

Keeping the faith at college

Discover four crucial guidelines, as well as other helpful tips, for helping your college-aged kids keep the faith

By Dan Connors

I remember walking across the campus that Sunday morning, asking God to forgive me for what I was about to do. I had been wrestling with my conscience and praying for courage ever since leaving Mass at St. Thomas Aquinas chapel. But, alas, it wouldn't be enough to keep me from doing what I knew was wrong.

I was a freshman in my first few weeks of school, a shy kid at a university with 10 times the population of the small town I'd come from. And a couple of weeks earlier I had made the innocent mistake of asking my Catholic roommate what Sunday Mass he was going to.

He laughed at me. "You're going to Mass?" he sneered. "What are you, 6?" He went down the hall to tell all the other Catholic residents of our floor that they had a "saint" in their midst. And thus I became a joke on our floor, the altar boy who wasn't having sex with anyone, inhaled pot only by breathing the second-hand smoke in the dorm, and worst of all, went to church.

Eventually I learned not to tell them I was going. Eventually I learned to lie when asked about it. I kept going to church, but I told people I was at the library, or I had gone to trade notes with someone. That's what I was wrestling with that particular Sunday morning: So desperate was my desire to be accepted and fit in, that I lied about having been with our Lord.

Peer pressure. It was only one of the challenges my faith faced that first semester. Just as strong were the sense of independence that comes from being away from home, the wonderful world of new ideas being discussed in the classes, a less-than-warmly-welcoming Catholic campus community, and a Campus Crusade for Christ evangelist who worked on me for more than half the year.

When I look back on that freshman year and the quiet, shy kid I was, I sometimes marvel that I came through it still a practicing Catholic. And I wonder what my parents thought of all this as I described it in the letters I'd send home.

All this comes back to me every year about this time, as lots of parents I know get ready to send their kids off to college. College is a new experience for so many of these kids, and even we parents who have done our best to provide a strong Catholic foundation end up anxiously wondering if our kids will keep the values we've tried to teach them, or continue going to Mass. Even on Catholic campuses, apathy, confusion, the widespread idea that one opinion is as good as any other, immaturity, peer pressure, hormones, and Jack Daniels and his friends all stand ready to evangelize. Overall, there are plenty of worries here that can keep a parent awake at night.

How can we parents deal with this anxiety? Is there anything we can do to help our kids stay strong in the faith when they're away at school?

I decided to ask two friends who have more experience in this than I: Margaret Palliser, OP, a Sparkill Dominican Sister and the editor of our sister publication *Living with Christ*, and Kerry Weber, a former associate editor of *Catholic Digest* and author of *Keeping the Faith: Prayers for College Students*.

Four Crucial Guidelines

I asked Sister Margaret especially because of her experience in a college setting. Before coming to *Living with Christ*, Margaret spent 15 years at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, including five years as its director of campus ministry and 10 years as director of the university's Center for Mission Education and Reflection. When I asked her about what parents can do to help their kids' faith as they go off to college, she offered the following four thoughts.

1. Remember: Asserting independence is their "job." One of the tasks of a college-age young adult is to assert his or her independence from the parents. "Since they usually can't do that financially," Margaret told me, "one of their favorite ways is to assert their independence from the parents' religious identity." They know, even unconsciously, that it's a sure way to get their parents' attention. But it doesn't always mean that the child is abandoning the faith for good: "It's often more about their asserting that they are now going to make their own decisions."

2. The best way for parents to nurture their college-age children's faith is for the parents to live their own faith with integrity. "The parents' faithfulness to their values is a must," Margaret told me. "College students are all about testing their values against new (perhaps never before encountered) models and challenges. They look to their parents as solid models against which to measure other models. It takes young people a while to come to their conclusions about values, so parents must be patient. If parents seem to waver in their own faith/values, the child will conclude that his or her parents' faith/values were not really solid to

begin with. And you can be sure that the child is watching carefully for the parents' reactions to the child's challenges! If the child sees that a parent's faith is not shaken and is a source of strength, that is a lesson that doesn't go unnoticed (even if it does go unacknowledged)."

3. Listen to and talk with your child, but don't back down. "The child wants you to value and respect him or her, not necessarily his or her ideas," Margaret told me. "Be willing to listen with real attention to the child's point of view, but do not back down from your own principles. The child really does expect (and want) you to hold on to your values. If you don't, they get very confused, if not shattered."

4. Prayer is the parents' best companion. "Give God the benefit of the doubt," says Margaret. "God knows your child through and through. Just as God has been there for you in times of questioning, God will be there for your child and is well able to deal with your child's questions or failures." Of course, she added, "God's timing is not always — or even usually — our timing. God has much more patience than we will ever have. Let God speak to your child in a way that is perfectly 'tuned' to him or her. God's voice is much more persuasive than a parent's harangue."

Of course, Sister Margaret added, "It's easy to give advice I myself don't have to follow. I stand in awe of parents and their courage and love."

Eight more ways

Margaret filled in the big picture. Kerry Weber offered many more valuable suggestions of what parents can do.

Kerry is the author of *Keeping the Faith: Prayers for College Students*, which was recently published by Twenty-Third Publications. In *Keeping the Faith* she offers contemporary, original prayers (but includes some of the traditional Catholic standards as well) covering a wide range of real situations in a student's life, everything from expressing gratitude for a good roommate to dealing with homesickness, a crisis in faith, resisting peer pressure, discerning a career, facing academic pressure, and much more. It's a small, powerful book meant to be prayed by the student — but even more, to help spark a student's own prayer life, to give them words and inspiration to help them speak with God in their own words about what they are feeling, thinking, and experiencing. Giving a copy to your child would be a great way to help keep him or her connected to the faith.

That's my first suggestion and recommendation. Kerry added seven more:

- Encourage your child to introduce himself or herself to others after Mass or to attend after-Mass events in an effort to meet people who may be interested in attending Mass together in the future.
- Encourage your child to inquire about the different types of Masses at their college. Colleges often have guitar Masses that are especially crowded and it can be a good way to meet people as well.
- Encourage your child to become an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion, lector, choir member, or altar server at their college. It's a good way to meet a new group of people and a chance to participate in Mass in a new way.
- Let your child know it's OK to look for a parish in the surrounding neighborhood, if he or she is not comfortable at, or has a scheduling conflict with, the Masses on campus.
- Let your child know that you're praying for him or her in a way that makes them feel loved. Give them a small prayer card or medal or a stone from a holy place, etc. — something that symbolizes the faith in a way that isn't showy. Your child may throw it in a drawer for a while, but may come across it again at just the right time and find that it is a reminder of the faith — and of your faith in him or her.
- Encourage your child to find new ways to pray — while running, hiking, camping, before studying.
- Encourage your child to explore volunteer opportunities through campus ministry. Often, there are many service groups that are filled with members looking to incorporate spirituality and service.

There are, of course, no guarantees in parenting. In the end, living our own faith as authentically as we can, loving our children and letting them know by our actions that we love them, staying true to our own beliefs even as we discuss different ideas with our kids, and then leaving it all in God's hands — that's the very best we can do.

When I think back to my freshman year, I think there were two main reasons I kept my faith, and eventually got more comfortable expressing it: the strong way my parents lived the faith they professed, and the trust and confidence they placed in God and in me, no matter what. And in that regard, Margaret suggested some questions parents might bring to their own prayer:

- Do I believe that God wants to take care of my child?
- Do I believe that God knows what's best for my child?
- Do I believe that God will not give up on my child?
- Do I really believe what I believe?

Being able to answer those questions affirmatively may just be the tonic we parents need to sleep through the night. **CD**

Prayer petitions for a parent with a child away at college

O loving God, help me to adjust to the new ways of caring for (Name) that are appropriate to this stage of his/her life. Help me to discern how I am needed now in this new stage of (Name)'s life, and help me to find new ways to give (Name) support and confidence.

Give me patience as (Name) and I establish new routines and ways to be present to each other in love and trust; give me understanding to realize that (Name's) new routines will likely be different from ones I may have chosen when I was that age.

Protect and guard (Name) in the midst of the challenges and temptations that surround all young people today. Grant (Name) greater courage than I myself might have in standing up for your truth amidst challenges to my faith.

Provide good friends, confidants, and mentors for (Name) during this time of growth and transition. Help me to let go of my own need to be such to (Name), for I realize that these are roles that others must play during these college years.

Allow me to pass on to (Name) something of the strength and courage and grace you have given to me in my experience of being a parent.

Give a gift that nourishes your child's faith

Kerry Weber's book, *Keeping the Faith: Prayers for College Students*, is available from Twenty-Third Publications at pastoralplanning.com or at 800-321-0411.

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