunchly conservative Roman Catholic colleges that have been recently established in the United States.

Every evening at 9 o'clock a group of students and faculty members gathers between two four-story student residences -- one for men, the other for women -- and sets off on a "rosary walk" around the former assisted-living complex that serves as Ave Maria University's temporary campus, proclaiming the 20 mysteries of the life of Jesus Christ.

At Ave Maria, Mass is celebrated three times a day, Latin is a required subject, and divorced Catholics are not welcome as faculty members. Opened last fall and currently enrolling 122 students, it is the best financed and the most ambitious of about a dozen new or planned Roman Catholic institutions of a very conservative bent.

After a quarter century in which no new Catholic colleges were established, most of those being founded now are led by traditionalists who feel the majority of America's 230 Catholic colleges have strayed from the truth of the Catholic faith.

The Rev. Joseph D. Fessio, a Jesuit and Ave Maria's chancellor, shares that view. He is bitterly critical of the University of San Francisco, the Jesuit institution where he taught for almost two decades, for such decisions as hiring a gay former priest as head of marriage-and-family counseling, and allowing students to stage the play *The Vagina Monologues*. In a fund-raising appeal for Ave Maria he wrote, "Many Catholic institutions ... have ceased to be places where the fullness of Catholic truth is joyfully and vigorously taught, defended and proclaimed."

Dissatisfied with existing Catholic higher education, the new colleges aspire to train graduates who will raise a strong and orthodox Catholic intellectual voice in the debates over stem-cell research, gay marriage, and other social issues. They strive to maintain a conservative campus life, where students and faculty members attend Mass frequently, premarital sex is strictly forbidden, and gay support groups have no place.

The new institutions are an answer to the prayers of some families. Kathleen MacLean, from New Hampshire, has a daughter who is a freshman at Ave Maria. "We read about Catholic colleges which don't want to put up crucifixes in their classrooms," she says. "It's like they're apologizing for being Catholic."

Yet conservative Catholic colleges, a small handful of which were founded in the 1970s in the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and the subsequent liberalization of Catholic higher education, appear to have had only a minimal impact on Catholic higher education or American society at large. It remains to be seen whether the new crop will have a broader influence.

A Generous Patron

If Ave Maria's benefactor, Thomas S. Monaghan, has his way, the institution will be a major intellectual force. He intends to transform remote pepper and tomato fields in Immokalee, in southwest Florida, into a permanent campus for up to 6,000 students. His plans include a Catholic church with the largest seating capacity of any in the United States and the largest crucifix in the world. Mr. Monaghan, the founder of Domino's Pizza, has committed \$200-million to the university. "My mission is to help as many people as possible get to heaven," says Mr. Monaghan, 67. The best way he can do that, he says, is to promote orthodox Catholic higher education.

Raised in an orphanage and foster homes, Mr. Monaghan reportedly made \$1-billion when he sold Domino's Pizza in 1998. He had already taken what he calls "a millionaire's vow of poverty"; he sold his yachts, airplanes, and the Detroit Tigers baseball team, and stopped flying first class.

For the last 20 years he has devoted himself to conservative Catholic causes. One of his early decisions was to finance the construction of a new cathedral in Managua, Nicaragua, to replace the old one that was destroyed by a

1972 earthquake. The move was a stand for the faith. "Nicaragua," he explains, "was controlled by the Sandinistas, who were atheists and communists." He went on to take over the failing Nicaraguan branch of the University of Mobile, a Baptist college, in 2000, and turned it into Ave Maria College of the Americas.

Before his latest venture, in Florida, Mr. Monaghan had opened another Ave Maria College, in Ypsilanti, Mich., in 1998. Two years later, he established a separate institution, Ave Maria School of Law, in Ann Arbor. Mr. Monaghan had planned to establish the new university in Ann Arbor, too, but the project ran aground when local officials refused to grant zoning authorization. So Mr. Monaghan took the project to southwest Florida, an area he knew from regular vacations in nearby Naples.

In what appears to be a real-estate first, the campus is being built jointly with a new town, also to be called Ave Maria. Designed in the style of Mr. Monaghan's favorite architect, Frank Lloyd Wright, the campus is scheduled to open in 2006. Barron Collier Companies, a major Florida real-estate developer, says the presence of the academic institution will make the housing more attractive to buyers.

The developer is donating 900 acres for the university, which will be built on both sides of a grassy mall in the center of town. The huge church will be at one end of the mall. Shops and cafes, small lakes, and a golf course for donors to the university are also planned.

While other Catholic educators are sometimes irritated by its holier-than-thou image, Ave Maria University has had no trouble attracting students and professors who share a common desire to return to their Catholic roots. The institution has received more than 100 applications for some faculty-job openings, says William K. Riordan, dean of the faculty.

The majority of students have come from out of state. Clare Robidoux, a freshman from St. Louis, Mo., says she is glad to be at an institution where students and faculty members regularly spend time in prayer. "Having a good spiritual life helps you do the right thing and be holy," she says.

The right thing for students at Ave Maria includes bringing Christmas gifts to migrant farm workers' children. It also includes conducting sidewalk "counseling" of women arriving at a local abortion clinic every Friday, and praying out loud against abortion in front of a Planned Parenthood office on Saturday mornings.

The administration supports those actions and provides vans to transport students to them, reflecting Mr. Monaghan's own strongly held views. He has long raised money from other wealthy people to defeat politicians who support abortion rights and to overturn laws granting equal rights to homosexuals. His conservative activism so roiled the National Organization for Women that in 1989 the group organized a boycott of Domino's Pizza.

Holier Than Thou?

Mainstream Catholic educators are often peeved by perceptions that Ave Maria and the other new institutions set themselves apart not just from secular colleges, but from most Catholic ones, too. "What bothers us," says Monika K. Hellwig, a former professor of theology who is president of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, "is that they think we're not properly Catholic."

The Rev. Charles L. Currie, president of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, says the new institutions "tend to get very judgmental. There is much more authentically Catholic going on at Catholic universities than Joe Fessio would give us credit for."

And Alice Gallin, former executive director of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities and a scholar-in-residence at College of New Rochelle, a Catholic college, says the new conservative Catholic colleges are like overly protective parents in the way that they try to maintain strict campus environments. Rather than allowing students to develop their own intellectual and moral judgments, "this group places more emphasis on how often the students go to Mass and what kind of films or plays can be shown on campus; all these neurotic points," says Ms. Gallin.

But some conservative Catholics are distressed by the way Catholic institutions in recent decades have seemed to embrace the mores of the larger society. About 30 Catholic colleges this spring are staging performances of *The Vagina Monologues*, a feminist play celebrating women's power over their bodies and their sexuality. Earlier this year, the University of Notre Dame held its first "Queer Film Festival." And last year about 70 faculty members at Georgetown University signed a statement protesting a commencement speech by Cardinal Francis Arinze, a senior Vatican official, because the cardinal used the occasion to condemn homosexuality.

A recent study conducted by Patrick J. Reilly, president of the Cardinal Newman Society, which promotes conservative values on Catholic campuses, concluded that Catholic colleges did a poor job of imparting church teachings to undergraduates. The study, "Are Catholic Colleges Leading Students Astray?," which was published last year, surveyed 7,200 students at 38 Catholic institutions in their freshman year and again as seniors. Significantly more of the seniors approved of abortion, homosexual marriages, and casual sex than did the same students as freshmen.

Among Catholics "there is a small but vocal contingent that feels the old certainties are gone," says Ms. Hellwig, of the Catholic colleges' association. "They feel betrayed."

Indirectly, Vatican II contributed to the deep changes at Catholic institutions. The council called for a respect for modern learning, the autonomy of the social sciences, and a greater role for lay Catholics in running Catholic institutions.

In response, Catholic colleges increasingly accepted lay people as trustees and senior administrators. The decisive blow came in 1967 at a meeting of presidents of leading Catholic universities, called by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, Notre Dame's president at the time. The "Land O'Lakes statement" they produced, named for the Wisconsin town where they met, declared independence from church control.

The New Institutions

For a small number of very conservative Catholics, that was the last straw. The Land O'Lakes statement produced "a wholesale loss of Catholic identity" at most Catholic institutions, according to the mission statement of Christendom College, in Front Royal, Va., which was founded in 1977. "The very existence of objective truth was in many cases denied."

For a few Catholic educators, the only solution was to establish new institutions. "The only surprise," says David O'Brien, a historian of American Catholicism at College of the Holy Cross, in Worcester, Mass., "is that it took so long for these colleges to arrive."

A similar phenomenon had already occurred in Protestant higher education early in the 20th century. As America's majority religion and its colleges adapted to the relaxed mores of modern life, some conservatives grew dissatisfied. Biola University, in La Mirada, Calif., established in 1908, and Bob Jones University, in Greenville, S.C., established in 1927, were created at a time when "Protestant fundamentalists broke off and started their own institutions," says William D. Dinges, an associate professor who specializes in Catholicism and culture at Catholic University of America, in Washington. "Now that Catholicism is becoming more accommodating to modern culture, some Catholics are doing something similar."

The late 1960s and 1970s saw the founding of four colleges with a staunchly conservative Catholic character: Christendom College; Magdalen College, in Warner, N.H.; Thomas Aquinas College, in Santa Paula, Calif.; and Thomas More College of the Liberal Arts, in Merrimack, N.H.

In 1990 the Vatican attempted to restore a degree of the church's authority over Catholic higher education when Pope John Paul II issued *Ex corde Ecclesiae* -- literally: from the heart of the church. After its release, American bishops said Catholic theologians had to seek a *mandatum* certifying that they were teaching "authentic Catholic doctrine." The controversial order appears to have been largely ignored. The episode only reinforced the drive to establish new institutions.

The institutions founded in the last few years, like those from the 1970s, advertise their unquestioning obedience to the Vatican, often expressed as "faithfulness to the magisterium of the Catholic church." All are small, and many have adopted a "great books" approach: a large core of required liberal-arts courses, stressing the reading of classics of western civilization, starting from ancient Greece and Rome, in history, philosophy, literature, and theology. Some celebrate Mass in Latin, a practice largely ended by Vatican II.

Many of the new institutions place great emphasis on academic excellence. Franciscan University of Steubenville, in Ohio -- along with Ave Maria, the only two full universities among the orthodox institutions -- has been ranked by U.S. News & World Report in the top tier of Midwest colleges for the third year in a row. It enrolls 2,200 students.

Steubenville was founded as a college in 1946, but after almost collapsing it was transformed by the Rev. Michael Scanlan, who took over as chancellor in 1974. In addition to strengthening the institution academically, he gave it a strong "charismatic Catholic" character. That orientation has since diminished somewhat, but campus prayer meetings still exhibit some of the exuberance normally associated with Pentecostalism, including arm waving and speaking in tongues.

Ave Maria School of Law is also excelling. Last year its first graduating class scored highest among graduates of all Michigan law schools in the state's bar exam. In a videotaped message at their graduation ceremony, U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft told students they were "trailblazers" for having chosen Ave Maria.

Rebels

Faculty members drawn to the new orthodox institutions are often seen by their peers at best as idealists, at worst as troublemakers. The career of Father Fessio, Ave Maria University's chancellor, illustrates the constant tension between mainstream Catholic higher education and the small minority of Catholic academics who reject the direction it has taken.

As a young theology teacher at the University of San Francisco in the mid-1970s, he founded the St. Ignatius Institute to promote a great-books education, in response to a liberalizing of the university's curriculum. Two years later he founded Ignatius Press to publish conservative Catholic thinkers, including Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the Vatican's doctrinal watchdog and Father Fessio's mentor since the time he did his doctoral studies at the University of Regensburg, in Germany.

Many at San Francisco viewed Father Fessio and the small group around him as doctrinaire elitists who opposed the university's attempts to engage with modern society. In 1987 Father Fessio was fired as director of the St. Ignatius Institute, but allowed to continue teaching. Then in 2001, the simmering conflict came to a head when San Francisco's new president, the Rev. Stephen A. Privett, fired the institute's then head and his assistant and revamped the unit.

The traditionalists did not take the move lying down. Supporters called on alumni to withhold donations to the university. And Father Fessio and his colleagues reconstituted the institute as a small independent institution, Champion College, just a half-block beyond the University of San Francisco's campus.

The move was seen as an act of insubordination, and the head of the Jesuits in California ordered Father Fessio to Los Angeles, to take up a post as an assistant hospital chaplain. He acquiesced, but Mr. Monaghan and Ave Maria University's president, Nicholas J. Healy Jr., appealed to the Superior General of the Jesuits, in Rome, who agreed to allow Father Fessio to join the new university as its chancellor.

The Truth, Period

The new orthodox colleges are often seen as attempts to recreate the more structured and insular Catholic higher education of the 1950s, with its clear answers and great certainties. Mr. Reilly, of the Cardinal Newman Society, says that's not the case. "There is an understanding that free academic interchange is a central part of academic education," he says. But within limits. Students at the new institutions will be allowed to debate controversial

issues like abortion and gay rights in class, he says, but professors will be expected to uphold the church's orthodoxy. "Faculty members," he says, "would not debate."

Indeed, for many of those involved with the new colleges, the Vatican's doctrine represents the truth, period. "I love the church," says Ave Maria's Father Fessio. "It means everything to me. I don't understand people who want to change things."

NEW CONSERVATIVE CATHOLIC COLLEGES

Here are several conservative Catholic colleges recently founded or being planned:

Campion College, a small two-year institution offering an intensive "great books" education, was opened in 2002 by the founders of the St. Ignatius Institute of the University of San Francisco. It is planning a branch in Washington, D.C.

Holy Spirit College is being established near Lansing, Mich. Rusty Hills, a former chairman of the state's Republican Party and chancellor of the college, says that in its various disciplines it will focus on such controversial social issues as abortion, cloning, and doctor-assisted suicide.

The Legionaries of Christ, a conservative Catholic movement active in 20 countries, plans to establish a university in Sacramento, Calif., with 7,000 students, and another one in Thornwood, N.Y., about 20 miles from New York City.

New Catholic University, which describes itself as "uncompromisingly" and "unapologetically" Catholic, plans to admit students in the fall of 2006 in the San Diego area. It will offer degree programs in business, technology, and communications media and plans an in-house business incubator.

Southern Catholic College, in Atlanta, is being established, like most of the new institutions, by lay Catholics with the blessings of the local bishop. The college plans to admit its first students in the fall of 2005, after the original 2003 opening date was delayed several times, and hopes to have an enrollment of 1,500. Its founder, Tom Clements, sold the small, successful software company he had founded and is one of five businessmen to contribute more than \$1-million each to the project.

Some Good Catholic Colleges and Universities

NOTE: STEVE ST. CLAIR HAS UPDATED THIS LIST INCLUDING LINKS TO WEBSITES IN JANUARY 2009

- [Assumption College](#), central Massachusetts
- [Ave Maria University](#), Ave Maria, Florida
- [St. Anthony of Padua Institute](#), San Francisco, California (successor to Campion College)
- [Christendom College](#), Virginia
- [The College of St. Thomas More](#), Fort Worth, Texas
- [Franciscan University of Steubenville](#), Ohio
- [Magdalen College](#), Warner, New Hampshire
- [Our Lady of Corpus Christi](#), Texas
- [John Paul the Great Catholic University](#), San Diego, California
- [Thomas Aquinas College](#), Santa Paula, California (east of Ventura)
- [Thomas More College of Liberal Arts](#), Merrimack, New Hampshire
- [Holy Spirit College](#), Atlanta, Georgia
- [Southern Catholic College](#), Dawsonville, Georgia
- [Catholic order Legionaries of Christ plans \\$200M university in Thornwood, New York](#)