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HEY CHURCH, MEET ME IN THE QUAD, AND BRING JESUS

Elizabeth Reavey

College students are a difficult bunch, aren't they; and I was one until just two years ago. However, it is my feeling that the Church is falling short in at least three areas when it comes to addressing the needs of this defiant group: good PR, understanding, and courage. First, the Catholic Church gets a lot of bad press. I'll bet students know more about priest scandals and anti-gay rhetoric from the Church than they do about its outreach programs and service work. We know Catholics are passionate about stopping abortions, but where is the passion to end war? The Church emphasizes marriage, but we hear that most of those marriages don't work! The Church is a wealthy institution, but we don't know exactly where all that money goes. The Pope sure does have nice shoes. Women cannot be priests, birth control is unacceptable, premarital sex is sinful, and it's not ok to be gay.

This is the Church that is presented to us: a list of irrefutable rules that we find outdated and out of touch. There is so much more to the Church than this, we just don't hear about it. Possible remedy: Marketing without selling out. Offer just as much good press as there already is bad available. Talk about the work the Church does, highlight its good role models, and discuss the origins of and reasons

for its philosophies. Where does all the money go? Why is Confession necessary? The point is not to "sell" Catholicism to increase numbers, but to offer students a more accurate and complete picture of the Church. At least then if they leave, it is with full knowledge.

Second, the Church, and its liaisons to the student community lack understanding of the college student. Students begin to question authority and

discover newfound freedoms, and our faith is no exception. We leave home and question the advice and ideologies of our parents. We gain the right to vote and question our political views and leaders. We steer our own education and make decisions about our future. We question our religious beliefs and those of previous generations. We care about gay rights, the wars our country wages, alleviating poverty, mending political splits, and helping those affected by disaster. We are over-

whelmed by our new power to decide things for ourselves. We would be better served by a Church that understands that despite this rebellion, many of us will gladly give our hoodie to the homeless guy on the subway.

Possible remedy: Understand your audience. Meet students where they are on their journey: questioning, searching for, and challenging their faith. Attempting to force or scare people back to the faith may only confirm their decision to leave.



Elizabeth Reavey.



Statue of Saint Ignatius, John Carroll University.

Choose wisely your college chaplain. He must act as ambassador from the Church to university students. Likewise, present opportunities to serve in ways that appeal to students. Stocking shelves at the local food bank is an important job, but students might be better served by giving their time at a drug rehab center, battered women's shelter, or an alternative spring break project. Embrace all students, no matter who they are.

Third, be not afraid. There is a lot of negative information, and additionally there are a lot of students ready to point out where the Church is wrong,

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unhelpful and hypocritical. In its reply, however, the Church lacks the courage to engage these critics through meaningful discussion. Instead, it offers silence or a brief and overused sound bite without an explanation. Some might worry that such discussions will legitimize the opposing views or concede to criticism. Many criticisms *are* valid, however, and the unfounded ones would be better dispelled with good information than with silence.

Possible remedy: Have courage. Give students the space and safety to voice their opinions through debate, lectures, and open forum. Invite Church experts to offer the Catholic point of view during debates and lectures, especially if the topic is not obviously religious. Listen to the gripes and grievances. Have courage to enter into that difficult discussion. While much can be done to improve the relationship between the Church and college

students, I offer these suggestions in order to first build a mutual respect between the two: good PR, understanding and courage. ■

Elizabeth Reavey has a BA in Spanish from Saint Peter's College and recently received her MA in diplomacy and international relations from Seton Hall University. She is currently travelling throughout Latin America, writing freelance articles for the Washington, DC, based think tank, Council on Hemispheric Affairs. Website: Mexigonia weekly.