

Helping Catholic Students Remain Catholic in a Setting of Nietzsche and Beer Pong



Christopher Capozziello for The New York Times

Dr. Leo M. Cooney Jr. mentored Marysa Leya, a graduating senior at Yale University, through the Esteem program.

By [SAMUEL G. FREEDMAN](#)

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NEW HAVEN — When she graduated four years ago as the valedictorian of a Catholic high school in Chicago, Marysa Leya received a present from her biology teacher. It was a hand-painted crucifix, intended for her college dorm room, with a note from him on the back urging her: “Be sure to stay as grounded and awesome as you are now.”

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Before leaving the Midwest for Yale University here, Ms. Leya also got some parting advice from her grandmother. “Don’t lose your faith,” Ms. Leya, 22, recalls being told, “out there on that liberal East Coast.”

In their divergent ways, Ms. Leya’s teacher and grandmother were expressing the conventional wisdom about religious young people heading off to college. Exposed to Nietzsche, Hitchens, co-ed dorms and beer pong, such students are almost expected to stray. Just as surely, the standard thinking goes, their adult lives of marriage and parenthood will bring them back to observance.

Things didn’t work out quite that way for Ms. Leya. In her four years at Yale, which culminate in commencement this weekend, she never missed a Sunday Mass and joined in weekly discussions of scripture. As a typical underachieving Yalie, she also drew cartoons for the student newspaper, captained the club tennis team, participated in a Polish cultural society and, oh by the way, earned her way into Northwestern’s medical school with a 3.78 grade point average as a biology major.

For all that, perhaps because of all that, Ms. Leya has also become part of a nationwide pilot program designed to keep actively Catholic college students just as actively Catholic after the last mortarboard has tumbled to earth. The program, [Esteem](#), has operated from the contrarian premise that a college graduate

who is suddenly reduced to being the young stranger in a new parish may well grow distant or even alienated from Catholicism.

“I can’t imagine shirking my faith,” Ms. Leya said in an interview this week at St. Thomas More, the Catholic chapel and center at Yale, “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?”

For Ms. Leya, like about 70 other students on six campuses, Esteem has provided intensive education in the Catholic practice, especially the role of laity, and a handpicked mentor who combines professional success with religious devotion. In Ms. Leya’s case, he is Dr. Leo M. Cooney Jr., a professor of geriatric medicine in Yale’s medical school, and, as important, a veteran of his own spiritual walkabout.

“We wanted people who were living out a life of faith that might have struggles,” said Kathleen A. Byrnes, a chaplain at St. Thomas More who is on Esteem’s executive team. “Not someone with all the answers.”

Esteem began, in fact, with a question. Every fall, the chaplains at St. Thomas More would welcome back alumni for the religious ritual known as the Harvard-Yale game. Invariably, those recent graduates delivered similar reports of Catholic life after Yale: stultifying parishes, aging congregations, irrelevant homilies, all resulting in a drift away. So what could be done?

A series of meetings by three people in 2004 — Geoffrey T. Boisi, a Wall Street executive active in philanthropy; Kerry Robinson, the development director at St. Thomas More; and the Rev. Robert L. Beloin, the church’s pastor — led to the initial notion of Esteem. A \$25,000 grant from the church paid for a planning conference and development of a business plan.

Then, with a donation of \$102,000 from an unidentified corporation, Esteem set up its pilot program for the 2010-11 academic year. Under the aegis of a national organization of Catholic executives, the [National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management](#), Esteem recruited students and mentors on campuses that included elite private schools (Stanford, Yale), public universities (Michigan State, Ohio State, U.C.L.A.) and one Catholic institution (Sacred Heart in Fairfield, Conn.).

Yet what all the planning comes down to, in a certain sense, is the hour each week when Ms. Leya and Dr. Cooney get together, and the chemistry that Esteem’s founders hope will emerge between them.

Dr. Cooney’s own trajectory, decades before Esteem was devised, ratifies its viewpoint. The third of 11 children in an Irish-American family, the product of Catholic education from kindergarten through college, he had many assumptions jolted when he started medical school at Yale.

To be immersed in biological science was, for him, to be confronted with an alternative system for the world than divine creation and oversight. His ultimate specialty, working with elderly patients nearing death, shook his belief in an afterlife. And such doubt seemed to him the disqualifier of faith.

Only in the last dozen years, since being introduced to St. Thomas More by a student, has he resumed regular observance, becoming more deeply involved than ever. What drew him back more than anything, he said, was Father Beloin’s message “that doubting is encouraged, that it’s part of the journey.”

Still, when Ms. Byrnes approached him about being a mentor to Ms. Leya, he asked, “What can I do?” Teaching medical students how to conduct muscle exams? That he could do. Modeling faith in action? That was getting into sin-of-pride territory.

Still, in his self-effacing way, Dr. Cooney shared what he could with Ms. Leya. He told her about the rough transition from college, with its built-in community, to the medical education’s regimen of long hours, less socializing, maybe a different hospital in a different city for your residency, then internship, then fellowship.

They talked, in a pragmatic way, about the parishes near Northwestern’s medical campus in Chicago, and the university’s Catholic center. More philosophically, Dr. Cooney reminded his protégée to find time amid the pressure to stop and reflect, to keep looking for a base, to see Catholicism as a means to an end: connection to a community.

As for Ms. Leya, she expects to attend her last Mass as a Yale on Sunday. The chaplains have already asked that she lead the worshipers in a reading from Peter. In it, the apostle asks of the believers what Esteem has asked of her, to “let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.”

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This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: May 23, 2011

The On Religion column on Saturday, about a nationwide pilot program intended to keep actively Catholic college students just as actively Catholic after graduation, misspelled the surname of a Wall Street executive active in philanthropy, who was one of three people whose meetings in 2004 led to the initial notion of the program. He is Geoffrey T. Boisi, not Biosi. The article also misstated the organization under whose aegis the pilot program was begun for the 2010-2011 academic year. It is the National Leadership Roundtable on Church Management, not the National Leadership Council on Church Management.

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