

St. Augustine Catholic

Summer '24 Edition

'Graduates begin New Journeys' by Linda Reeves

Full text of interview with Fr. Blair Gaynes, DOSAFL Catholic Campus Ministry

Tell us a little about your work in Diocesan College Campus Ministry?

I have been engaged in campus ministry in the diocese since 2011, when I was a seminarian preparing for deaconate and priestly ordination. Seeing the state of ministry at colleges in the Jacksonville area, I studied campus and young adult ministries from across the country and wrote a report for Bishop Estevez that suggested possibilities for our diocese. I spent the next 12 years primarily focused on building and growing that ministry in the Jacksonville area. Since last summer I have been continuing in campus ministry with various responsibilities but located at and focused on UF Gainesville, which has existed in one form or another for 100 years! Ministry for priests always comes with administrative responsibilities, but there is no doubt that the most fulfilling part of ministry is encounter with and accompaniment of the people. For me in particular, the youth and young adults, whether at their best or worst, are a great joy. Sometimes, listening to them, I marvel in amazement, and the amazement isn't always inspired by a good thing, lol. Yet they are all extraordinary and differently so. To be able to serve and guide them at this critical period in life is an honor, a privilege, a sacred trust.

What advice do you have for parents who are sending their teens off to college and are naturally worried about their teen's safety on campus while their teens are likely to be worried about navigating a major life change and new emotions?

The idea of and concerns for a child's safety are varied and so difficult to speak to in a general response. Every parent needs to be realistic, nothing can eliminate the worry of a parent or guarantee the safety of their child, but there are ways to prepare for and aids to minimize these concerns. The best thing a parent can do is to fulfill, throughout their child's life, the promises they made to God at their baptism. The second is persistent prayer. There are many other important aspects of formation and education of children, but none so important as faith formation and education which gives context for all others and helps to firmly root a child in their core identity as persons with dignity and value, made in the image and likeness of God. There is little else than 'self-possession' according to St. John Paul II that will help a person stand firmly in the truth and have strength against the cultural forces and peer pressures of the day. Going to college comes with newfound freedoms to fall and to fail, free will and choosing the good will be tested. They will not avoid challenges and suffering, and a parent cannot prevent these things, but they can be confident in the solid foundation they laid for their children and where they can, find ways to reiterate the messages of the faith.

When choosing colleges, it is essential that the colleges chosen to visit and to be applied to have a strong faith community either in the local parish and / or college campus ministry. On visits and again when moving in, return to the parish, return to the campus ministry. Do everything you can to ensure a connection is made and then continue to encourage your child to be involved. As well, considering the myriad clubs vying for your child's involvement, help them to identify clubs that correspond to the morals and values of faith, and then encourage participation.

What are your thoughts about parents remaining connected with their children? How often should a parent check on their children or visit?

Parents today, those of faith and of no faith - more than I've seen in my lifetime - can be over involved, over directive, and overbearing. The control exacted by what we used to call 'helicopter parents' pales in comparison to what's happening now. Parents must embrace this life transition and empower their children to be able to navigate it. Parents will always be parents, but children must be age appropriately free to become adults. I find the biggest source of conflict between parents and college students is in this area. An over involved parent is going to inspire one of three basic responses: the continued infantilizing of their child, the development of a 'double life' by their child, resentful anger and separation. That being said, it is important to ensure they know that you continue to 'be there for them', but that you trust and believe in their ability to put fully into practice the things you have hopefully taught them. Of course there is no perfect way to do all of this. I would say, to a large degree, let your child drive the degree to which you check in or visit.

What tips can you give students as they leave home and friends to go off on their own? In their first year, they will be choosing classes, joining groups, making friends.

My short answer is in all things, to Live as Christ, Love as Christ, Learn as Christ, Lead as Christ. The long answer,

- a. Work on responding to the call to holiness by,
 - i. Work on the virtues / habits you lack
 - ii. Intentionally engage in discerning with God about your future and vocation
 - iii. Be a good student
 1. Always go to class
 2. Read the material and do the work
 3. Proactive about your education
- b. Build strong and valuable friendships
 - i. Networking / Social activity
 - ii. Find your Catholic Community, be involved
 - iii. Be accountable
- c. Strengthen your relationship with God.
 - i. Pray daily
 - ii. Find your parish / worshipping campus ministry community – attend Mass and go to confession
 - iii. Engage in continuing faith formation and education
 - iv. Remember that ‘Love Serves’
- d. Be a good steward
 - i. Be mindful about money
 - ii. Be wise how you spend your time
 - iii. Be prudent about sharing your talents
 - iv. Be temperate as regards your body, mindful of your mental & physical health

Your thoughts on what a teen should do if they are feeling lost on campus without anyone to turn to?

This is another reason why it is so important to connect with the local parish, priest, and campus ministry. These folks are ready and equipped to guide, to help, to accompany. First year students are inevitably going to feel lost at some point, being prepared for dealing with it is essential and developing solid authentic relationships within the faith community right from the start will ease the transition and be there when you need them.

Any comments for students about staying close to their family members to keep them updated on their life as they journey through college?

Healthy families and strong bonds are essential to our development. Earlier I mentioned that the most common parent – child issue that comes up is related to communication and appropriate involvement. There I focused on parents, but I also tell students when the issue comes up, that they must help their parents make their own transition to having a mature and adult relationship with them. That they must share their life, about their experiences, intentionally take time to evolve their relationship with their parents. To remember that with independence comes greater responsibility in every area of life and especially in relationships with family and God.

Any thoughts on why the student should continue to pray during college years and the stressful times? Is there any prayer you suggest? Devotion?

Well, the Father told us to listen to Jesus and do what he says, and Jesus told us to pray! All our spiritual fathers and mothers give testimony with their lives and words to the fact that if you take delight in the Lord you will pray, and if this is the priority in your daily life then you will increasingly delight in the Lord over and above anything else in your life, and in response God will shape your heart so it wants the things God desires to give you. God’s desires will become yours. Conversation is essential in any relationship, prayer, as conversation with God, helps us to trust God. That God listens to us patiently and takes our requests seriously. Knowing that God considers everything in the context of the bigger picture only God can see. Over time, you also learn to recognize the voice of God. Through prayer, God transforms your heart.

There are so many devotional aides in our Church that I wouldn’t want to narrow the focus to what has helped me or those in my limited experience. However, I highly recommend the development of devotional practices and to explore them in order to find those that correspond to who you are now and who you are becoming in God. I do often recommend reading St. Francis DeSales’ ‘Devout Life’ and Brother Lawrence’ ‘Practicing the Presence of God’.

Thoughts about teens continuing their faith? The statistics indicate that many teens fall away from the Church when they leave home. What should they do to find a church, priest, other practicing Catholics? Young adult Catholic groups?

No doubt, the studies tell us that 80% fall away, and there are myriad reasons. This is why it is so important for parents to help their child find, connect to, and participate in the local parish and campus ministry faith communities. However, the truth is that those young people who believe and for whom living the faith is important, they will find us. Most of the others will avoid contact with church folks at all costs as they become intoxicated with their freedom or just distracted by all the new things vying for their attention. Some of those will find their way back during college. But I guarantee that if parents and parishes don't do everything, they can help our children have and grow a relationship with God that leads to living faith and continued desire for formation and education in the faith... then the children who haven't already 'checked out' will do so upon entering college.

Any comments on what a student should do if they think they are encountering "falsehoods" on campus—maybe from peers—statements/activities that are misleading and confusing? How do they find the truth? Who do they turn to with questions?

What is truth? As Catholics we believe that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The question – "What is Truth?" is answered in Scripture and Tradition. Since the first lie in the Garden of Eden, we have been faced with this question. We might argue or be deeply concerned that we live in the worst of times for knowing and living according to the truth, as opposed to a truth that is merely relative to me. Although this is a bad time in history for truth, it isn't the worst. However, we must believe and hold fast to the fact that we and our ancestors of the past 2000 years have the benefit of Christ's saving sacrifice and the work of the Holy Spirit. Truth must be sought, found, known, and understood through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. We must teach our youth how to pray, discern, and critically think. We must help them to know how to recognize in another person that they are good and trustworthy teachers. Of course, if you don't believe in God, it's going to be very tough and if you don't believe there can be absolute / objective truth, well...

We must be vigilant against the cultural forces that would lead us away from the truths of God, most of which aren't headline grabbing in Christian circles. It's the quiet forces that slowly invade our minds that we need to really be concerned about. We must stay awake. We must avoid the slow slide into a slumbering lukewarm faith. Of becoming a person of faith who strives to be both in the world as a child of God and of the world as a child of lies.

Do you recall your first days on campus and any worries or challenges? What school were you attending?

I have an entirely different story. I was in my mid-twenties when I went to college, it was immediately after my conversion and almost 10 years of life lived on my own. A story for another time.

Who did you turn to for guidance?

But even in my personal circumstances of young adulthood it was essential to look to others for guidance. Who did I seek out? Saints. Saints around me and those recognized by the Church. I looked to the documents of the Church, beginning with Scripture. I looked to Priests and Religious. I looked to philosophers and theologians. I looked to my sister.

Maybe you have a special incident that happened involving a student, someone who turned to you for advice or help?

To be honest, I've been very blessed throughout my nearly 45 years in ministry and professional work with youth and young adults. I have worked or been in ministry for young people who have experienced the worst of abuses and been thrown away, to those who have just needed a momentary guidance or an affirming word. Throughout that time there have been incidents and encounters that were extraordinary blessings, great challenges, and deeply sad. I couldn't possibly name one. They have all, the young and their lives, become interwoven within me, part of my heart and soul. They have helped me to become who I am now. I am always humbly grateful for how the Lord has gifted me and allowed me to spend my life in service to his children. I pray that every priest would be able to experience the fullness of the love of God which empowers us to love purely as spiritual fathers.

If you would like to read more of Father Blair's story, 'One Priest and the Eucharist' is available on the Catholic Gators website.