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NATIONAL CATHOLIC REGISTER

80th
ANNIVERSARY

REPRINT

March 11-17, 2007

Volume 83, No.10

'Pray Up, Catholics,' Say Students on a Mission

BY BARB ERNSTER

Holy Cross College may live in the shadow of its big and famous Catholic-education colleague in Notre Dame, Ind. — even as it shares that-other-school status with a third player in town, St. Mary's College — but its ability to attract new students looking for rich Catholic spirituality and solid Catholic identity is second to none in the neighborhood.

The success is due largely to Holy Cross' Mission Team, a new component of its campus ministry.

Mission Team is the brainchild of Robert Kloska, director of campus ministry. He and other campus leaders started the program after deciding to leverage the school's authentic Catholic heritage to shape its spirituality and, in the process, build its enrollment of spiritually engaged students.

The program was piloted in 2005 with just eight students. Since then Mission Team has quadrupled in size — and grown exponentially in dedication and dynamism, according to its leaders and members.

As Kloska explains it, Mission Team provides faith-development opportunities and promotes the sacramental life on campus. The idea is to help young Catholics grow in their faith at a time when temptations to abandon it abound.

"Young people are starving for this. Many kids were show-

ing up at Holy Cross wanting to work in campus ministry, and we didn't have enough for them," Kloska told the Register. "We have deliberately formed this team and recruit for it and give scholarships, like a sports team, so we can bring in high-school leaders."

"It's an exciting thing that kids are coming to Holy Cross College because of Mission Team," he adds. "It's our plan for energizing and renewing the Catholic faith at Holy Cross."

Favorable Forecast

For most of its 40-year history, Holy Cross was a junior college. Commuter students graduated with a two-year associate's degree and then either found jobs or transferred credits to a four-year school in pursuit of a bachelor's degree. Many used the school as a launching pad to gain admission into Notre Dame.

Several years ago, it became a four-year residential college all its own. Today its hottest major is theology.

Holy Cross is administered by the Brothers of the Congregation of Holy Cross. Kloska says the order's rich faith is especially evident among its young priests. He notes that, when a daily Mass was added about five years ago, the only people in attendance were him and the presiding priest. Today at least 30 students show up for daily Mass.

Because of its small size —

fewer than 500 students — not many people outside northern Indiana or southwestern Michigan have heard of Holy Cross. But that, too, is changing. The college has set its sights on doubling its enrollment. Kloska believes that will happen, thanks in no small part to Mission Team. He says the college is actively recruiting at least 71 high-school students who are specifically interested in Mission Team and the school's Catholic identity.

Based on those numbers, Kloska anticipates Mission Team will "more than double" next year.

"We really want to build a nice little Catholic college and promote our vibrant faith life," he says, "and the administration is behind us. We're hoping to turn out good, solid Catholic, educated kids who will go out and affect the world."

It was that focus on "mission and vision" that attracted Becca LaLonde, who, after graduating high school in Big Rapids, Mich., was seeking a college where she could practice her faith in an unapologetically Catholic community.

"Being able to join with people who have that same love for God and the Church gave me an immediate sense of community and friends here, and made it easier to be away from home," says LaLonde. "Mission Team helped me work through that transitional period."

As a Mission Team member,

LaLonde is dedicated to keeping up a rigorous faith-development regimen that includes prayer, daily Mass, Eucharistic adoration, a Catholic apologetics course and weekly meetings with her squad. She also contributes weekly service work to an off-campus ministry adopted by the college.

The time commitment is worth it to LaLonde, who relies on the group to face the challenges of college and life.

"I look forward to the committed times of prayer and Mass. It's the only thing that keeps me sane," she says. "It's still a school with homework and tests and research projects. Sometimes you forget you're doing this for God and it is part of your vocation. It's nice to have that reminder throughout the week, to see the bigger picture."

Ecumenical Triage

Tina Holland, vice president of student affairs and one of eight Mission Team squad leaders, says Mission Team and the Catholic identity of the college is a point of distinction for many of the students, not unlike a major or membership on an athletic team.

"There are a lot of schools that are apologizing for their Catholic identity. We market it," explains Holland, who holds a doctorate in education. "We're not interested in the slippery slope to relativity, but we regu-

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larly assure the administration that we're also not trying to establish a homogenous group of campus charismatic religious zealots."

"This group was not meant to be the 'God squad,' but more 'stealth leaven,' as Bob Kloska calls it," she adds. "We're open to all and we'll help any student develop their faith life no matter what their faith tradition."

Trevor Gibney, 23, from Elkhart, Ind., is respectfully referred to as a "Catholic-loving Lutheran" by fellow Mission Team members. While he does not plan to convert to the Catholic faith, he likes the "undeniable Catholic" identity of Holy Cross. He's completing his degree in

theology after attending Indiana University in South Bend and a music school in Boston.

"I'm not a fan of ambiguity. Holy Cross has a mission and it's not going to sway from it. That was a huge attraction to me," said Gibney. "The cultural lures are really strong. It's coming out of every aspect of our lives. Without Mission Team and campus ministry, it would be more difficult to live out my faith. It's hard to find that discipline if it's not available."

Another theology major, Tom Polcinsky, 21, one of the pilot members of Mission Team, says the group has helped with his spiritual formation by making him accountable for a daily

prayer life.

"A lot of what we do on Mission Team is focused on keeping ourselves active in our faith," says Polcinsky. "That is what guides a person for the rest of his life."

Like many students, Polcinsky initially intended to stay at Holy Cross for one year and transfer to Notre Dame, but he likes the close-knit environment at Holy Cross. Now he plans to earn his bachelor's degree at Holy Cross and then pursue a master's at Notre Dame.

"Mission Team is bringing a positive thing to this campus and community," says Polcinsky. "I hope it continues to grow."

*Barb Ernster writes from
Fridley, Minnesota.*