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Program aims to foster Catholic leaders

Casey McCorry | Nov. 16, 2010

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(Photo courtesy of ESTEEM)

LANSING, MICH. -- Joel Poliskey is graduating this spring with a physiology degree from Michigan State University. As part of an elite Medical Scholars program, he was admitted to medical school as a freshman and every semester has been on the dean?s list. Ten hours a week are spent riding with the Michigan State cycling team -- he is their fastest rider. Yet in spite of these accomplishments, Poliskey says that his best moments in college have been those he spends in the little Catholic parish right across the street from his house, St. John Student Center.

?We have a saying here that we study at Michigan State, but we get our education from St. John?s,? Poliskey said. He estimates that he spends more than 20 hours a week participating in St. John Student Center activities, whether leading the Catholic men?s group at his house, teaching the catechism on campus, or spending late nights praying the rosary in front of the tabernacle.

Poliskey is just one of roughly 70 similarly passionate and active students chosen to participate in a new program developed by St. Thomas More Catholic Chapel and Center at Yale University in New Haven, Conn., and the Washington-based National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management.

For five months students from six universities across the country have been participating in Engaging Students to Enliven the Ecclesial Mission, or ESTEEM, a program created to teach students how to bring their skills as Catholic lay leaders to their parishes after graduation.

?Young Catholic graduates have an abundance of skills to offer the church, but often they do not know how to apply them. Through this program, they will learn not only that their service is needed, but how best to utilize their gifts,? said Christopher Solga, the program manager and a 2008 Yale graduate.

Five years ago, the lay-led Leadership Roundtable partnered with St. Thomas More Chapel to discuss what they saw as a glaring issue.

?Each spring we have passionate, articulate, faithful leaders who leave our campus ministry programs and lose touch with the church until they return to be married years later,? said Katie Byrnes, assistant chaplain at St. Thomas More. Discussion of how to change this culminated in the development of ESTEEM. Rooted in what the roundtable calls the ?core competencies of spirituality? -- education, community and service -- the program involves a yearlong curriculum and a mentoring program.

Byrnes explained, ?It?s a creative tension between engaging students at school and filling the gaps of their education, finding resources and directing them to it, capturing their enthusiasm while they?re here and harnessing it for the church, networking them with the people of God in their own dioceses so they can know

what that looks like. We have students who graduate from finance here at Yale, leave their school, and go to parishes, never opening their mouths at a parish financial meeting, and that?s tragic. The immediate goal is to start opening doors.?

After a generous donation from an anonymous foundation two years ago, the founders were able to start choosing pilot schools and invited approximately 100 people involved in campus ministry to Yale to learn about the ESTEEM program. Those interested were asked to apply and the schools with the most vibrant campus ministry programs were chosen. This August the program launched at six public, private and Catholic colleges and universities: Yale; Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Conn.; Ohio State University in Columbus; Michigan State University in East Lansing; Stanford University in California; and the University of California in Los Angeles.

?The most exciting part is that the students are so different, given each campus has a different feel,? said Byrnes. ?It?s been incredible to see how six different campuses took the same program and made six different iterations of it.?

Participating students have started studying the fundamentals of Catholic ecclesiology for the yearlong curriculum component of the program, including Catholic social teachings, stewardship, liturgy, baptismal call, and the meaning of Catholic leadership.

Poliskey said he thinks the curriculum ?will influence us wherever we go. Whatever parishes we belong to we will have a solid base to speak up for what?s right.?

In addition, each student has been paired with a Catholic professional who will serve as a mentor following the students? graduation and show them how to become a leader within their own parish.

Katie Liming, a political science sophomore at Michigan State, said, ?I?m at that point where I?m constantly wondering what I am going to do. It?s an obsession right now and this is just kind of showing me that whatever I do, I can fit God into it.?

Along with the biweekly meetings, participating students have had spiritual retreats with their individual ESTEEM groups, and in April there will be a retreat at Yale for students from all six schools. The students, approximately 12 from each school, were chosen by their campus ministers for exhibiting strong Catholic leadership and involvement within their student parish.

?This is all voluntary,? Byrnes said. ?The campus chaplains recommended them and we were thrilled with the students who responded. They are all active citizens. They are all interesting and involved in diverse parts of our faith community. I loved seeing their enthusiasm. They were just so excited and hit the ground running.?

Byrnes said the ESTEEM program offers a glimpse of the future at a time when the church is persistently confronted with the sex abuse scandal, and made the subject of media criticism.

?The heart of this program is that there is hope here, and the church needs it,? she said. ?There is a lot of negativity about the church right now and to think about not harnessing that for the future of the church is sad. The difference between parishes and a vibrant campus ministry is night and day. People are seeking student campuses out because they?re alive, full of energy, and we need to bring that spirit to other parishes. I think the church is looking for some answers and I hope they can find them here.?

The results of this year?s pilot schools have been so promising, Byrnes said. ?We?re hoping to double the program by next year.?

[Casey McCorry was a summer intern for *NCR* and now assists with Web site maintenance at NCRonline.org.]

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