

Catholics evangelize college students

Alice Popovici | May. 5, 2011



Amber Loosbrock, left, discusses relationships and sex during a weekly Bible study for young women at New York University. (Alice Popovici)

NEW YORK -- In a student lounge at New York University, Amber Loosbrock sits on the floor surrounded by a group of young women, leading a lively discussion about sex, relationships and love.

The members of the weekly Bible study group have brought their takeout dinners, their many questions and their copies of Edward Sri's *Men, Women and the Mystery of Love: Practical Insights from John Paul II's Love and Responsibility*. Loosbrock, a missionary with the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS), steers the conversation, from dating advice to birth control to pop culture, and back to the text.

"What's wrong with Bill and Sally having sex outside of marriage, if each person consents and each person derives something out of it?" she asks the group.

The young women struggle with the answer. They agree that premarital sex is wrong if the two people are simply using one another. They bring up conversations they hear on campus every day: students talking about casual sex in the elevator or in the lunch line. One young woman wants to know why it is wrong for two people to have sex if they are in a committed relationship. Marriage, says another, is a milestone you reach, like driving a car and getting a fake ID -- and you have to work for it and wait for it.

"This is truly about freedom," Loosbrock explains, bringing Pope John Paul II's "personalist principle" into the context of college life in a big city. Modern society seems to say, "Do whatever you want," but Loosbrock tells the young women they can choose to follow the pope's teaching about relationships. They can choose to not treat others as "potential objects."

"True love -- it's hard," she says, "but it pays off."

Loosbrock, who is 24 and a recent college graduate herself, is one of four FOCUS missionaries who are reaching out to students across the New York University campus, forging friendships and working to instill in them a passion for the Catholic faith, but also encouraging them to continue a mission of "new evangelization" that began 13 years ago at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kan. "Be soldiers," John Paul is said to have told

founder Curtis Martin that same year, when he learned of Martin's vision for FOCUS. Since then the outreach movement, now headquartered just outside of Denver, has grown from one campus and four missionaries to 50 campuses and 300 missionaries, rooted in the belief that college is a time when young adults ask important questions about their lives. FOCUS, which plans to expand to 10 to 15 additional campuses next year, wants to help answer these questions.

"There is a battle for the hearts and minds of young adults on college campuses," said Jeremy Rivera, director of communications at FOCUS. "Our battle is a spiritual battle."

Rivera spoke of a "new atheism" that is present "in the halls of academia," with the potential to influence students at exactly the time when they are seeking answers to the larger questions in life, such as "Who am I?" and "What am I here for?"

The missionaries (four on each campus) work in partnership with university parishes or Newman Centers, reaching out to students in dining halls, gyms or student centers on campus, forming friendships and stepping into the roles of mentors and teachers. They encourage the students to follow the example and reach out to their peers.

At New York University, FOCUS missionaries "are helping to form the leadership of our groups," said Dominican Fr. John McGuire, interim director of the Catholic Center. Housed in the Church of St. Joseph in Greenwich Village, the center runs a soup kitchen, afterschool tutoring activities and other educational programs with the help of about 300 students.

"It's the same thing that we try to do, which is try to bring Christ to others," McGuire said of FOCUS's work, which builds on the tradition of the Newman Center (at the university since 1894) and the Catholic Center that later replaced it. FOCUS reaches out to students on a more individual level, McGuire said, but the work is driven by "the same evangelical energy."

Chris Schilmoeller, the leader of the four-member FOCUS missionary team at New York University, said he and his team members meet regularly with 30 to 40 students during outreach events, Bible study and one-on-one mentoring sessions. For the most part, they live the life of college students, hanging out in dorm rooms, playing video games or going out for pizza. Their job, he said, is to create disciples.

"We're calling them to a relationship with Christ, but we're also calling them into his mission, which is evangelization and discipleship," Schilmoeller said. "We're here answering a call that Jesus gave us, which was to go and make disciples of all nations."

Schilmoeller, who is 25, enjoys drawing students out in conversation. He asks about their lives and their interests, and doesn't bring up religion right away. If they ask about his life, he mentions FOCUS.

"A lot of times I just ask them about their faith and how they got to where they are," he said. "I think it is interesting, what leads people to believe what they believe." The discussions often lead to more questions.

"I'm obviously doing it because I think Catholicism is the truth," Schilmoeller said of his work as a missionary. Describing his conversations with students, he added, "I guess a big thing is truth itself." But is truth relative? "And if there's an objective truth, is there a God," he asked, "a God that we can know?"

Christianity, Schilmoeller said, is different from other religions in that it makes very bold claims. Whereas faiths in general present a set of values and ethics and morals, Christianity "claims that Jesus is God," he said. "What does it mean if he actually was who he said he was?" The claims of Catholicism are even bolder. "When the priest holds up the bread" during Mass, Schilmoeller continued, "it literally becomes Jesus Christ himself. So if

this is true, what does that mean??

In the three years Schilmoeller has served as a FOCUS missionary (he spent one year at the University of Colorado in Boulder before coming to New York), he has noticed a pattern in the types of friendships students tend to develop during college, he said. He called them "friendships of utility," either centered on partying or making connections. Some students don't have many friends at all.

"So basically we're there to be their friends, to show them what a true friendship looks like," Schilmoeller said. A few years ago a FOCUS missionary did the same for him.

Schilmoeller, who grew up in a Catholic family, was hanging out with a crowd of drug dealers in high school, but decided to make changes in his life once he arrived at the University of Nebraska at Lincoln.

"FOCUS found me and invited me to a Bible study," he said, and from that point on he became more interested in church teachings, "became hungry to know more." In time, he saw himself change for the better. "I began to truly value real relationships," he said, "to not be so arrogant and cocky, and really began to let people in."

Schilmoeller said he realizes that the Catholic church, as an institution, has made mistakes, but he believes there is a very clear distinction between the church, which is led by the Holy Spirit, and the people in positions of leadership within the church.

"It's God's kingdom, but it's led by human beings, which are imperfect." He said he places his trust in the Holy Spirit, which he believes is guiding the church, as it has done throughout history. "This isn't anything new," he added. "This has been around for 2,000 years."

Rivera, FOCUS's director of communications, said every faith community "has something wrong with it," and the Catholic church presents an easy target for critics.

"There've definitely been a lot of mistakes made in handling problems," but it is important to make the distinction between the problems of the church and what the church teaches, he said. Otherwise, focusing on the mistakes becomes "a way of skirting responsibility of what we know Jesus is calling us to, which is love."

FOCUS missionaries, who raise the money for their own salaries, attend a fundraising boot camp as part of a training program they are required to complete before they start work, where they are taught how to reach out to potential donors. They attend prayer classes and business strategy classes. And they learn how to communicate the FOCUS vision to others.

"It's really like a lifestyle," says Loosbrock, whose work at New York University is funded by family, friends and parish members in New York City and in her hometown of Lismore, Minn. "Our mission is a vision for life."

Loosbrock, who is one of the missionaries in charge of interviewing candidates for FOCUS positions, says she looks for people who have a "zeal for souls," a love for Jesus Christ and the church, and bubbly personalities.

Earlier this year, she met with Ann Gennaro, a member of her Bible study group, to encourage her to apply for a job as a campus missionary. By that point Schilmoeller had already asked Gennaro if she planned to apply, and her initial reaction had been, "Not for me," Gennaro remembers. But then she gathered more information and looked at the essay questions in the application.

"It was this almost soul-searching application," says Gennaro, who is 21 and will graduate this spring with a degree in communication and economics. "This really got me thinking and praying, and really starting to think

about FOCUS in my life.? Now that she has accepted a position as a campus missionary and will begin training in the summer, she says, ?It?s exciting and terrifying all at once.? Family members were at first hesitant about the idea, but they are now supportive.

?The heart of what we do is discipleship,? says Loosbrock, ?teaching teachers how to teach.? Already she says a couple of the young women in her Bible study group are planning to lead their own groups next year.

Elisa Angevin, an 18-year-old freshman from Texas, says she was initially reluctant to give FOCUS a chance, but she went to a meeting anyway at the urging of her best friend.

?I thought it was going to be really lame,? she says, ?and I showed up and realized that it?s not uncool.? She met Loosbrock, who ?just was hilarious.?

Angevin, who plans to major in applied psychology, says she barely went to church every Sunday before finding FOCUS, but now she goes to Mass almost every day.

?It?s just helped me become more comfortable with who I really am,? she says. ?They don?t judge you for what you believe, they just try to help you find the right answer.?

[NCR contributor Alice Popovici lives in New York City.]

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