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Your College Faith

OWN IT!

Matt and Colleen Swaim



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Introduction

Are you a high school graduate preparing to go to a state or private institution? Perhaps you are a senior in college who has just begun to connect with your faith. And maybe you have decided to stay at home while attending your local community college. Regardless of your college context, this book is intended to assist you in keeping the candle of faith well lit through your collegiate years.

Whether you've been home-schooled, gone to Catholic school, attended a public school, or experienced a combination of all the above, no educational experience to this point can fully prepare you for what you'll experience or already have experienced the first day you set foot on the campus of the undergraduate institution of your choice.

No matter what background you come from, if you're a practicing Catholic, prepare to be scandalized on your first weekend as a myriad of worldviews assault your senses. After your first few days at college, you may be tempted to think one of two things: either you're the only person on campus with good sense or everything you've been told about faith and the universe is a lie and you need to start from scratch. Neither of these approaches will get to the heart of the concerns you face as a Catholic trying to live your faith on campus. In addition to that, prepare to have your daily routine upended, your social landscape rototilled, and your concept of your own personal identity revolutionized.

College presents a totally different universe than the one you experienced in high school. That doesn't mean you have to become

a totally different person than you were in high school; it just means you're continuing to develop your understanding of what it means to be a Catholic Christian as a young adult. Just because the simplified forms about Christ and his Church that you believed as a third-grader seem overly basic for the situations you face in college doesn't mean Jesus is no longer relevant once you cruise past your confirmation and into your collegiate career.

If something is true, *really* true, it'll maintain its truthfulness as well when applied to your lived scholastic situation: through middle school, high school, and even into the academic discipline you choose for your own personal collegiate path. Science, literature, philosophy, history—our Catholic faith touches each of these subjects, and it's important to be grounded in your faith so that when it's challenged in or outside the classroom, you'll be equipped to handle those challenges.

You may be tempted to draw away from regular Mass attendance by atheists, Protestants, or even Catholics who don't think the sacraments are all that important. However, you'll have to assert yourself no matter who tempts you, because, as Jesus says in John 15:4, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." You may not be connected to your home parish like you were before college, but don't let that keep you from being connected to the Church while you're at college.

You'll face no shortage of challenges to living your Catholic faith as you transition into life as an undergraduate. Our hope is that this book—while not claiming to be a *be-all and end-all* guide to living your faith—will at least get you to thinking about the basic challenges to your Catholicism that you'll face as a student and guide you toward resources that can help you stay connected to Christ and his Church.

How to Use This Book

As we take a look at some of the challenges you'll face or are already facing as a college student, our goal is to provide you with reflections you can return to when these challenges occur. Each chapter is structured interactively so that you can add your own thoughts as you read.

After beginning with a quote from Scripture or a papal document and a brief overview of each area of campus life, you'll read about some scenarios you might encounter in the classroom, the dorm room, or in social settings. Take some time to think through these scenarios in advance so that when you're confronted with them in the moment, you won't be caught off-guard.

When you've finished reading about why each aspect of college life brought up in this book is important, you'll be inspired by "alumni profiles" or stories of saints who struggled as you may with everything from keeping balance in the midst of a busy schedule to withstanding the pressure to go against your conscience in a tempting situation. The less regrets you have about the way you conduct yourself in college, the better!

Toward the end of each chapter, you'll see what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* has to say about the subject matter of that particular chapter. After that, you'll find a series of practical ways to act on your faith in a campus setting, followed by a list of other books to explore if you want to delve deeper into a particular issue. Finally, you'll find prayers that you can visit repeatedly in the course of your collegiate career.

Remember, this book is designed to be interactive—you're encouraged to write down your own thoughts and experiences as you see fit. Then perhaps years from now, you'll be able to flip back through these pages and revisit some of the formative landmarks in your spiritual life.

1

Own It! Your Faith as Authentically Yours

Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us.

2 TIMOTHY 1:13–14

Technically speaking, nobody is born Catholic, though some of us came close, having been baptized as infants. Others of us perhaps came into the Church individually or with our families later on in our childhood or school-age years. Under the guidance of parents, grandparents, or Catholic-school teachers, you probably attended classes where you learned some of the nuts and bolts of the faith and may even have been active in your parish youth ministry along the way. All the work you and those who love you have done to help your faith take root in your life has been preparing you for the moment when you finally leave the nest, take off the training wheels, and begin to flourish in the Church as a young adult.

College provides many gifts and opportunities when it comes to making your faith your own. Now it's your turn to take the initiative to go to Mass and confession, your turn to decide to read materials and

engage in activities that further your spiritual growth, and your turn to become the kind of person who honors Christ with your life when nobody's looking. That includes the tough task of scrutinizing what is valued and mainstream in contemporary life and figuring out if it truly meshes with who you are as a Catholic young adult. Maturing in your Catholic faith is a challenging though ultimately exciting process as you move to a whole new level in your relationship with God.

What name did you take at your confirmation? Which saint does it honor? How can you further emulate his or her life while in college?

Why It's Important to Take This Chapter Seriously

Throughout your life, you've no doubt encountered opinions that were indifferent or even hostile to your Catholic faith. These challenges may have come from the media, friends at school, or even family members such as those Catholics who no longer practice their faith. Through social media, exposure to a myriad of worldviews is becoming more and more possible at earlier ages, and college tends to be the ultimate testing ground in this regard. Understanding how people object to Catholicism in unique and varied ways will help you to better understand why you believe what you believe. It's time for you to do the leg work and figure out why Catholicism offers more than the faith of Buddhists, nondenominational Protestants, Mormons, or even agnostics. Like many of your college subjects, you might have to do some critical thinking here. And it's certainly necessary to keep praying through moments of doubt or confusion.

In college, chances are you'll meet in person for the first time people from belief systems you've previously only read about. You'll have questions for them, just as they'll surely have questions for you. Some of their questions are bound to make you uncomfortable, especially if you're not sure how to answer them. Just like your parents may have grown more deeply in their faith as they researched answers to difficult questions about the faith that you asked as a young child, you can use these questions from friends as an opportunity to grow in your own faith as you try to explain to others what it means to be a Catholic. After all, how can you defend something you don't understand, or more important, how can you share your faith if you're not sure why you believe in the first place?

As you begin to take full ownership of your Catholic faith, it may be helpful to start at the beginning:

Where did your Catholic faith come from? Was it from your parents? Your grandparents?

Can you remember a point in your childhood when you were sure God existed? What was it that convinced you then?

Between birth and college, almost everyone has resisted going to church one Sunday or another. If you were reluctant to go to Mass at some point in your life, what was the source of that reluctance?

Has your experience of high school made you more or less convinced that God exists and loves you?

It's time to begin examining exactly why you're Catholic, especially since sooner or later someone is going to question you about it. Have you stayed Catholic because of a nagging relative or because you deeply believe in the importance of meeting Jesus regularly in the Eucharist? Why Catholicism, and what does this identity mean for you? With thousands of Christian denominations to choose from, why would you want to share the faith of your ancestors any more than you'd want to share their interest in music? If you've ever considered being something besides Catholic, what was it and why? All of these and more are questions Catholics interested in taking ownership of their faith need to be asking themselves as they grow in Christian maturity. And stepping onto a college campus and out from under the umbrella of your parents provides a chance to address these questions from a different angle, allowing you to decipher what you believe and why.

Perhaps some aspects of the faith seem as natural to you as breathing—things like the importance of baptism, devotion to Mary, the necessity of the priesthood, and the observance of Lent. But these

ideas may seem totally foreign to people from other faith backgrounds, whether they be new friends, roommates, professors, or acquaintances. Take some time to explore the things that obviously set Catholicism apart from other worldviews. Try to understand why the Church places an emphasis on these aspects of our faith that people of other faiths don't seem to think are important at all, or perhaps even find offensive about Catholicism.

If you attend a Catholic college or university, you probably assume that deepening your faith will come naturally—that opportunities for growth will be as common and mainstream as a classmate planning her fantasy wedding or a hallmate streaming online movies. You probably also assume you'll be fairly free of challenges to your Catholic beliefs. The fact is, you may have to work as hard or harder at a Catholic university than you would at a secular college to avoid taking the gift of your faith for granted and sinking into a malaise. At secular colleges, Christian colleges, and even many specifically Catholic colleges, skeptical postmodernist theory—which puts forth the idea that absolute truth doesn't exist and isn't even possible—is far too prevalent. As such, don't take for granted that your professors are right just because they are teaching at a reputable university or have several letters behind their name. It is possible to be highly intelligent and totally wrong. However, this does not mean you should not consider what they are teaching as reputable. Though they could be wrong, sometimes it takes discernment in thought and prayer to assimilate some information.

Furthermore, we humans like to do our own thing and stay comfortable. However, seeking out higher truths as a student means not only reaching toward the meaning of eternity with your heart, soul, mind, and strength but also living a life consistent with the meaning of the eternal truths that you will hopefully come to know and love in new ways as a maturing Catholic. The work of *owning* your college faith takes time, but God is with you and accompanies you through

these struggles. God wants you to understand the gift of faith you received at baptism.

Many times, people's objections to Catholicism will have more to do with the failings of those who profess the Catholic faith rather than a misunderstanding of doctrine. If someone were to ask you how you could be part of a Church that has seen some of its priests exposed as sexual child abusers, what would you say? If someone asked why you'd want to align yourself with the same institution that arrested a scientist like Galileo, led inquisitions in Rome and Spain, and engaged in the Crusades, how would you respond? Perhaps the most antagonistic questions you'll face won't come from atheists, agnostics, or Protestant Christians. Rather, they may come from those who were raised Catholic but had a series of bad experiences with clergy and fellow Catholics or who found the moral teachings of the Church, particularly on issues of sexuality, challenging. If you are struggling with the same issues as they are, what would keep you Catholic?

Write down one objection someone you know has put forth as a reason they could never be Catholic.

Put aside a chunk of time this week to seek out answers to that question from a trusted source, such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *YOUCAT*, or a faithful Catholic priest or other mentor.

In addition to the challenging questions others will have about your faith, you may have some challenging questions of your own—perhaps questions as big as how can we even be sure that God exists. Some outside the Church criticize Catholics as a bunch of unquestioning

automatons of the pope, an army of robotic simpletons just waiting for orders and afraid to think for themselves.

A survey of the lives and teachings of some of the doctors of the Church shows that we as Catholics regard those great minds that asked the hardest questions to be some of our proudest family members in the communion of saints. This includes people like Saint Augustine, the brilliant writer and orator, who tried out a number of different philosophies and lifestyles before finally arriving at the conclusion that Catholicism was the one true faith. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux was a Carmelite nun who desperately desired to be a missionary but was too weak to go to foreign lands. Her spirituality of the *little way* has inspired many and earned her the title of doctor of the Church. Saint Thomas Aquinas wrote the *Summa Theologiae*, a massive collection of objections to Catholic belief wherein he grants his opponents massive benefit of the doubt and uses reason to argue and prove the Church's theological perspective.

And Blessed John Henry Newman, after whom the Newman Centers on many college campuses are named, was part of an intellectual movement that sought to prove the historical validity of the schismatic Church of England when he came to the conclusion that Catholicism was the only faith consistent with the one founded by Jesus on the rock of Saint Peter. It was Newman, by the way, who said, "Ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt." According to Newman, asking the toughest questions about the Church in a spirit of charity is not an act of defiance, but an act of love. You will never be able to own your faith until you explore the difficult questions for yourself and find the explanations that resonate with you personally in your spiritual walk as a Catholic.

This chapter led off with a verse from Saint Paul's Second Letter to Saint Timothy, where he encourages Timothy to carefully "guard the good treasure entrusted to you." Paul and Timothy had a special relationship. Paul knew both Timothy's mother and grandmother

to be faithful Christians and was aware of the lengths to which they had gone to ensure that Timothy had a solid foundation of faith. We know their efforts paid off, because Paul's letters to Timothy in the New Testament are among what we refer to as the "pastoral Epistles," letters Paul wrote to a couple of the Church's early bishops, teaching them how to conduct themselves as they went about instructing the faithful. As Saint Paul's letters indicate, Timothy was a young man when he became the first bishop of Ephesus, which should encourage you as a college student to know that you don't have to be advanced in years to be a Christian leader. But something else can be learned from this relationship between Paul and Timothy. In both of his letters, Paul uses fatherly language when referring to Timothy, calling him "my loyal child in the faith" (1 Timothy 1:2) and "my beloved child" (2 Timothy 1:2), even though there was no biological relationship between these two men.

This underscores the importance of finding a mentor in the faith. This could be someone with whom you formally meet for spiritual direction or instruction, but it also means seeking out fellow Catholic classmates who may be a step ahead of you when it comes to Christian maturity. At college, you'll find Catholic students who are at your level in regard to the love and knowledge of their faith, as well as those who are at different points in their spiritual journey, both ahead of you and behind you. This is why it's important to plug in to some kind of Catholic community on campus such as a Newman Center located on many public universities or the campus ministry provided by Catholic universities.

Additionally, sometimes you will find outreach groups such as the Fellowship of Catholic University Students (FOCUS) or St. Paul's Outreach to help you revitalize your faith. Through these channels you will not only find adult campus-ministry leaders who are willing to help you make your faith your own, but also fellow Catholic students who have walked the path you're trying to walk and who were likely

in the same place as you not so long ago. These are the people you want to meet with at coffeehouses and campus hangouts to dig more deeply into questions of faith. When you get hit with a challenge to the faith that you don't know how to answer, you will likely encounter the living Church through these people, because odds are they've been approached with the same challenges. These are the same people who will encourage you to join them for Mass on Sundays and who are trying to live out the Church's moral teaching on a campus full of temptations. Developing a community of fellow pilgrims along the path to spiritual maturity is an excellent way to guard and strengthen your Catholic faith as you seek truth both within as well as outside the normal educational structures.

Who mentored you in the faith throughout high school? Did he or she do a good job? Explain.

Growing up, you probably knew people who stopped going to church in high school, perhaps even earlier. In college, too, you'll likely see Catholics who decide not to go to church, at least for a while. Research shows that people stop going to Mass in college less out of disagreement with Church teaching than out of getting caught up in the whirlwind of distractions that campus life provides. In the whirlwind of college adventures, Mass sometimes moves to the bottom of the list of priorities, and if someone isn't taking personal responsibility for learning and practicing the faith, it'll be one of the first things to go. As you read this book, think about what steps of accountability you're taking to make sure you aren't tempted to hit

the snooze button Sunday morning instead of going to Mass following your first late-Saturday-night social engagement. The Eucharist is true spiritual food, and the more connected you stay to this essential sacrament, the more strength you'll have to participate in it regularly and use the grace you receive from Jesus himself to grow in your faith amid the challenges of college life.

ALUMNI DIRECTORY

Saint Peter Gonzalez (1190–1246; Spain)

When it comes to saints who started off their lives taking their faith for granted, Saint Peter Gonzalez certainly makes the hall of shame. In thirteenth-century Spain, the royal family and many of the nobles were Catholic and had many clergy in high-profile positions in their courts. Saint Peter, who came from a prominent Catholic family, was interested in the priesthood, not so much because he had a deep sense of his vocation, but because he thought that by saying the right words and doing the right things, he could become a high-ranking clergy member with access to all the luxuries this particular office provided.

Saint Peter did, in fact, become ordained, and as he had hoped, gained increasing status in his early years as a priest. As his prominence increased, however, so did the size of his ego. The story goes that one Christmas, Saint Peter had planned a horseback procession through the streets of a local village. He was so vain that he had actually paid a large group of peasants to cheer him as he rode through town. Unfortunately for Peter, his plan backfired. When the people he'd paid to greet him erupted in praise, his horse became startled, and Peter was thrown from it into a large pile of livestock manure. As he rose from the rubbish and tried to clean himself up, Peter expected the peasants to be mortified at the offense to his dignity. Instead, he looked up to see them cackling with glee at the fact that some big shot had been taken down a notch.

That moment marked a point of conversion for Saint Peter. For the first time, he began to take ownership of his faith and of his priesthood, seeing it not merely as a status symbol or way to gain approval with certain people but as an opportunity to connect people with the sacraments. He repeatedly refused further offers to advance in the royal courts, choosing instead to move his ministry to the fringes of society, reaching out to the poor and marginalized, especially fisherman and dock workers. As such, he shows us that no matter how nominally Catholic you've been, there's always the opportunity to take your "official" faith and make it personal to change your life and impact others.

MEMORY VERSE

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 3:14–15).

"Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them'" (Ecclesiastes 12:1).

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

Faith

"Faith is a personal act—the free response of the human person to the initiative of God....But faith is not an isolated act. No one can believe alone, just as no one can live alone....The believer has received faith from others and should hand it on to others....Each believer is thus a link in the great chain of believers" (CCC 166).

Have you endeavored to hand on the faith to anyone? To whom and how so?

How comfortable are you with speaking to others about your faith?

How do you actively support other believers?

EXTRA CREDIT

Practical Steps Toward Owning Your College Faith

- Read great works of classic Catholic spirituality, such as some of the ones suggested at the end of this chapter. See if some of the Catholics you know on campus would be interested in participating in a discussion group based on these texts. If you don't have the time or patience for that, seek out an online message board where a conversation about matters of faith is taking place and join the discussion.
- In addition to finding an on-campus support system where you can sort out answers to your tough questions about the Church, consider signing up on an apologetics website like catholic.com or phatmass.com. Both of these sites have an open-source Q&A board where

your questions can get responses from expert apologists as well as lay Catholics who are looking to settle the same issues you are.

- Find a patron saint whose life or writings you particularly connect with, and develop a relationship with this saint through prayer and study. Carry a medal or holy card of that saint with you, and have recourse to this heavenly intercessor as you face the everyday challenges to your faith.

SUGGESTED READING

In each chapter we provide a list of books you might want to pick up in the beginning stages of trying to take personal ownership of your faith related to the topic discussed in the chapter.

- *Theology for Beginners* by F. J. Sheed. A practical step-by-step guide through some of the most essential tenets of Catholicism. Sheed balances depth and clarity in a way that even a casual reader can appreciate. A must read for anyone who wants to get to the heart of what we believe as Catholics and why.
- *Mere Christianity* by C. S. Lewis. Lewis was not a Catholic, which he freely admits in the opening paragraphs of his book. However, his defense of why there is a God and why that God is the author of Christianity is unparalleled among Christian classical writers. This is one of those books that is worth reading once a year to remind yourself of the importance of being Christian.
- *Orthodoxy* by G. K. Chesterton. Chesterton wrote this book well over a decade before converting to Catholicism from the Church of England, but his mystical view of the world as viewed through the lens of Christianity has assisted a number of lukewarm Christians to get excited about their faith. His offbeat, witty, outside-the-box understanding of what it means to be Christian has opened the door for many Catholics to joyfully explore the depth of their faith.

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for inspiring my forebears in the faith to give me the gift of Christian creed, and especially for _____, who in particular has helped shape me as a believer. Aid me in taking the initiative to mature as a young-adult Catholic, seek eternal truth, and make you the center of my college experience. Give me the intellect, humility, and charity necessary to proclaim the Gospel, even when it is socially difficult. Put people in my life who can lead me deeper into love of you through worship, fellowship, service, and knowledge.

I ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.