

# Nursing, med students tackle difficult issues with a Catholic mindset

The parable of the good Samaritan epitomizes the Catholic mission to care for the sick. It is why the Catholic Church has been a leader in building hospitals and creating health care initiatives throughout history.

As anti-life practices such as contraception, abortion and euthanasia have infiltrated under the guise of health care, however, authentic Catholic teaching must be carefully integrated into the education of medical careers to prepare their students for jobs that may challenge their faith.



Father  
Nadolski

At DeSales University in Center Valley, Pennsylvania, imparting the Faith begins from the very start, according to Father Kevin Nadolski, vice president for mission. From the time students first arrive as freshman, they go through the “CharacterU” formation program led by upperclassman to facilitate the adjustment and development of students through Salesian character traits: gentleness, humility, patience and love of knowledge.

“The spirituality of St. Francis de Sales is one of the heart that puts students on a trajectory grounded in virtue,” Father

Nadolski said. "Matthew 11:29 is a favorite quote. It locates those virtues in the heart of Jesus, the locus of goodness and freedom, where we take our impulses of grace: 'Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am meek and humble of heart; and you will find rest for yourselves.'"

Father Nadolski explained that the spirituality of St. Francis is part of DeSales Catholic intellectual tradition, informing the minds with information that also forms hearts so that they are transformed and expanded. "From there they can roll up their sleeves and get to work," he said.

The DeSales medical program includes nursing, physician assistant, physical therapy and sports and health science. "We talk about end-of-life issues, and during clinical rotations, students do not participate in procedures that are abortifacients," Father Nadolski said.

The pastoral side of care is part of their nursing education. "Patient care is not just about when life ends, but also about how we care for people who are dying," he explained. "In the simulation lab, students are walked through the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick and are taught when to call a priest and how to talk to the family about it. I also talk to them about the role of prayer. I would like to think that our students are launched in terms of their spiritual life and that they care for all dimensions of the human person."

## **Example of a saint**



Harris

Jackie Harris, assistant professor of nursing at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, explained that the example of Mother Teresa pervades their program. "Her life and example permeate our days and motivate us to better live a Catholic life," she said.

The nursing program is located in the Mother Teresa Center for Nursing and Health Education building, named with permission from the Missionaries of Charity. A statue of her outside the building greets students and faculty, and a large picture of the saint hangs in the front entrance. Other pictures and quotations, including, "Give your hands to serve and your heart to love," are found throughout the building. One way they have celebrated her feast day was with a health care screening in a low-income neighborhood.

In addition to such a holy example of caring for the sick, nursing students take a Christian bioethics class taught by a theology professor. "It covers a lot of current issues and gives students a solid basis for all the ethical issues that will come in the future as technology continues to grow," Harris said.

Guest speakers frequently are brought in to discuss topics related to Catholic values such as contraception, the Catholic Church's teachings about reproductive issues, and personal experience on how to stay true to Catholic values and Church teachings in the real world.

"Personally, I lead by example and openly discuss the challenges I have faced as a nurse in a secular world," Harris said. "I try to get to know the students well, so they feel comfortable coming to me to discuss their concerns about these areas that conflict with Catholic values. I also pray with students at the beginning of each class."

## Navigating difficult issues

David M. McCarthy, associate provost and theology professor at Mount St. Mary's in Emmitsburg, Maryland, said that students in the sciences study those areas in relation to the Christian faith and the moral life. The required course "Ethics and the Human Good" draws on their major fields of study.



David M. McCarthy of Mount St. Mary's in Maryland talks with students.

"Central to the course are the virtues of faith, hope and love, as well as prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude," McCarthy said. "We address areas of conflicts with Catholic values in terms of human flourishing." When he teaches the course, he said he tells students that their articulation of Catholic values should be done in a way that enhances and gives greater meaning to the fundamental practices of the profession.

At Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, in addition to receiving solid Catholic teaching and addressing the issues of the day, pre-med students are coached on how to handle graduate school and medical school interviews without compromising their faith.

"We bring back former students who will talk about the process

and how they got through it without being screened out,” said Dan Kuebler, biology professor, researcher and dean of the School of Natural and Applied Sciences. “Typical questions have to do with contraception or abortion or end-of-life issues. Technically, they can’t screen candidates based on political bias, but they can use it to say they are intolerant.”



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Students are told to focus on the patient when answering questions that might be intended to screen them out.

“For instance, saying something like, ‘I really want to understand the patient and understand their situation and what their health issues are and then discuss with them what is going to be best,’ makes it about the patient in a holistic way,” Kuebler said. “We don’t want them to be denied admission because they are pro-life.”

Students are told that interviews for admission are not the time to try and convert people. Also, during student clinical rotations, if there are procedures contrary to Catholic morals, students are told to step out of the room, that they should not assist for such things.

# The wisdom of the Church



Cloutier

At The Catholic University of America, David Cloutier, associate professor of moral theology/ethics, said that all nursing students take a bioethics class.

“We emphasize the particular and unique framework that Catholicism offers in which human stewardship is important but should accord with God’s design for creation,” he said.

He acknowledged that students come to them with many diverse, and conflicting views that they typically never really have sorted through.

“We make our classrooms open to these questions, but we are consistent in showing the students how wise the Catholic tradition is about these things,” Cloutier said. “We consistently help our students understand the wisdom of the Church on these sorts of issues. Faith and theology aren’t just a separate compartment here; they permeate the whole framework of the education.”

*Patti Maguire Armstrong writes from North Dakota.*

Catholic-formed health care workers



Bursch



O'Hare



Volkman

Graduates who received clear teaching on Catholic morality go into their fields with eyes wide open. Three recent graduates explain how their colleges prepared them for their first jobs. Taylor Volkman graduated from the University of Mary in Bismarck, North Dakota, with a degree in respiratory therapy, and she now works in a cardiac care unit at a large hospital. Volkman sometimes faces life and death situations since it is her responsibility to turn off the ventilator when a patient does not make it.

"It's hard. Some patients last for months, and then hearing they passed away is devastating," she said. "I've had to lean on God for that."

She credits her time at the University of Mary with deepening her Catholic faith and helping to form her in virtue.

"I was taught to treat the patient as your own family member rather than a science project, even though it's a job," Volkman said. "Human dignity was emphasized. I pray for my patients, and I pray for God's will and that I give them the best care that I can and never become so robotic that I don't care."

Elizabeth O'Hare graduated from Mount St. Mary's with a degree in biology and biochemistry. She plans to go into medical school to become a pediatric surgeon but is first spending a couple years as a high school teacher at Cantwell-Sacred Heart of Mary in East Los Angeles through Notre Dame's Alliance Of Catholic Education (ACE) graduate program. It involves summer and long-distance classes while agreeing to teach during the school year in a low-income Catholic school. O'Hare credits Mount St. Mary's with igniting her Catholic faith, which had been pretty dormant in the beginning. "It was life changing," she said. "I became pro-life because I had reasoned through it in a course on bioethics."

Since her inner-city students do not all have pro-life mindsets, she is taking what she learned in college and gradually teaching them the beauty and value of human life.

"I bring out my fetal models to teach about fetal development," she said. "Some may not be as receptive to learning about pro-life, but they are excited to see how babies develop. I will explain the pro-life side and look at the ethical side of stem cell research, abortion and IVF this semester. I'm also going to start a pro-life club on campus."

Karina Bursch graduated from The Catholic University of America and is a first-year student at the Medical College of Wisconsin, pursuing a dual M.D. and Ph.D. degree through the Medical Scientist Training Program.

"My education at CUA and conversations with my professors have taught me that the job of a scientist and physician is so much more than a mere career," she said. "It is a unique vocation that allows you to place your desire to understand the world around you in cooperation with God's grace, so that he might accomplish his good works in the world. I know that I will always consider my vocation to science and medicine through the lens of Catholicism and allow the tenets of the faith to shape my words and actions in the lab and the clinic."

