

Online university 'reignites enthusiasm' for faith, says its president

Betty Ellen Walter Catholic News Service | Aug. 22, 2013
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Catholic Distance University's programs "reignite a passion for being Catholic," said Marianne Evans Mount, president of the online university, based in Hamilton.

"Many Catholics have advanced degrees in their professional fields, but they're operating at a third-grade level when it comes to their faith," she said, adding that the university provides "an education that is textured, deep and transformational."

Students from all 50 states and 60 countries have earned degrees from Catholic Distance University or taken its courses and seminars.

It was founded Aug. 22, 1983, as the Catholic Home Study Institute, educating exclusively through distance education using correspondence courses to educate the laity.

The university has evolved into a nationally accredited, U.S. Department of Education-recognized institution of higher education. It offers three degree programs: a master's in theology, a bachelor's degree-completion program in theology, and an associate's degree in liberal arts with a concentration in Catholic studies.

"Our reach is worldwide," Mount said. "For example, we are working with a religious community of sisters in Nigeria and we've just completed a pilot project with the archdiocese of Dublin."

Arlington Bishop Paul Loverde, chairman of the board of trustees, said the university is "committed to handing on the authentic teachings of the church, the Catholic intellectual tradition, and our rich cultural heritage as Catholics" and "reaches people at all stages of life and circumstances at their convenience."

Close to 1,000 students are enrolled in courses and seminars. Classes range from basic introductory courses in the Bible, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, canon law, church history and Catholic theology to classes that reintroduce students to the time when Jesus walked the earth.

Courses and seminars also include catechetical classes to fulfill continuing education requirements for volunteer catechists at parishes and employees of Catholic dioceses. Students include deacons as well as young men and women in formation for religious life who lack a background in fundamental theology.

The school partners with the Brooklyn, N.Y., Grand Rapids, Mich., Toledo, Ohio, and Arlington dioceses, the Indianapolis archdiocese and the U.S. Archdiocese for the Military Services to provide education and catechetical formation to the laity.

"Our diocesan partners see us as experts in online faith formation, encouraging and supporting continuing education for busy Catholics working in the world, for parents, and those who assume leadership roles in parishes and dioceses," Mount said.

George Barlow of Binghamton, N.Y., is one such student. After serving in the Army from 1973 to 1975, Barlow earned an associate's degree at Broome Community College in 1978, followed by a career as a city police officer. At the time of his retirement in 2006, he was the confirmation instructor for two Catholic churches in his community.

"I saw Dr. Mount on EWTN, and she was talking about a new class on the revised Catholic catechism," he said. "At that moment, I said, 'Sign me up.' "

Barlow is now three courses shy of earning a catechetical diploma from Catholic Distance University.

Students find the school appealing because they can fit coursework into a busy lifestyle.

"I can drive an hour north or an hour south to find a Catholic college, but why would I do that if I can take a CDU class in my own home?" Barlow said. "The professors are excellent, and I like that the teaching focuses not just on the what, but on the why. This is very helpful to me when I am in front of high school students discussing something in the news that they think is cool but is totally against our beliefs as Catholics."

The school's typical student works full time or has a life that is home-centered caring for young children or elderly parents. The average age is 45.

The common thread in the curriculum is [the online campus](#) [1] and course rooms connected through the Internet. Students choose the format and length of study. Online group courses are similar to what is offered at traditional universities with classes beginning in September, January and May. During the 12 weeks of instruction, students log into their course rooms at their own convenience to complete assignments.

Courses are interactive and the professor posts questions and answers in a discussion area that can be viewed by all. Many courses come with audio and graphics, and online materials are available 24/7.

Three-week online interactive seminars offer intense learning over a short period of time. Online on-demand independent study courses allow students to enroll at any time of the year and work at their own pace with automated testing under a course instructor's direction.

"Our faith is under attack in the secular culture; Catholics who live their faith are sometimes portrayed as simple, uninformed or even irrational," Mount said. "A lot of Catholics who lack a rational understanding at an adult level for the teachings of the church end up walking away from the faith.

"Others who do not continue to nourish their faith and deepen their knowledge gradually begin to struggle with the demands of the moral teachings of the church. Rather than becoming evangelizers of the culture, as (Blessed) John Paul II challenged us, we become evangelized by the culture."

Catholic Distance University "reignites enthusiasm for being Catholic and turns armchair Catholics into true and fearless apostles," Mount added. "That's something worth being excited about."

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