



The Guiding Light FOR NEVADA'S Catholic Future

BY JENNIFER MARIE PELFINI

How can personal faith be nurtured without the background and understanding of what it means in practice? What happens when faith isn't taught, isn't part of regular conversations, or is mocked by others?

Our Lady of Wisdom Newman Center is the guiding light that illuminates the path through the darkness for students.

In today's world, college students find themselves in an environment where faith is often questioned and challenged. Fueled by the effects of the pandemic, the pressures of academic life, exposure to diverse beliefs, and the increasing secularization of society, the landscape of contemporary college life can make navigating personal faith more complex than ever. Amid these influences, students wrestle with questions of identity, purpose, and belief, often without the foundational understanding or support to guide them.

Without the example of parents who pray and teach the faith and faced with consistently negative news and social media, students must make an adult decision for themselves on faith and religion.

This predicament isn't just a Catholic challenge. In Nevada the formation of future leaders is a serious problem influencing the future. There are no Catholic universities or colleges in Nevada. Only two major public universities play a pivotal role in shaping Nevada's future as they significantly contribute to the state's professional workforce and overall development. One of them, is the University of Nevada, Reno, (UNR). It has a little under 22,000 students with an estimated 15% or more as Catholics. This has long-term implications for the state of Nevada.

University of Nevada, Reno, has a unique opportunity. In the middle of campus stands Our Lady of Wisdom Newman Center (OLWNC), both a Catholic church and Catholic student center. Coupled with Bishop Muegenborg's visible presence and a team of Fellowship of Catholic University Student (FOCUS) missionaries, a door is opened to encounters with Jesus. Simply by welcoming students right where they are, this ministry can make all the difference for Northern Nevada Catholics. In the last two years \$3.2M raised through private contributions was invested to update the center and the church. The renovation has made a big difference, paired with the new programs and engaged leadership.

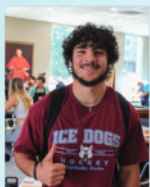


Before

After Our Lady of Wisdom Chapel

A few students shared the impact OLNWC has on their faith, and how this links to the critical growth of the Catholic church. The students have various backgrounds but similar points of craving something more in their life, unsure of where to go and found their way to OLNWC and fulfillment through encounters with Jesus Christ.

FROM ATHEIST TO ALTAR SERVER



Ryan Yarhi, a freshman at UNR, grew up as an atheist. Ryan and his family moved from Reno to Florida and lived in the Bahamas for a time during which Ryan was homeschooled from 8th grade through his freshman year of high school. Upon returning to Reno, his parents wanted the best education for him; they applied to Bishop Manogue Catholic

High School where Ryan was accepted.

Spending time with his family and being absent from a school and peer community for pivotal years in his life, Ryan was enthusiastic about having a community to join. While at Bishop Manogue, he quickly found friends, enjoyed his studies, and became involved in Kairos ("God's time" in Greek), a yearly retreat offered for students. After attending Kairos and meaningfully participating, he committed the following year to become a retreat leader. The second-year retreat experience as a leader touched his heart, and he realized nothing remained more fulfilling in his life than to serve God.

Ryan made the decision to go through Order of Christian Initiation of Adults (OCIA) to convert to Catholicism. Through the process of OCIA, he appreciated the beautiful theology of Catholicism and learned about how a trusting and loving God saved him and others from sin. At that same time, being new to the faith, he was also new to UNR campus and experienced OLNWC. He witnessed the transformation of the building transform from a dark, somber, non-mission oriented space into a welcoming community of students that reflected where he was, searching for answers, seeking what faith meant. "God is good, and OLNWC is an incredible blessing to have in the community

WolfPack *Catholic*

to understand how God transforms the lives of students in ministry," Ryan said. Today, he is a student coordinator at the OLNWC. He serves at Mass at the altar, attends Bible studies, and participates in many on-campus ministry events. Ryan has experienced first-hand the great impact of OLNWC on the campus community and how all the resources poured into the ministry bring students closer to encounters with Jesus.

FROM QUESTIONING FAITH TO CONVERSION



Jack McKinzey met Bishop Mueggenborg walking by OLNWC and was welcomed in. "People were so kind to me and talked to me. I was inspired and filled with excitement. I needed more and decided to convert to Catholicism," Jack said. He is studying to be a teacher and is also the UNR mascot, Wolfie. This Easter, Jack celebrates

one year since he completed OCIA. He works as a barista at OLNWC a few days of the week. "The community here is friends. This is a safe place to do your homework or chill out. You don't need to be Catholic to be here, that makes it inviting to everyone," Jack said. Jack was inspired to become more visible and involved when he saw the changes at OLNWC and what it meant to the community. "When I saw what was completed and what this had become and will be, I decided to volunteer," Jack added. He is also joining the Knights of Columbus and looks to continue to support others in their faith walk.

FROM SEEKING MORE TO COMMITMENT



Samantha Mahoney was born to Catholic parents who stopped practicing their faith. Samantha believed in God but didn't know what faith meant or anything in particular about Catholicism. She decided at the end of high school to go to college and there she would go back to church. Samantha

came to OLNWC three years ago. She had been baptized and received Communion but was not confirmed until two years ago. Before she decided to become confirmed, she had started on a journey learning about other faith traditions. "I was advised to explore before I converted. As my faith developed, and my questions answered, I realized I wanted to be confirmed and receive confession," said Samantha. She is a reader at Mass and when she attended the FOCUS SEEK conference (a young adult faith enrichment experience) last year. It was life changing for her. "I have never been in a place where the people I met, I felt I knew," said Samantha. During SEEK she shared intelligent conversations about faith and current lives. For Samantha, having the Bible studies available at OLNWC has helped her appreciate the Bible more deeply, in a place where her thoughts and questions can be addressed. For her, OLNWC has become the place to ask questions and to find answers.

FROM RAISED CATHOLIC TO ABIDING LEADER



Gabrielle Azevedo grew up in a Catholic family with parents whose faith was strengthened from encounters at San Jose State University's Newman Center. When she decided to go to UNR, the first thing her mom asked her was to visit OLNWC. Gabrielle began college in the middle of the pandemic. Because she had no car and

she was away from her family in California, finding a school family was important. She attended a welcome BBQ in the

fall and decided immediately to get involved in campus ministry, shadowing student coordinators. She worked at OLNWC and helped coordinate activities. What she saw through the transition of OLNWC only emboldened her faith. "I could see the presence of the bishop. When he spoke about the changes planned, I got right on board seeing how this would welcome the many lost students," said Gabrielle. The newly revitalized engaging and interactive approach transformed the idea of what OLNWC could be and how the Catholic Church was viewed. In meeting missionaries, she experienced people who were fervent about their faith. "We are missionary disciples. Placing the focus on mission will help our diocese grow with the next generation of young adults," said Gabrielle. The changes at OLNWC have resulted in a more reverent Mass. Gabrielle feels it is important for students to experience the beauty of the Mass in this way. "The building space has changed from a place to hang out to a space of outreach, where we can share our encounters with Jesus to inspire others every day of the week, not just during Mass," said Gabrielle. She is studying geography and geology and enjoys sharing conversation with the Bishop (who studied geology as well) about this career choice. She experienced enlightenment after attending SEEK in 2023, committing her life to serving Jesus.

FROM ISOLATED CATHOLIC TO COMMUNITY



Liam Mulcahy found OLNWC as a freshman looking for community. Having always attended Catholic schools, he thought it would be a great way to connect with other Catholics. Four years later, Liam is well into his studies and has personally experienced the incredible transformation of OLNWC and all it has to offer for someone new to campus, and for someone like him, nearing graduation. "The changes resulting in the past few years have made such a difference for many. For



Before

After Study and Conference Rooms

example, more people are going to Mass and the FOCUS missionaries have been so instrumental in connecting with students,” said Liam. After attending a mission trip to support Catholic Charities by working with the homeless, Liam’s perspective on his faith changed from say to do. “My mission trip was transformational in my faith journey,” said Liam. He continues to grow in his faith with Bible studies, discipleship opportunities at OLNWC, and working with FOCUS missionaries.

ENCOUNTERS WITH JESUS CHRIST

With just a few of these spectacular student witnesses, the connection between the revitalized OLNWC and the positive experiences from students is obvious. The power of the Holy Spirit and energy of Catholic faith are coming alive on UNR campus.

For many years, Newman Centers have hosted students around the world to be more like a second home and place of fellowship. Campus ministry has changed over time, from a perspective of a place to hang out, to an important encounter with Jesus Christ.

Bishop Mueggenborg explains, “The goal for the Newman Center is to evangelize our faith, provide encounters with Jesus Christ, and to educate the next generation of leaders and raise them up as active Catholics and faithful business leaders. We hope to positively influence and guide the future leadership in our Church, state, local civic community, and business world with a solid foundation of faith. We are preparing them to return to their parishes as young adults on fire and ready to live and share their Catholic faith. It’s an ambitious but beautiful vision for the growth of the Catholic Church in Northern Nevada. This ministry needs the support of our Catholic community.”

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THE OLWN IS A DEDICATED MINISTRY TO THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY, AND AS SUCH, CANNOT SUSTAIN ITSELF BASED ON COLLECTION INCOME. THAT IS WHY WE ARE APPEALING TO THE LARGER CHURCH IN NORTHERN NEVADA TO HELP FUND THIS MINISTRY FOR THE LONG-TERM FUTURE. DONATE TO ONE CHURCH TO BE A PART OF OUR COMMUNITIES GROWTH.”

— BISHOP DANIEL MUEGGENBORG

BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE MINISTRY FOR THE FUTURE

The Newman Center is not a typical parish ministry; it has a specialized focus. The center and chapel are open to Catholics and non-Catholics alike. Visitors are invited to attend any event offered, from Bible studies to OCIA. Here, Catholicism is offered to students at an intellectual level that matches the academics of their university classes. This supports their growth in faith and equips them to be better leaders.

For many, OLNWC is their first contact with Catholicism. For them, it is a safe place to study, to meet in community, and enjoy coffee or a free lunch. It is the kind of welcoming environment that most students long for. Faith is nourished and strengthened through Bible studies, mission trips, charitable works in the community, active participation in reverent Mass, adoration, retreats and many other campus ministry efforts. Special offerings include a candlelight Mass and classes that help people understand and participate in Mass in more meaningful ways.

This community and environment is conducive for young men and women to explore their vocations whether it be discerning priesthood, religious life, or marriage and family. OLNWC offers a discernment group for young men who are considering vocations to the priesthood.

The annual ONE CHURCH second collection at Christmas this year is dedicated to funding this crucial need of



Catholic campus ministry. The future of the Catholic Church in Northern Nevada is reliant on this critical ministry for young adults. Your donation to ONE CHURCH will fund a state of the art platform for Catholic Campus Ministry in the Diocese of Reno. †

