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Website fosters faith, fellowship among students, campus ministries

Laura Dodson Catholic News Service | Dec. 7, 2011

Fr. John Sims Baker, chaplain of Vanderbilt Catholic, talks with Vanderbilt University students who are planning a group trip to the upcoming March for Life in Washington. They are, from left, Stephanie Brennan, a senior from Fort Mitchell, Ky.; Stephanie Best, a junior from Brentwood, Tenn.; and Elise Burgett, a senior from Medway, Mass. Vanderbilt Catholic is the Nashville Diocese's campus

MELBOURNE, Fla. -- They are the future of the church and world and it just makes sense that as young adults pursue advanced education for their careers, they should be able to deepen their faith with prayer, fellowship and knowledge about their faith at the same time.

At newmanconnection.com [1], young adults are doing exactly that. Via the virtual world, they are connected to a community of others just like themselves.

"Campus ministry is where I found my faith," said Katrina Teano, a 23-year-old graduate student at Florida Institute of Technology in Melbourne. "I'm connected with Newman Connection, do the online classes and really like it because it's connected to people in other schools in the country. All kids are welcome and if this gets someone involved -- that's the benefit."

The Newman Connection, a nonprofit organization founded in July 2009, unites Newman centers across the country, providing a medium for communication as well as a support structure and ongoing development for students and the centers.

"There's so much work to be done in campus ministry," said Bill Zerrusen, its founder and president. "Through the Newman centers, we want to create a Catholic home within the public university boundaries where the kids can come and get the support they need."

Newman centers were inspired by Blessed John Henry Newman, who encouraged societies for Catholic students attending secular universities. The first Newman center was founded in 1893 at the University of Pennsylvania, and there are now about 1,500 of the diocesan-sponsored campus ministry centers.

"I discovered God in law school," said Chad-Michael Cunningham, 28, who is director of Catholic campus ministry and development at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn. "God has made it an amazing ride, a really unique place to be in the world, a neatly carved-out job of working with students who might not know

things, but know they want to know."

In late August, Newman Connection launched two online educational courses, "Exploring 'YouCat'" and iFACTS, which stands for the Institute For Advancing Catholic Thought and Studies.

"YouCat" is a new youth catechism released this summer as a supplement to the Catechism of the Catholic Church; iFACTS is a project of the Vanderbilt Catholic community and endorsed by Nashville Bishop David R. Choby, who online welcomes students to the institute.

"A lot of this is the fruit of Blessed Pope John Paul II and his love for youth," the bishop said in an interview for Catholic News Service. "He encouraged and supported them. World Youth Day 2011 is a prime example. I'm happy to see that this younger generation is discovering the richness of this life of faith and the hope and joy it brings. It's a real grace."

Cunningham started teaching catechism classes to Vanderbilt freshmen in September 2010, but it was meeting with the Newman Connection in February 2011 that catapulted the iFACTS program from a university classroom to the world and that classroom is available free, live-stream, online, 24/7 to all who click.

"Newman Connection gave us the opportunity to say what we were saying, but into a very big microphone," Cunningham said. "I now get to speak with a countless number of people as to why their faith is important and especially how you live it -- the practical side of our faith."

Bishop Choby had high praise for the Vanderbilt's campus ministry program in general, saying it is "part of the overall effort to enrich the catechetical life in the diocese. I see the value and need for doing an ongoing program in campus ministry, and my role is to support those who can carry it out on a day-to-day basis."

Newman Connection's resources include a list of the Newman centers on campuses around the country. Campus ministries connected to one another through the site number 159; for each one of those the site includes a calendar of events; times for Mass, confession and adoration; center details and staff; and location and contact information.

"Exploring 'YouCat': Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church" is taught by three priests. One is Father Jim Kelleher, a priest of the Society of Our Lady of the Most Holy Trinity.

"We live in a complex, highly technical and driven world," said Father Kelleher, who is at Our Lady of Corpus Christi Center for New Evangelization in Corpus Christi, Texas. His order operates the center.

"A person can feel left out. The despair you find in society and particularly on college campuses is 'not knowing the purpose of my life,'" the priest told CNS. "Blessed Pope John Paul II saw the young people as under-served and said he was not going to give up on them. He challenged them 'to come to know Jesus because the more you and I know Jesus, the more we know ourselves.'"

Victor Chapa, development director for Catholic campus ministry at Texas A&M International University in

Laredo, Texas, encourages parents to visit the Newman Connection website. "It helps a lot for parents to see Catholic centers at secular universities. Newman Connection is doing a really great job of providing all the information."

"I'm involved in Catholic education because a large number of our kids are not catechized and aren't going to Mass," said Thomas Monaghan, founder and chancellor of Florida's Ave Maria University, in Ave Maria.

But "not all kids can afford to go to Catholic schools, and we've got to teach our kids that the most important thing in their lives is to be in sanctifying grace. It is the foundation for everything else -- living in Christ's presence," he said. "We're finding that the Newman centers on non-Catholic campuses are revitalizing -- they're producing vocations and the leaders of the future."

The foundation upon which Newman Connection was built is called United in Prayer, which has its own link on the site. It's a national network of Catholics praying together for Newman centers and Catholic campus ministries across the country. Participants make a pledge to pray on Wednesdays at 7 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m.

"I've encouraged our students to sign up, uniting our Catholic students across the nation in prayer to support each other," said Father Peter Nassetta, chaplain/director of campus ministry at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va.

Religious communities are involved in the prayer network, too. One is Mother Angelica's Poor Clares of Perpetual Adoration at Our Lady of the Angels Monastery in Hanceville, Ala., who include young adults in their intentions at perpetual adoration. Another is the Fathers of Mercy in Auburn, Ky.

"We're at a crossroads in our nation and our young people are really looking for something substantial," said Father Anthony Stephens, the order's vocation director and also a teacher of the "YouCat" sessions. "I continue to pray about it. It's the United in Prayer side of the ministry. The Fathers of Mercy are praying on a daily basis at Mass and in our book of intentions for our young people."

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Links:
[1] http://www.newmanconnection.com