



PHOTOS BY PHIL HALL

# The Faith Factor

An exploration of the formation of religious identity among Notre Dame students

NICK KOLMAN-MANDLE

The lights go out in the Coleman-Morse Center lounge at 10 o'clock every Wednesday night. The doors are closed, and candles are lit and placed around the room. A handful of students—about 20 altogether—mingle and chat with the campus ministers before the event begins with a prayer. The group is called Four:7, a name derived from the passage in 2 Timothy 4:7: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." Their purpose is simple: sing, pray and praise God as a community.

Amidst the flickering glow of the candles, the group sits on the floor, listening to a talk given by one of the members. Meanwhile, students walking through the well-lit hallway pass by the closed-off lounge. Ten at night is prime study time, and CoMo is a favorite study spot. Seeing the room occupied and glancing at the sign outside the door, some students don't break stride. Others raise their eyebrows slightly in curiosity and peer into the dark room before continuing on their way. A few cast deprecating frowns at the sign and closed doors, visibly irritated at the unavailability of study space.

And in this short span of time, students' reactions reflect the microcosm that is the uniquely religious atmosphere of Notre Dame. The extent of students' religiosity is principally a personal matter, but *Scholastic* set out to examine how (and how well) the university's attempts to cultivate faith affect the social and academic lives of Notre Dame's 8,000 undergraduates.

## *Ministering to the Masses*

The devout. The nonreligious. The lukewarm. The disdainful. To break Notre Dame's students down into such superficial groups is not fair. Neither is it accurate: Another person might divide up those categories or create whole new ones. That's why the Rev. Richard V. Warner, C.S.C, director of Campus Ministry, prefers to think of the student body as a mass of interlocking circles. There is a large center circle representing the student body, he suggests, with a good amount of overlap from other circles. Those ancillary circles might represent dorm activities, campus organizations or faith-based groups. Students can belong to some, all or none of them. Warner is proud to claim Campus Ministry as a particularly large circle of involvement for many students.

According to Warner, approximately 3,400 students attend Campus Ministry retreats yearly, and large numbers of students are members of at least one of the university's eight choirs and assist in the daily upkeep and functions of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart. None of these opportunities for religious involvement would be available without the presence of Campus Ministry. "Campus Ministry is the congregation's outreach," which seeks to "encourage and assist students in the development of their own spirituality," Warner says.

Warner enthusiastically cites a Georgetown University study of 24 U.S. Catholic colleges and universities. In the study, alumni from each college were surveyed 10 years after graduation. Approximately 77 percent of surveyed Notre Dame alumni reported themselves as practicing Catholics who regularly attend weekly mass. The average among all of the schools was 24 percent.

The results for Notre Dame alums stand out from the rest, indicating the rather high level of success Campus Ministry has had in its attempts to provide all interested students with outlets for developing their faith.

But don't be fooled by Notre Dame's rumored religious fervor into thinking that the job of Campus Ministry is an easy one. It is a continual challenge to meet the spiritual demands of so many different levels of students, says Brett Perkins, director of Protestant student resources and peer ministry in the Office of Campus Ministry. "We want to reach the people we know are going to be at our door. They're our bread and butter." But at the same time, Campus

Ministry works to reach the marginalized students who feel only "lukewarm" about their faith. Perkins works with both Catholic and Protestant

students on campus. "The majority of Protestants that I work with are very involved on campus, and they deepen their faith greatly while they're here," he says.

It is a deepening of faith for which many students at Notre Dame strive, Perkins says. But, despite the religious nature of the university, some feel that the resources to do so are somewhat lacking. Senior Christina Dehan wishes there were more opportunities for her to delve into a deeper examination of her Catholic faith. Further, Dehan would like to see Campus Ministry strike a balance

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— The Rev. Mark Poorman, C.S.C.

between the retreats they sponsor, which can be either too intense or not probing enough. Junior Chris Scaperlanda, who describes himself as one of the "overinvolved" students in Campus Ministry, agrees. Although, as he says, "Notre Dame does a pretty admirable job making sure people who are ready [to pursue an understanding of their faith] are challenged and those who aren't ready aren't forced," Scaperlanda feels there is not much of a push to get students to take their faith a step further.

For example, Dehan "didn't get much" out of the Notre Dame Encounter (NDE) retreats, a must-do for many before graduation. She looks to other activities to deepen her faith instead. However, she believes that one of her preferred activities, silent retreats, receives a sullied label, whereas NDE does not. "There's this stigma that Campus Ministry is only for hardcore Catholics," Dehan says. "I really hate the labels that go along with things that Campus Ministry does." Dehan also is a coordinator of Eu-

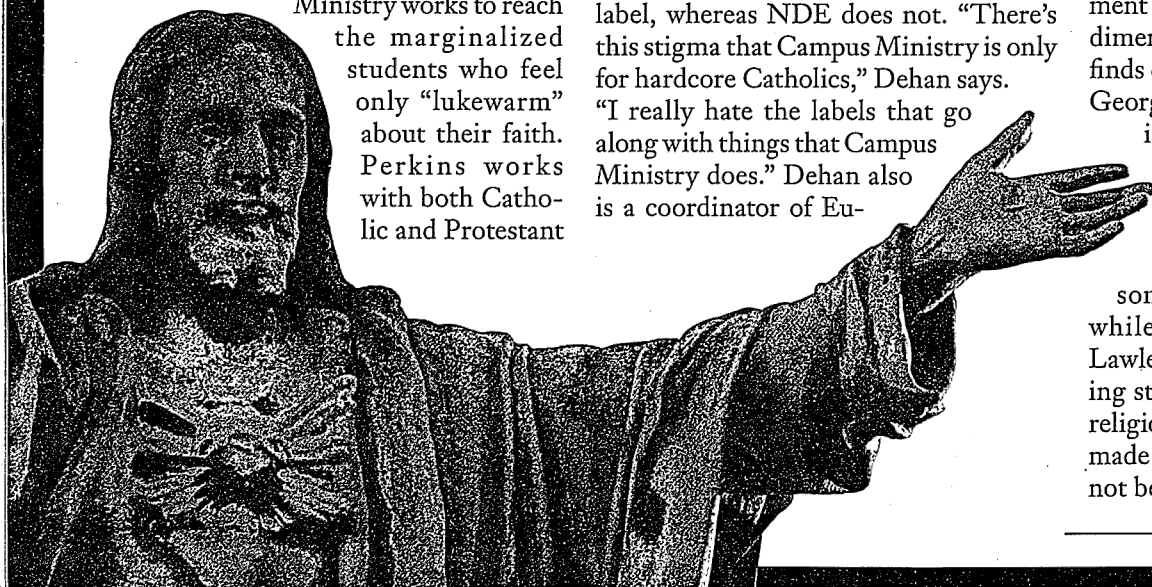
charistic Adoration on campus, another activity she thinks has gotten a bad rap as something in which only intensely serious Catholics participate. "I don't want [adoration] to be a club," she says. "I want it to be something that everyone feels welcome to." Dehan believes that Notre Dame's faith society should be egalitarian, not intimidating. She says that not everyone "has it together" as some would suppose.

### *Questioning the Faith*

More often than not, it appears that Notre Dame students are far from having it together. Studies have been conducted that reveal an inconsistency with the aforementioned Georgetown survey. In 2003, a survey of graduating seniors conducted by the Office of Institutional Research yielded some interesting figures. When asked to rate their change in spirituality from first to senior year,

only 15 percent of students reported a "slight upward" change. One percent said their faith had undergone "much upward change." The majority of students, 46 percent, responded that there had been no change in their spirituality in their four years at Notre Dame, and 29 percent reported a "slight downward" change. Eight percent of students surveyed said that their level of spirituality had gone "much downward." The statistics from the 2003 survey closely match those from the same survey conducted in 2001. The Rev. Mark Poorman, C.S.C., vice president for Student Affairs, is not surprised by the results of the survey. "[College], developmentally, is a time of great questioning," Poorman says. Poorman believes that "faith development on campus is an absolutely critical dimension to what student life is," and he finds encouragement in the results of the Georgetown survey. For him, that survey is more significant; he feels that it speaks of the enduring effect of faith formation at Notre Dame.

While the 2003 survey numbers don't lie, the fact remains that some students question their faith while at Notre Dame. Senior Karen Lawler describes herself as a questioning student. "People would ask me what religion I am," Lawler says. That question made her uncomfortable, as Lawler does not believe she can know whether or not



there is a God, though she leans more toward "there being something." Her agnostic beliefs caused her to feel isolated on Notre Dame's predominantly Catholic campus. "I find it interesting that people at Notre Dame are less likely than others to understand or accept my beliefs about religion," she says.

Lawler never felt like she could participate in the religious realm of student life because it highlights her difference from the majority of students, but she has appreciated the opportunities Notre Dame offers her to reflect on her convictions. While difficult at times, Lawler says Notre Dame's religious atmosphere has been both "challenging and expanding," and she believes that, had she attended a state school, faith would not have to cross her mind.

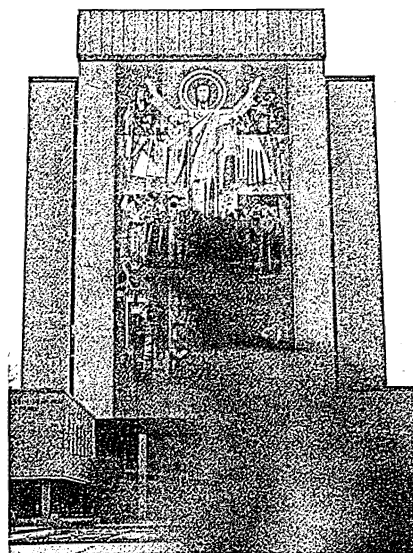
Another agnostic senior, Brian Agganis, can empathize with Lawler. "It's not easy to be agnostic when you're presented with a Catholic world," he says. Agganis is critical of many university policies, and he believes Notre Dame has closed its mind around a set of beliefs, which is "detrimental, especially in college. Beliefs should be vulnerable," he says. Agganis isn't surprised at the results of the 2003 senior survey. "That's the impression that I've gotten from the student body." He concurs with Poorman's belief that college is a time for questioning, and also notes that "after four years at ND, if you're still agnostic, you're probably going to be like that for a long time."

#### *Decisions, decisions?*

Some worry that faith at Notre Dame has become a mandate rather than a personal journey. Sister Mary Ann Mueninghoff, rector of Pasquerilla East, echoes this concern. She stresses the overwhelmingly good job the administration does in fulfilling its mission to cultivate faith in its students, saying many are enriched by the Catholic approach to life. Notre Dame, Mueninghoff says, "is set up with a [Catholic] mission in mind undergirding everything else [...] I think the basic message of the Gospel is 'good news,' and the place bubbles over with a lot of that," she says. However, she is concerned that students do not actively question their faith. "I want students to look at their religious faith and practices critically in college," she says. "I want students to ask, 'What is it that roots me?' I

worry sometimes that perhaps there aren't enough challenges."

Variations of Mueninghoff's sentiments run throughout the student body. Many students feel that Catholic beliefs are forced upon them, citing parietals and the lack of meat in the dining halls on Fridays during Lent as evidence. "One thing that ND is good at is taking away



decisions," Agganis says. "Notre Dame doesn't prepare you for the real world and its challenges. There's no temptation or work involved."

The so-called "No Sex" rule, which is found in section seven of *duLac* under Student Life Policies, is a pet peeve of

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some students. "Because a genuine and complete expression of love through sex requires a commitment to a total living and sharing together of two persons in marriage," it reads, "the university believes that sexual union should occur only in marriage. Students found in violation of this policy shall be subject to disciplinary suspension or permanent dismissal."

Students in opposition to this policy have come to the conclusion that Catho-

lic doctrine's prohibition of premarital sex underlies the university's adamancy about single-sex dorms and parietals. But those involved in student affairs argue differently. "For me, it's not about sex," Mueninghoff says. "It may be what an undergraduate perceives, but most of the administration see residence halls as homes, not dorms." Both Mueninghoff and Poorman assert that the primary role of parietals is to quiet down the dorms at night. Parietals give the community a chance to reconstitute itself, Poorman says, and to set a norm of rest and relaxation.

Additionally, the idea of community is central to living the Catholic faith, and residence halls strive for strong communal bonds. "Our mission in the residential system is to give students a really strong foundation of faith," Poorman says. Living in dorms is a challenge, he says, in the sense that students must be responsible for themselves and other people. The fact that students are held accountable for their actions in the dorms is "an enormous favor. I think we assist them in very important ways." This, he says, is "utterly like the real world."

#### *"The Spirit of Inclusion"?*

In an open letter to the Notre Dame community, the administration states that "[it prizes] the uniqueness of all persons as God's creatures. We welcome all people, regardless of [...] sexual orientation [...] We value gay and lesbian members of this community as we value all members of this community." Despite these statements, however, some homosexual students find Notre Dame's religious atmosphere to be only mildly inclusionary.

Alex Chapeaux, a graduate student studying chemical engineering, came out as gay while he was in college, and now serves on Notre Dame's Standing Committee for Gay and Lesbian Student Needs. Chapeaux has made it a priority to keep his Catholic faith a major part of his identity, and he largely has been successful. However, he takes issue with some aspects of Notre Dame's religious character.

Chapeaux says that Campus Ministry does not treat gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) students differently from any others on campus, which is a good thing. Campus Ministry even runs



a retreat for GLBT students and their friends, an event which Chapeaux calls "an incredible experience." The Notre Dame gay community is a "diverse group. Some of us are more mindful of our faith because we've had to reconcile our faith with our sexual orientation," he says. The problem arises from the fact that there is

nothing but a retreat for those students. The main source of support for GLBT students is faith-based, Chapeaux says, and "in that regard, GLBT students who are not Catholic tend to be left out because they don't fall on the radar."

Agganis also makes reference to the mix of religion and homosexuality. It

was a shock for him to come to a place with plenty of retreats and religion but no recognized homosexual group. In his public high school, it was just the opposite, with a Gay Alliance but no mention of religion.

### *The Pursuit of Truth*

The controversy surrounding the lack of official university recognition of a non-faith-based GLBT group resonates with a difficult, yet common, question: Can Notre Dame challenge its students spiritually and intellectually while preserving its Catholic identity?

Mark Roche, the I.A. O'Shaughnessy Dean of the College of Arts & Letters, thinks so. Roche believes Notre Dame does quite well in balancing faith with progressive academic pursuits. However, universities like Notre Dame that strive to be both academically superlative and Catholic are delving into "uncharted territory" these days.

Notre Dame, Roche says, has a complex identity, with three basic, intertwining attributes: an undergraduate program focusing on the liberal arts, dynamic research and a world-renowned Catholic identity. "I think we do a good job of mediating," Roche says. He commends the university's success, especially in the disciplines of literature, economics and psychology.

Despite its many academic achievements, Roche acknowledges that many secular schools might cast a skeptical eye onto Notre Dame. Many professionals at other schools are led to believe that Notre Dame's faith leads the university to close itself to certain ideas and restrict academic freedom, and while that sentiment may sometimes be echoed on campus, Roche contests the notion. Only half of Notre Dame's faculty is Catholic, and after being hired, a faculty member has complete freedom in terms of the research they choose to do. It is hoped, though, that all members of the faculty will at least have respect for the university's Catholic identity.

Philosophy professor Bill Ramsey is an atheist — the university's "token atheist," as he jokingly refers to himself. "I applaud the fact that ND is a religious university which retains academic ideals," he says. "I think we should be the best in the world." Ramsey also asserts that, although the majority of Notre Dame students are Catholic, most students are polite and extremely interested in his be-

## Campus Ministry vs. CSC

The Center for Social Concerns (CSC) and Campus Ministry are two prominent organizations on campus that fill important roles at Notre Dame. Campus Ministry aims to serve the spiritual lives of Notre Dame students by running retreats and sponsoring other programs to meet the spiritual needs of all students. The Center for Social Concerns is focused on providing service-based learning opportunities for members of the Notre Dame community. Though it is a common perception that the two organizations cater to students on opposite sides of the political spectrum — the CSC is popular with liberal students and Campus Ministry with more conservative students — in recent years, the staffs of both organizations have actively worked to overcome this divide.

Professor Jay Bradenberger, director of experiential learning and developmental research, sees no rift between the organizations. "On the contrary," Bradenberger says, "it seems to me that both organizations are well-focused on their missions, collaborating in the middle where there is overlap. We consistently partner." According to Bradenberger, the organizations have made several efforts in the past few years to work together and bridge any gaps in their mission statements. As a result of these efforts, collaboration between the organizations is increasing steadily.

"There have certainly been efforts to keep open lines of communication," says Sister Susan Dunn, Lyons Hall Rector and the CSC's liaison to Campus Ministry. Dunn attends Campus Ministry's weekly meetings on Tuesdays and reports back to the CSC at its meetings every Wednesday. Likewise, an intern from Campus Ministry fulfills the same duty, reporting back to Campus Ministry. The directors of both organizations — William Lies and the Rev. Richard Warner, C.S.C., of Campus Ministry, also meet monthly to discuss ways the organizations can work together. An example of collaboration includes this year's Senior Retreat, which was organized by senior members of VOICE — the student advisory committee at the CSC — with input from Campus Ministry.

Senior Teresa Hansen is a member of VOICE and has worked at the CSC for four years. Last year she participated in a dinner meeting during which staff members of the CSC and Campus Ministry discussed ways to improve their collaboration. "The two organizations differ in the way in which they serve students. This is influenced by the fact that the CSC is under the Office of the Provost and has an academic mission," Hansen says.

In addition, Dunn believes the organizations share the same ideological values, despite a stereotypical view that often associates faith with conservatism and social justice with liberalism. "There's certainly a blend of viewpoints in each organization," Dunn says. Campus Ministry reaches out beyond just Catholic students and provides programs for students of other faiths, including a Muslim prayer service. Campus Ministry also has recently organized a retreat for gay, lesbian and bisexual students. On the other side, the CSC offers classes on issues of peace and social justice that encourage dialogue among those who hold different perspectives.

"We're really working on a collaboration between faith and action," Dunn says, "It impresses me how much has been done."

*Daric Snyder*

liefs. "They're fascinated by someone who doesn't believe in God." At the conclusion of every semester, Ramsey will take questions from students about his own beliefs, but he leaves them at the door until then. "I have no interest in getting students to adopt my religious views. The idea is to prepare them with a wealth of perspectives and arguments." Ramsey does not proselytize, but believes that undergraduates exposed to a more diverse range of viewpoints will have a more intellectually sophisticated kind of faith than others with no alternate viewpoints.

English professor Kevin Hart agrees with Ramsey on that point. "In my view, a first-class Catholic university should be capable of hosting many conversations: between Catholics and Protestants, Christians and representatives of other religions, people of faith and people of no faith," Hart says in an e-mail interview. "Yet people who are not Catholic should recognize that Catholicism is their host and should respect that," he adds.

Hart also draws a distinction between "baptized" Catholics and "practicing" Catholics, and believes that the latter make up far less than 50 percent of the faculty. Additionally, he thinks that the university should be more aggressive in hiring a faculty that represents the entire spectrum of the Catholic faith. "We should be on the lookout for outstanding scholars, needless to say, and we should be especially vigilant in looking for outstanding Catholic scholars. I don't see [the university doing] that at the moment." Hart adds that some of the faculty who are most supportive of the university's Catholic mission are neither Catholic nor Christian.

#### *The Bottom Line*

By and large, most students, staff and faculty seem pleased with Notre Dame's religious character and the resources available to help the campus community grow in faith. At the same time, a sizeable percentage of the community expresses concern over the university's apparent lack of diverse religious opinions and sparse challenges to Catholicity.

Notre Dame is lauded and criticized for its identity, but it is quite apparent that that identity is here to stay, despite the good or bad effects that may come from it. Maybe the most important thing members of the social and academic community ought to remember is, as Dehan puts it, "Faith should not impede reason. □



## Faith Matters: Scholastic's Survey

In order to gain additional information about how Notre Dame students really feel about their faith and the Catholic environment on campus, *Scholastic* conducted its own unscientific survey with both on- and off-campus students chosen randomly. Over half of the students surveyed attend Mass at least once a week; however, Mass attendance did not dramatically decrease as students got older, as expected. While only 60 percent reported that they felt that understanding their faith was important when they arrived at Notre Dame, 70 percent of students who responded said that understanding it was important to them currently. Although 59 percent of students considered reflecting on their faith important, only 43 percent consider themselves religious to very religious. There are more students who feel that the religious atmosphere had only a slight impact on their faith development than students who feel that it had a profound to very profound impact. Despite this curious divide, most students (83 percent) feel that Notre Dame has performed well to very well in cultivating the faith of its students. This development, predictably, takes place in the dorms, as most students (approximately 61 percent) attend Mass in their dorm chapel. Another 17 percent attend Mass at the Basilica, and a large majority of the remainder do not attend at all. Though conflict may exist over the proper way to foster faith development, most Notre Dame students concur in affirming the value of their religious experience at the university. □