

Catholic colleges are training the next generation of parish leaders

Parishes today are facing a number of growing challenges – from declining Mass attendance and participation in religious education, to financial struggles and aging infrastructure. But across the country, Catholic colleges and universities are doing their part to train the next generation of parish leaders who will not only help come up with innovative solutions, but who will roll up their sleeves and do the work that often goes unnoticed.



Bolster

The root of many of these problems stems from a lack of understanding what the Church teaches and why. At Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio, the Catechetics Program trains future catechists “who love the Lord, love the Church, know the Faith, and teach it effectively, all for the purpose of leading their disciples into a relationship with the Lord, or deepening that relationship if they are already in one,” said Ron Bolster, assistant professor of theology at Franciscan, who has been teaching in the program for 16 years.

At Franciscan, the students learn about all of the various dimensions of pastoral ministry at the parish level, including the importance of catechesis and youth ministry, the important

role Catholic schools play in the Church, and how religious education in schools differs in practice from parish catechesis. They learn about adult catechesis, RCIA and ongoing faith formation, as well as family-based catechesis and more. The faculty at Franciscan tries to give the students the foundation to tackle any pastoral situation that might arise. “And, in response to the growing crisis of faith in so many places in the world, they learn to meet and accompany people in their own situations,” Bolster said, “to love them and proclaim the Good News to them, to evangelize in any setting, to help initiate them in a catechumenal process and to make missionary disciples.”

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Preparation for pastoral ministry requires more than theological education. “Our program was established when we found that theological training, however valuable it might be, does not necessarily prepare one to be a teacher, serve effectively in a parish setting or know how to make disciples,” Bolster said. Just as a doctor needs proper instruction in order to operate in a hospital, a minister needs proper instruction to do a good job in a parish, Bolster said.

“Our students come to learn that eternity is at stake, that their work is really a matter of eternal life and death for the people whom they serve,” Bolster said. “We can teach our students only so much. At the university, we are very fortunate to have a community of believers that supports growth in holiness that is a prerequisite for work in the Church – or in life, for that matter.”

One of the greatest challenges facing pastoral ministers today is a general decline in knowledge and practice of the Faith among Catholics. “Our students learn the Faith and how to teach it, but perhaps more importantly, by their lives and teaching they help others learn how to live it as disciples of

the Lord,” Bolster said.

Experience in the field

Limited parish resources – finances, staff, volunteers – also pose a challenge, and this has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions. But Bolster said the university teaches the students that the Church does not have a resource problem, but an under-utilization problem.

“I think it is particularly important for new graduates to have had some experience of what it is like to plan, implement and evaluate a program,” said Susan Timoney, an associate professor and the associate dean for undergraduate studies in the School of Theology and Religious Studies at The Catholic University of America. She has directed and taught in the Certificate for Pastoral Ministry Program for the last three years.

“It is important for them to learn the skill of theological reflection ... so they can see how one applies theology to pastoral practice,” Timoney said. “It is one thing to have studied the Trinity and quite another thing to make the mystery of the Trinity come alive in a confirmation class or RCIA presentation.” This focus on the practical elements of teaching the Faith is also emphasized in the university’s desire to place students with supervisors who are passionate about the Faith and what they do.

Along with building a foundation in theology and pastoral theory, each student in the Certificate in Pastoral Ministry program at CUA chooses a specialized field, such as youth ministry, catechesis or working with vulnerable populations. The program also allows students to gain practical experience in parishes through internships and other real-world experience.



“You learn from ministry leaders who have decades of experience in both pastoral theology as well as in parish leadership,” said Brian Rhude, a 2020 graduate of CUA who majored in theology and religious studies. “Our internship is a great opportunity to experience parish life ... and get real chances to accompany individuals, to plan events, to work with Church leaders, and to learn and grow as a pastoral minister.”



Holler

Joanna Holler said her experience at The Catholic University of America prepared her well for the pastoral work she pursued after graduation. After earning a degree in psychology and brain sciences with a certificate in pastoral ministry, she now serves as a Jesuit Volunteer at a parish in San Antonio, where she is the director of parish outreach and serves as a catechist, music minister and more. Holler told Our Sunday Visitor that, in one class, students role-played various scenarios and were challenged to practice their active-listening skills.

“These scenarios helped prepare me for some of the challenging conversations I have had over this past year,” Holler said. “The program is well-rounded and helped to shape me as both a minister and a listener,” she said.

The parish as a business

While the goal of a parish is aimed at guiding people on the path to heaven, the nature of the work necessitates well-formed business administrators to help run them. This, too, is

a ministry, and many Catholic universities and colleges have business administration programs that explicitly guide students on how to work in a parish setting.



Haroldson

At Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas, students in the School of business learn the fundamentals of business while being formed in virtue and the Catholic faith, said Leeds Haroldson, assistant professor in the School of Business. “The skills and competencies they gain while at Benedictine College can be placed at the service of parishes to help them become more vibrant, healthy environments,” Haroldson said.

With discipleship and evangelization as the goal for every parish, “it is important that students be equipped with best organizational practices to more effectively accomplish the salvific work of the Church within the parish setting,” Haroldson said. Like other businesses, parishes need to be well run, utilizing best practices in the areas of leadership, accounting, marketing, human resources and other areas vital to their success.

At Benedictine, the business administration program focuses on guiding students on how to lead with a Christian heart, whether in a parish context or somewhere else. “There are many different theories on leadership, but true sustainable leadership can only be found in Christ,” Haroldson said. “Without him, we are lost and lack a sustainable vision for ourselves and others.”

Paul Senz writes from Oregon.

'CO-WORKERS IN THE VINEYARD OF THE LORD'

In 2005, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops published "Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord," which serves as "a resource for guiding the development of lay ecclesial ministry." The introduction describes the mission of the document.

"For several decades and in growing numbers, lay men and women have been undertaking a wide variety of roles in Church ministries. Many of these roles presume a significant degree of preparation, formation, and professional competence. They require authorization of the hierarchy in order for the person to serve publicly in the local church. They entrust to laity responsibilities for leadership in particular areas of ministry and thereby draw certain lay persons into a close mutual collaboration with the pastoral ministry of bishops, priests, and deacons.

"These men and women of every race and culture who serve in parishes, schools, diocesan agencies and Church institutions are identified by many different position titles. In 'Co-Workers in the Vineyard of the Lord,' we identify them in a generic way as 'lay ecclesial ministers.' We do so in order to reflect on what they have in common and to propose some understandings of lay ecclesial ministry situated within our social and ecclesial environment and within the framework of the Church's belief, teaching and pastoral practice."

The full document can be found at USCCB.org.