

A Letter to College Students From the Catholic Bishops of the United States

Dear College Students,

We write to you as your coworkers in Christ, and we congratulate you on all you have done to arrive at this point in your life. Already you are leaders, because in a very real sense you have begun to lead, especially if you are an older student with family and work responsibilities.

Your college years are a very significant time for you. In these few years you will greatly expand your knowledge and your skills. At the same time, you will be making many important choices—about vocations, relationships, and careers.

These years will also provide a wonderful opportunity for you to grow in your faith, a faith that is rooted in your own personal relationship with Jesus and nourished by prayer, reading the Scriptures, and participating in the sacraments. As you grow in faith, you will recognize the important responsibility of sharing your faith with others.

We realize that foremost among the many priorities in your life is the time devoted to study. Your study is not unrelated to your life of faith. Through your exploration of history, language, science, and art, you can also deepen your faith and your understanding of our religious tradition. In the future, what you study now can help transform business, academia, culture, and the mass media into places where the Spirit of God truly lives and works. And there is always the possibility of a career of ministry and leadership in the Church.

But you do not have to wait. Think of the impact you as a Catholic college student can have even now on others who may not know the rich tradition of Catholicism. Working with students of other faiths and religious traditions on campus, you can make important contributions toward peace and justice, reminding the whole academic community of the presence of those whom society neglects or marginalizes. By your involvement as a Catholic, you can help others see the face of Christ in the faces of the poor.

It is a fact of campus life and life everywhere that many people today experience a deep sense of uncertainty and confusion. It seems that for some the world is filled with questions and even discouragement. While we have to admit that the future, as always, is uncertain, we also have to recognize that it is full of possibilities. And as Catholics, we have the added certainty and hope that comes from our faith in the victory of Jesus' death and resurrection. You can be witnesses of that hope for everyone you meet, sharing with them the hope that is based on the Gospel and the abiding presence of the Spirit. By your care and concern, you can also reassure other people that they are really loved and that Christ's love is always present for them.

There are many specific ways that you can minister on campus to create a climate of hope and a community of welcome. Begin by inviting your friends and neighbors to join you at Sunday Mass, the most important celebration of the Catholic community. It is easier for them to respond to the prompting of the Spirit when someone else is willing to go with them. Also, offer to be a reader, server, eucharistic minister, cantor, or musician, according to your gifts.

Strengthen your own spirituality by searching for answers and by becoming more knowledgeable about your faith. Start with the Scriptures, God speaking to us. Then the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is a wonderful reference that can help to answer both your

questions and those others might have. And campus ministers, with their special training, want to help you with your questions, spiritual growth, and religious identity.

There are so many other ways to serve. Volunteer to help out in the local community or improve the quality of life on campus by becoming involved in peer ministry or by tutoring your fellow students. Working together with campus ministers, you can organize or participate in small prayer or faith groups in your residence hall or local community. By your efforts on behalf of life, you can remind others that a lived Christian faith begins with a profound respect for human life from conception to natural death. By simplifying your lifestyle, you can be a reminder that our resources are not without limit and ought to be used wisely.

Jesus commissioned us to be his witnesses by the testimony of our lives when he said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). We bishops of the United States enumerated in our pastoral letter on campus ministry of 1985, *Empowered by the Spirit*, six ways in which the Church on campus can be a faithful witness to the message of the Gospel: forming the faith community, appropriating the faith, forming the Christian conscience, educating for justice, facilitating personal development, and developing leaders for the future.

Since 1985, many campus ministries have reported increased student involvement in liturgy, community service, retreat opportunities, and justice concerns. Now as the Church approaches the two-thousand-year mark in its history, we challenge you to reflect, using these categories from *Empowered by the Spirit*, on the ways in which you have revealed the Church on campus to be a faithful witness to the truth of the Gospel, a “servant community, dedicated to social justice, and a more effective sign and instrument of the kingdom of peace and justice in the world.” This will be especially challenging for you who do not have the help of an organized campus ministry program.

You have so many gifts to offer the Church: your faith, your desire to serve, your spiritual hunger, your vitality, your optimism and idealism, your talents and skills. We can all learn from you, so we ask you to expand your leadership role in witnessing to the Gospel on campus. We promise you our prayerful support and encourage your future involvement in the mission of the Church through a parish faith community. We look forward to working more closely with you to make the Church ever more effective in announcing the reign of God. We ask for your prayers for us in our work of shepherding the Church.