

An Oasis of Faith

Celebrating 80 years, St. John's Catholic Newman Center provides spiritual support at a secular university

BY NATE BROWN

It is the largest Newman Center in the United States, and it would never have existed without help from the Knights of Columbus.

St. John's Catholic Newman Center (SJCNC) in Champaign, Ill., is home to thousands of Catholic students at the University of Illinois. Celebrating its 80th year, the center — located prominently on the Big Ten university's campus — has been praised by students, staff and clergy alike for the refuge it provides. Many, like Tristen Pisarczyk, immediately credit the Knights for their help in making it a reality.

"Our start at the Newman Center was because of the Knights," said Pisarczyk, who serves as director of operations at Newman Hall. "They gave \$50,000 in the early 1900s to serve the Catholic students at U of I. In 1924, they bought the property with \$200,000 and helped fund the original complex we have here now."

PAYING STRONG DIVIDENDS

The Knights' initial investment grew beyond expectations. St. John's holds an honored place among Newman Centers and offers a wealth of options for eager students seeking to enhance their spirituality. There are hundreds of public colleges and universities in the United States, but St. John's is the only Newman Center that offers residential housing.

Last September, the SJCNC community celebrated the dedication of a \$40 million expansion, which included an additional residential facility featuring a dining area, space for

study and socializing, and a fitness center. Extensive remodeling and an expanded library were also among the center's enhancements.

"We have a unique opportunity to have dorms where 600 students live," Pisarczyk explained. Although St. John's is among other private certified housing on campus, its population outnumbers all of the other faith-based living arrangements combined.

Fifty percent of the students living at Newman Hall are freshman. Retention rates are higher than anywhere else on campus. Many upperclassmen continue to board for the duration of their college stay, leaving some students on a waiting list.

"People want to stay here and be a part of this," Pisarczyk said.

The wealth of resources now available to students is staggering, thanks to a vision that was launched by Msgr. Stuart Swetland when he began his ministry as director of St. John's in 1997.

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"We are there, as Catholics, so we can help students make important life decisions," he explained. "We found that if we keep students during their college years, they're more like-

ly to remain involved in the Church once they graduate. If we lose them in college, there's no doubt we can lose them forever."

Using traditional means, St. John's responds to the spiritual needs of students in an extraordinary way.

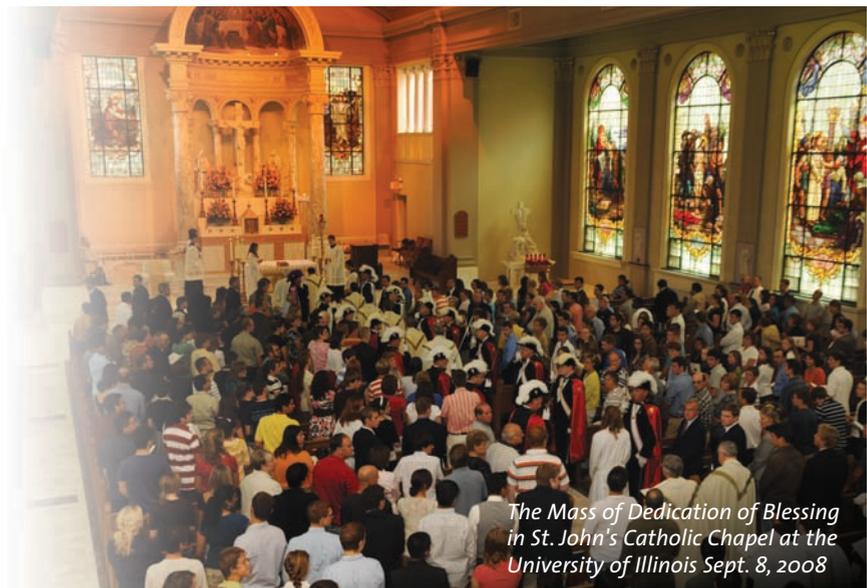
"We reach out to 10,000 students on campus," Pisarczyk said. "We offer daily Mass, six Sunday Masses and adoration. The interest is certainly there, and for our students staying in the residence halls, the chapel is open 24/7. It's so popular that it's very rare to go into the chapel at any time and not see someone taking advantage of it."

FORMED, DEDICATED, PRESENT

At SJCNC, there are also a number of student groups, among which Illini Council 2782 remains a strong presence. The Knights of Columbus continues to be an example at the Newman Center both in the public eye and behind the scenes.

"St. John's has a long connection with the Knights," Pisarczyk explained. "In 1937, we formed the first college council at a public university and we still have a very active council."

According to Msgr. Swetland, Knights were not only responsible for the foundation of the university's Newman Center, but they have also contributed to its "ongoing spiritual need." The Order gave the university its first official chaplain, Father John O'Brien, in 1915, and has been involved in the Catholic community there ever since.





The formal ribbon cutting following renovations at St. John's Catholic Newman Center: (from left) SJCNC Trustees Bill and Jo Ellen Zerrusen, University of Illinois President B. Joseph White, SJCNC Director Father Greg Ketcham, Bishop Daniel R. Jenky of Peoria, Chaplain Emeritus Msgr. Edward Duncan, SJCNC Alumnus Joe Kaiser, and student Sara Maletta.

"The Knights were always well formed, dedicated and present," said Msgr. Swetland. "They're willing to do what is necessary to help the mission at St. John's and, without a doubt, are among the most important parishioners."

Each year, approximately 20 new recruits join Council 2782, which counts both Pisarczyk and Msgr. Swetland among its members. The University of Illinois Knights were even named Outstanding College Council at the 2004 College Council Conference.

Another critical success on the campus is the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS). Founded in 1998, FOCUS is a national outreach to both secular and Catholic universities. At St. John's, there are eight FOCUS missionaries who lead Bible studies and mentor young Catholics looking to grow in their faith.

Brendan Heffron, a University of Illinois alumnus and a member of Naperville Council 1369, credits his spiritual growth largely to his experience at St. John's.

"Bible studies and fellowship strengthened me, especially through the further instruction of the Bible," Heffron explained. "The existence of a young, dynamic program such as FOCUS is encouraging."

Meanwhile, involvement in the Knights allows students to actively witness to their faith in the greater community. "Their biggest push is evangelization, and they achieve this

by working with local groups and servicing soup kitchens," recalled Heffron. Also among the council's activities is an annual fund drive held outside Memorial Stadium to benefit people with intellectual disabilities.

While the college Knights donate money, they focus more on donating time, Heffron said. "That makes a more resounding impact than just giving a check and ending it there."

'Our mission statement talked about radiating Jesus Christ in word and sacrament.'

Adding to the Newman Center's wealth are spiritual retreats and lectures by distinguished speakers. The most prominent retreat program, Koinonia, has four retreats each school year and will host its 100th retreat this month.

RADIATING CHRIST

Before leaving SJCNC in 2006 to serve at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, Md., Msgr. Swetland developed the center's focus on faith formation in many ways. This included educational and social programs, the reverent celebration of the Mass, and efforts to live one's faith with clarity and joy. "Our mission statement talked about radiating Jesus Christ in word and sacrament," he said. "Christ is the ultimate example."

By all accounts, this mission is bearing fruit. In the last 11 years alone, approximately 90 graduates of the University of Illinois have gone on to enter seminary or religious life.

According to Heffron, the very presence of "good, strong, intelligent Catholic men" like Msgr. Swetland and other dynamic priests at SJCNC is enough to strengthen students' faith.

As such, the work of the new evangelization demands an unending commitment to the spiritual welfare of both current students, and to those who have yet to take their first step on campus. This fact is underscored by Pisarczyk's recruitment visits to Catholic high schools.

"Our job on these trips is to raise awareness and, of course, to see students become part of the U of I Catholic community," Pisarczyk said. "We are the largest Newman Center in the country. We will give them the resources to pursue their spiritual quest."

Indeed, the resources at St. John's continue to expand. Since 2001, the center has been home to the Institute of Catholic Thought, a Catholic academic program that offers students the opportunity to enroll in credit and non-credit courses. Providing Catholic education in a secular environment, the institute joined Newman Hall and St. John's Catholic Chapel to become one of the three pillars of SJCNC.

According to Msgr. Swetland, young people are attracted to the St. John's Center because they have a thirst for more and respond to the authentic proclamation of the Gospel.

"People in this generation are looking for the truth," he said. "Very few people have been willing to stand up and say, 'Here's the truth that will give you joy and peace.' We try to unapologetically give them the truth. They're not finding it in other sources because it's not there. It is found in Jesus Christ."

For more information about St. John's Catholic Newman Center, visit www.sjcnc.org. ■

Nate Brown is a freelance writer from Aurora, Ill., where he is a member of Robert H. Weaver Council 12005.