

ISSUE BULLETIN

Examining Critical Issues in Faithful Catholic Education

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Catholic College Closes, but Other Small Colleges Thrive on Faithful Catholic Mission

By Adam Wilson

A small, Massachusetts-based Catholic college will close this month, citing financial difficulties brought about by declining enrollment. But while many similarly small colleges around the country are struggling to find their niches in order to sustain enrollment, some faithful Catholic institutions are successfully leveraging their faithful Catholic identities to attract students, inviting emulation both as models of success and as witnesses to the Faith.

Marian Court College in Swampscott, Mass., has undergone many changes since it was founded by the Sisters of Mercy in 1964 as a women's secretarial school. It just recently transitioned from a two-year coeducational college to a four-year program, awarding its first bachelor's degrees just last month to 41 of the 67 graduates. But Marian Court closes at the end of June, unable to face what Inside Higher Ed describes as "a challenge that faces many small, private college[s]: the troublesome combination of extreme tuition reliance and declining enrollment."¹ The College served about 250 students this past year, many of them first-generation students who commuted from home.

The challenges facing Marian Court were extraordinary, but could a stronger Catholic identity have helped? The Cardinal Newman Society was granted an interview with Dr. Denise Hammon, president of Marian Court College in Swampscott, Mass., who acknowledged the minimal role the College's religious mission played in attracting students. But the Society also spoke with leaders

¹ Kellie Woodhouse, "No Choice But to Close?", Inside Higher Ed (June 18, 2015). Available at: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2015/06/18/enrollment-declines-drove-closure-marian-court-college>



from Christendom College in Front Royal, Va., and Thomas Aquinas College in Santa Paula, Calif., both of whom attested to the strong pull their faithful Catholic identities have on potential students. Admissions officers at these small, tuition-dependent colleges work hard, but they are meeting enrollment targets while their institutions earn high marks for academic quality.

Catholic identity has value for colleges and students that transcends practical concerns. Yet Catholic colleges that embrace a strong Catholic identity may find that it helps distinguish their institutions as providing something unique and attractive.

Marketing a Strong Catholic Identity

Tuition-reliant colleges often depend heavily on marketing in order to keep enrollment numbers up. While Catholic colleges such as those recommended in *The Newman Guide* for their strong Catholic identity view their religious mission as a strong asset, many other colleges apparently view their Catholic heritage as a liability.

In a widely-read article last year, the *Atlantic* reported how some Jesuit Catholic universities are hiding their Catholic identities because they think it will help them attract more students.² Rockhurst University in Kansas City reportedly “removed the word ‘Jesuit’ from the university tagline”. And a staff member at Regis University in Denver boldly attested, “We hide the word ‘Catholic’ from prospective students.”

Instead, colleges feel pressured to compete with extravagant campus facilities, high-profile faculty members and exciting student activities, all adding to the high cost of education. “These days it’s an arms race to have climbing walls and one-on-one attention, and you just can’t do that with a small college,” said Kent Chabotar, a past president of Guilford College, to *Inside Higher Ed*. “It’s worse now because of demographics, and because students and families are smarter about looking for schools with niches.”

For Christendom College, which has 433 students, its niche is clear. Vice President for Enrollment Tom McFadden explained to the Newman Society, “We are an educational apostolate with the mission of educating our students in a time-tested Catholic liberal arts education, in a vibrant Catholic culture, so that they can go out into the world and restore all things in Christ.” And Christendom does it in complete fidelity to the Magisterium of the Catholic Church, with reverent liturgies, traditional devotions, orthodox theology, and an emphasis on the moral and spiritual formation of students.

That clarity of institutional identity helps draw students to the College, according to McFadden. “There are a lot of colleges out there. And a lot of Catholic ones too,” he said. “We do our best to make sure everyone knows what makes us different, and if they are attracted to us, then we are

² Autumn Jones, “The New Brand of Jesuit Universities”, *The Atlantic* (December 30, 2014). Available at: <http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2014/12/the-new-brand-of-jesuit-universities/384103/>

very interested in them. We build strong relationships with our prospective students to educate them about our mission, our curriculum, our activities, and our goals for our graduates.”

That’s not the sort of Catholic identity that was marketed by Marian Court College. When asked what the College promoted to prospective students, Hammon mentioned being a commuter college, a relatively low tuition, business and criminal justice programs, financial aid, small class sizes, a teaching-focused faculty, and student academic support. She added that the College was founded by the Sisters of Mercy and is Catholic, but did not mention the clearly Catholic identifiers that a college like Christendom readily advertises.

To the contrary, it seems that Marian Court did little to promote its Catholic identity. There is no mention of “Catholic” or even the Sisters of Mercy on the homepage of the College’s website. Religious imagery is minimal. But the College prominently features on its homepage its 2015 commencement speaker, abortion and same-sex marriage supporter Massachusetts Governor Charlie Baker.³

A search on the Marian Court website for distinctly Catholic attributes yields few results. The student life page mentions “Mercy core values of compassion, integrity, justice, and service.”⁴ Regarding the campus spiritual life, the College declares: “Marian Court College promotes spiritual growth through many community service activities and services. A chapel is located on campus and serves as a place for reflection. Students of all faiths are invited to participate.” No Mass or confession times are found.

Dr. Hammon told The Cardinal Newman Society that there was no relationship between Marian Court’s financial difficulties and the way the College portrayed its religious mission. At the same time, however, she does not believe the College’s Catholic identity helped attract students, at least not explicitly.

“I don’t think it was the published words of ‘We are a Catholic institution,’ but rather it was how we teach here and how we treat each other that attracted people,” Hammon said. “And we did it in the good faith of the Catholic religion.”

“So for some people it was very important that we were a Catholic institution, for others not as much,” she said.

The Enrollment Question

Thomas Aquinas College has found that its unique mission helps expand the pool of prospective students, said Anne Forsyth, director of college relations, to the Newman Society.

³ On The Issues. Available at: http://www.ontheissues.org/Governor/Charlie_Baker_Abortion.htm

⁴ Marian Court College. Available at: <http://mariancourt.edu/student-life/>

Ten years ago, the College reached its target enrollment of 350 to 370, which is capped to support its unique mission of student formation and small classes. Nevertheless, the College has experienced an increasing number of applications in recent years.

Forsyth explained, “Because our Admissions efforts as well as our advertising and publicity activities make our Catholic identity well-known, I think it is fair to say that Thomas Aquinas College has an established reputation for its strong Catholic identity and that this is one of the strongest attractions for prospective students.”

Forsyth described how the College seeks students that understand and will live in harmony with “the thoroughly Catholic nature of our academic program and our community life.” She continued, “Our Admissions officers work closely with potential students to ensure they do indeed grasp our Catholic identity, and our publicity efforts reinforce their work.”

“Moreover, applicants are asked to complete a series of essays, including responding to the prompts... regarding the Catholic intellectual life and the Catholic moral life,” she said.

Christendom College also sets an enrollment cap but enjoys strong interest from prospective students each year. “Our commitment to the Faith and orthodoxy is definitely a draw for our students,” said McFadden.

“Christendom’s enrollment has increased by 17 percent over the past four years, which, considering the fact that many other private liberal arts schools are seeing declining enrollment, is a great testament to the value of a Christendom liberal arts educational experience,” he said.

Christendom also finds that its strong Catholic identity attracts students outside its local geographical region. “Christendom has students from all across America and various foreign countries. And it is our Catholic identity, coupled with our strong liberal arts program and unparalleled personal attention, that is drawing them here,” McFadden said.

Why the Liberal Arts?

Christendom, Thomas Aquinas College and other *Newman Guide* colleges find Catholic liberal arts education to be a draw for students, but some liberal arts colleges that lack a strong Catholic component are finding it hard to sustain that educational model.

Earlier this year, Sweet Briar College and Tennessee Temple University announced closures, although this month alumni won the right to attempt a comeback at Sweet Briar. “Both schools cited declining enrollment numbers over the last several years and an inability to climb out of troubling financial difficulties,” according to *U.S. News and World Report*.⁵ Sweet Briar President

⁵ Allie Bidwell, “Two Private Liberal Arts Colleges Will Shut Down”, *U.S. News & World Report* (March 3, 2015). Available at: <http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2015/03/03/declining-enrollments-financial-pressure-force-two-liberal-arts-colleges-to-close>

James Jones, Jr., blamed, in part, “the declining number of students choosing to attend small, rural, private liberal arts colleges,” according to the report.

Marian Court has portrayed itself as having a strong dedication to the liberal arts. Its mission statement refers to its liberal arts curriculum as of the “highest quality,” and its vision statement says that the College provides a “comprehensive liberal arts foundation, grounded in ethical thinking.”⁶ However, a look at the College’s academic catalog reveals only one associate’s degree major in the liberal arts, and no bachelor’s degrees.⁷ The other majors include disciplines such as accounting, entrepreneurship, fashion, paralegal studies and sport management. The College offered two bachelor’s degrees in business administration and criminal justice.

And despite its Catholic heritage, Marian Court did not offer any core curriculum courses in the Catholic intellectual tradition. Depending on the major, some of the most common classes required included economics, comparative religion, composition, oral communication, psychology, sociology, world history, and world literature.

Nevertheless, President Hammon believes that the liberal arts branding drew students to the College. She said the institution focused on training students in critical thinking, writing and communication. But Marian Court’s approach to the liberal arts was apparently a pragmatic one, oriented toward career preparation. Hammon said, “the liberal arts was very important for broadening the mindsets of young 18-year-olds, as well as helping them start their careers in their chosen discipline.”

Surprisingly, Marian Court did not offer courses in Catholic theology or philosophy. Pope St. John Paul II’s apostolic constitution on Catholic higher education *Ex corde Ecclesiae* stipulates, “Because of its specific importance among the academic disciplines, every Catholic University should have a faculty, or at least a chair, of theology.”⁸

When asked why Marian Court did not have any offerings in Catholic theology or philosophy, Hammon replied, “We offered a course in comparative religion that was a required course of all students no matter what their major. Sprinkled throughout the curriculum was always the Mercy mission, and that is of treating others with compassion, integrity, and justice. We have a big emphasis on serving others.”

“So while we may not have had a formal theology course or program, the Mercy values and mission are throughout the curriculum,” Hammon said. She mentioned in particular the college’s criminal justice program, which she said “offers substantial coursework in restorative justice.

⁶ Marian Court College. Available at: <http://mariancourt.edu/about-us-3/our-mission/>

⁷ Marian Court College. Available at: <http://mariancourt.edu/wp-content/uploads/2015/forms/Academic-Catalog-rev-Jan.-20151.pdf>

⁸ John Paul II, apostolic constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae* (August 15, 1990). Available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_15081990_ex-corde-ecclesiae.html

Certainly there's a lot about giving back to society. All the values that you hope to see in people who believe in their faith come from restorative justice."

Institutional Identity Leads to Stability

Noting that many of the students at Marian Court had come from underprivileged families, Hammon emphasized the role that donors play in helping students. "I really hope donors realize that when they are giving to a small Catholic college, they are changing families."

Indeed, for tuition-reliant colleges the importance of a strong donor base is of paramount importance. "Christendom is very tuition reliant," said McFadden, "although our advancement office does a great job of making up the difference between what the students pay and what it actually costs to run the college."

McFadden explained the positive effect that its Catholic identity has on the overall stability of the institution. "Everyone that works here know why Christendom exists," he said. "Having a clear mission and buy-in from our employees is very beneficial and helps us retain our employees, which in turn gives us stability. Because we are not changing who we are and we are sticking to our original purpose, it also helps show our donors, alumni, and friends that we are stable."

While many small colleges are tuition dependent, Christendom is one of only a few that reject federal aid. "This has been, at times, hard for us – financially," explained McFadden. "But you know, God is never outdone in generosity, so as a result of our decision, we have found many people who are interested in supporting us financially. They like the fact that we are truly independent and totally free to be a faithful Catholic institution."

Forsyth said that Thomas Aquinas College's accreditors often remark on the rarity of the universal support its faculty have for the College's mission.

"This unanimity on the part of the faculty and staff about the College's Catholic identity and mission gives rise to a similar quality in our friends and benefactors, as well as a real depth in their commitment to the school and our students," Forsyth said.

"Observing that we stand for our principles, they are confirmed in their decision to stand with us and support us all the more in our efforts to form the minds and hearts of our students for Christ," she said.

Forsyth agreed that there are strong connections between a Catholic college's financial health and its Catholic identity. She spoke about the kind of donors that Thomas Aquinas College attracts:

Some of our benefactors are disillusioned with their own Catholic alma maters whose Catholic identities have been diluted; some are parents of alumni who see the tremendous good the College has been in the spiritual lives of their children; and there are foundations for whom fidelity to the teaching Church is a *sine qua*

non for grant consideration. All are looking for the best way to help build up the Body of Christ in faithfulness and truth, and they view their giving to Thomas Aquinas College as a great investment toward that end. As a result, they are deeply committed to the College and our students and provide unfailingly for our financial needs.

She continued, “Many if not most of our generous benefactors are committed to Thomas Aquinas College not simply for its excellent academic program but because that program is carried out under the light of the teaching Church and in an atmosphere that nurtures in students the moral virtues and a vibrant spiritual life.”

Appeal of Catholic Campus Life

Thomas Aquinas College shared how its founding document, *A Proposal for the Fulfillment of a Catholic Liberal Education*, still serves as the institution’s governing document today.⁹ This is unique in the world of Catholic higher education, where many Catholic universities have become detached from the founding Catholic principles that guided them in their early years.

Forsyth said that “this statement of our mission as a Catholic college is very much alive and at work here, constantly forming our decisions, the community, and the institution itself. With this continual return to our roots, the College renews again and again its commitment to its Catholic mission and identity.”

She noted several ways in which Thomas Aquinas College ensures that the residence and student life experiences on campus are informed by its Catholic character. “Our residence halls are single-sex, with no visitation between them,” she said. “Mass is offered four times a day and confession eight times (before and after Mass); participation is voluntary, but simply by making these so available, a large majority of students participate regularly. There is a nightly Rosary offered by students in our chapel, and nightly prayers in each residence hall at curfew—again, both voluntary and well-attended.”

Forsyth agrees that the Catholic residence life program at the College is a big draw for students. “The best testimony we receive in this regard comes from the high school students who participate in our two-week summer program,” she said. “It should be noted, too, that our retention rate has been on the rise in recent years, reflecting satisfaction on the part of existing students with our residence life.”

McFadden, too, believes that Christendom College’s residence life program, which stems from its Catholic mission, is an attraction for students. “Students coming to Christendom are interested in achieving greatness, and not settling for mediocrity,” he said. “They want to grow in virtue and

⁹ Thomas Aquinas College, *A Proposal for the Fulfillment of a Catholic Liberal Education* (1969). Available at: <http://thomasaquinas.edu/about/founding-governing-document>

live in an ordered environment – something hard to do at other schools. Having a strong formation program and a caring student life staff has helped students grow to love Christendom even more.”

He shared Christendom’s conviction of the importance of Catholic mission actively influencing college policies. He said, “It is absolutely necessary for us to base all of our activity on our particular mission and on the universal mission of the Church, for without them, we would not have a sure guide and we would be more prone to stray from the Truth.”

McFadden concluded, “The Faith is simply part of everything we do – and this enables our students to leave the college fully formed academically, spiritually, and socially in the teachings of the Faith.”