

Encouraging Catholic Students for a Life of Faith

By Michael J. O'Loughlin, Communications Manager, National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management

Over the course of three warm days last spring, nearly 80 college students and their campus ministers gathered at the Saint Thomas More Catholic Chapel and Center at Yale University in New Haven, Conn., to share stories of faith and friendship. The students, all Catholic and all finishing their junior and senior years, had participated in the pilot year of an innovative Catholic campus ministry program sponsored by the Catholic center at Yale and the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management called ESTEEM—Engaging Students to Enliven the Ecclesial Mission.

“ESTEEM empowers Catholic young adults to use their talents in service to the Church,” explained Katie McKenna, who manages ESTEEM for the Leadership Roundtable. “We work with campus ministers to identify student leaders and then cultivate their leadership potential throughout the year. At the end of ESTEEM, students are ready to serve their church at the parish and diocesan level.”

Catholic culture at many of the nation’s top universities is vibrant and attractive to students. Campus ministry centers engage students through liturgy, study, and especially service, but this positive experience often does not translate into strong parish connections following graduation. ESTEEM aims to enrich the church by connecting these recent graduates to vibrant parishes and Catholic nonprofits. Anecdotal evidence suggests that young adults are not returning to active participation in the Catholic Church, even eschewing parish life during nascent marital days, a traditional time for young people to seek spiritual homes. Closing this gap is the primary aim of ESTEEM, exhorting young adults to live out their baptismal call to serve the Church now and in the future.

The ESTEEM executive committee consults with campus ministers, nonprofit executives, and ordained Catholic leaders to develop a curriculum outline that includes spiritual reflection, leadership workshops, and study of Catholic doctrine. Campus ministers at

the pilot sites take the framework and customize it to best serve the needs of their own communities.

Putting Faith to Work

Unique to ESTEEM is the emphasis on connecting students to local leaders in fields that they hope to enter as professionals after graduation, creating a student-mentor relationship that explores the intersection of faith and career aspirations.

Sarah Heiman, a campus minister at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Conn., explained that the mentor feature of ESTEEM attracted students to the program on her campus.

“Before we had even ended the pilot year we had students asking about when they would be eligible to participate in ESTEEM. They yearned to have a mentor who could help them connect their faith and academic pursuits and to have conversations with their peers about how they would transition from campus back into parish life. ESTEEM has become one of the key ways in which our seniors are able to carve out the time to carefully reflect on how they bring their faith and values into their everyday lives, especially as professionals once they enter the workforce.”

Last year, New York Times religion writer Sam Freedman profiled Marysa Leya, an ESTEEM participant at Yale, and her mentor, Dr. Leo Cooney. “I can’t imagine shirking my faith,” Leya said in a recent interview, “but how do you keep it important around all the chaos of med school? How do I become a meaningful member of a new parish? How do I allow the kind of experiences I’ve had here to continue?”

Kelly Leather, a graduate of Sacred Heart University who is now a Fulbright Scholar in Albania, explained that ESTEEM offered a space for her and her peers to consider how their faith would influence their professional lives.

“ESTEEM was an incredible journey for us throughout the school year,” said Leather. “It’s provided a meeting place for us to reflect even more on our faith, and that’s allowed us to better understand where we want to go in the future and how we want the Catholic community to be part of our lives.”

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Kara Zang, an ESTEEM alum from the Saint Thomas More Newman Center at The Ohio State University, had her eyes opened during a trip with her mentor to an after-school program for homeless and at-risk children. “I was absolutely floored at all the opportunities for children through this program—ballet, plays, extra homework time, and just the chance to be warm, safe, and taken care of for several hours,” she remarked. “It never occurred to me that this population or ministry existed, and it was so moving to see how much work went into helping them.”

Young Adults, Young Leaders

The Catholic Campus Ministry Association (CCMA) honored ESTEEM last November during a reception at the fall gathering of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops in Baltimore, Md. Kerry Robinson, executive director of the Leadership Roundtable and a member of the ESTEEM executive committee, said that the award validated the insight that the Church needs young adults.

“The Church has untapped access to an abundance of talent in its young people, and ESTEEM reminds students of their baptismal obligation to serve the Church,” Robinson said. “Part of the challenge is

persuading Church leadership that young adults can be capable to serve now, and encouraging them to welcome this talent into their parishes and dioceses in meaningful and fulfilling ways, whether that be on parish councils, diocesan finance councils, or boards of Catholic nonprofits. The honor from CCMA affirms the work of ESTEEM campus ministers and students, and it will strengthen the case for young adult leadership.”

Now in its second year, ESTEEM is active on nine college campuses across the nation; original pilot sites included Yale University and Sacred Heart University in Connecticut, Michigan State University, The Ohio State University, Stanford University, and the University of California at Los Angeles. They were joined this year by Villanova University, Purdue University, and California State University at East Bay. □

Campus ministers and university officials eager to bring this resource to their campus are encouraged to visit www.ESTEEMleadership.org or contact McKenna at katie.mckenna@nlrcm.org.



ESTEEM students and campus ministers at the spring 2011 all-school conference in New Haven. ESTEEM aims to engage Catholic students more fully into the life of the Catholic Church. (Photo courtesy of The Leadership Roundtable)