



▲ The UNF campus in Jacksonville.

Graduates Begin *New Journeys*

BY LINDA REEVES

Alexis Anderson, student body president at Bishop Kenny High School in Jacksonville, reflected on her education and the unwavering support she received throughout her school years. During her school's graduation Mass in May, she spoke of her faith, describing it as strong and unshakable. "It is an honor to gather one last time as the class of 2024 to celebrate the Eucharist," she said. "On behalf of our entire class, I would like to thank the faculty and staff who have pushed us to be the best versions of ourselves in and out of the classroom. To all the parents and family members, thank you for your endless love and support. One thing I have learned is that God has a plan greater than anything we can imagine for our lives. May we carry our faith beyond the walls of Bishop Kenny and into the whole world."

After High School, A New Journey Begins

Graduates stand at a unique point in their lives, saying goodbye to their school families and moving forward with plans for careers, college and further education. For those heading to college, life will be different. Many will be leaving home for the first time, stepping out from the security they've known under their parent's roof. To better understand this transition, we spoke with seasoned campus ministers in the Diocese of St. Augustine who have worked closely with students navigating this new chapter.

Campus Commandments

Father Blair Gaynes, pastor of St. Augustine Church and Catholic Student Center in Gainesville, has spent nearly 45 years in ministry, particularly in campus ministry, where he has formed strong connections with young people. "The youth and young adults, whether at their best or worst, are a great joy," he shared. "To serve and guide them at this critical period in life is an honor, a privilege, a sacred trust." Father Blair, who has served as chaplain and director of campus ministries in Duval County and beyond, offered valuable advice for students heading to campus: "In all things, live as Christ. Love as Christ. Learn as Christ. Lead as Christ."

He emphasizes the importance of attending classes, reading assigned materials and being proactive about education. Father Blair also stresses the need for students to take care of their physical and mental health, build strong friendships and engage in social activities to avoid isolation.

Keeping the Faith

Father Blair advises students to connect with the local parish, priest and campus ministry upon arriving on campus. "These folks are ready and equipped to guide, help and accompany. First-year students will inevitably feel lost at some point, so being prepared to deal with it is essential. Developing solid relationships within the faith community right from the start will ease the transition."

He encourages students to stay close to God through daily prayer, Mass and the sacrament of reconciliation. "Work on responding to the call to holiness. Work on the virtues. Intentionally engage in discerning with God about your future and vocation. Strengthen your relationship with God."

Finding a Home Away from Home

Sister Brittany Samuelson, a member of the Servants of the Pierced Hearts of Jesus, has been serving in campus ministry in the diocese since 2018. At the Catholic Student Center near the University of North Florida in Jacksonville, she and her sisters serve college students in Duval and St. Johns counties. Raised in a Catholic family, Sister Brittany discovered the depth of her faith through Catholic campus ministry led by the Servants of the Pierced Hearts of Jesus and Mary at a university in Ill.

"At first I went to every Christian group on campus. Then I found my home and the fullness of the truth at the Catholic campus ministry. I started attending daily Mass, adoration, confession, bible study, praying the rosary and my life changed," she recalled. Sister Brittany advises students to



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▲ Sister Brittany Samuelson, SCTJM, gives a presentation to students as part of her campus ministry.



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▲ Sister Brittany Samuelson, SCTJM, gathers with students during a campus ministry program.

search for their school’s Catholic campus ministry. “That is where you will find your family and your home away from home because as Pope Benedict XVI taught us, the church is the family of Jesus.”

Empty Nesters

Parents also face transitions as their children leave home to pursue their futures, altering family structures and lifestyles.

Father Blair offers advice for parents navigating this change: “Parents must embrace this life transition and empower their children to navigate it. While parents will always be parents, children must be free to become adults.”

He warns against over-involvement, which can lead to infantilization, double lives or resentment. “It’s important for parents to ensure their children

know they are there for them but also trust and believe in their ability to apply the lessons they’ve been taught.”

Father Blair encourages parents to pray for their children, asking God to guide them in making wise decisions as they explore newfound freedoms. “A parent cannot prevent failures and tests, but they can be confident in the solid foundation they’ve laid.

The best thing a parent can do is persistently pray.”

Words of Wisdom from a Saint

St. Pope John Paul II, a beloved figure among youth and young adults, often urged them to be a light in the world of darkness. During an address to young people, he advised, “Do not listen to those who encourage you to lie, shirk responsibility or put yourselves first. In your hearts, you know that true love is a gift from God and respect his plan for the union of man and woman in marriage.”

He explained that true freedom, a gift from God, involves living responsibly in truth. “When freedom is separated from truth, individuals lose their moral direction, and the very fabric of society begins to unravel. Remember what Jesus said: ‘You will know the truth and the truth will set you free.’ Let no one mislead you or prevent you from seeing what really matters. Turn to Jesus, listen to him and discover the true meaning and direction of your lives.”



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▲ Father Blair gathers with graduates after Mass at St. Augustine Church in Gainesville.