Lambs to the slaughter: Catholic students at secular colleges

[**Anthony Esolen**](https://journal.newmansociety.org/authors/anthony-esolen) / November 28, 2017[CATHOLIC IDENTITY](https://journal.newmansociety.org/category/catholic-identity/) / [HIGHER ED](https://journal.newmansociety.org/category/higher-ed/)

The problem with secular and pseudo-Catholic colleges is not only what students learn there, but what they never get a chance to learn

“Give me the imagination,” says Satan, “and you can have all the rest.”

[A recent article in *The Catholic Digest*](http://www.catholicdigest.com/from-the-magazine/college-guide/201701-07can-you-keep-your-faith-in-college/) says that you can keep your faith at a secular college, which is true enough in a trivial sense. It’s not a sure thing that you will lose it, just as it is not a sure thing that if you go out on the sea alone on a boat, without the slightest knowledge of sailing, you will drown, or that if you enter the lions’ den at the zoo, you will be mauled. Yes, let’s grant the point. Anything can happen.

I’m choosing my analogies advisedly. The author identifies two threats to your faith at such a place: the aggressively secular professors and the debauches. If only it were so; yet she does not discern just what the character of even those threats are, and that leaves her utterly naive as to what is actually going on for most students at Land Grant State or St. Eustaby Catholic College.

The typical young person, Catholic or otherwise, enters college with a yawning and tempestuous abyss where firm land, a home, and a cathedral should have been. I speak of the imagination. Only a small fraction of my freshmen at Providence College, where I taught for 27 years before I landed at a haven of beauty and sanity, [Thomas More College](http://www.thomasmorecollege.edu/blog/2017/05/04/anthony-esolen-joins-tmc-faculty/), could recognize the mere *names*of the great English poets: Chaucer, Milton, Wordsworth, Keats, Browning.

Alfred Tennyson, whose “[Ulysses](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45392/ulysses)” and [*The Idylls of the King*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Idylls_of_the_King) were once high mountains in the imaginative and spiritual worlds of young people in English-speaking nations, might as well have been an Egyptian priest writing in hieroglyphics on the wall of a tomb 4,000 years ago. Their imaginations, alas, are a jumble of bad “young adult fiction,” semi-pornographic movies, music to fornicate by, and television shows that are cynical and sentimental at once. It isn’t, if we should limit ourselves to works produced within still living memory, [*The Power and the Glory*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Power_and_the_Glory)*,*[*How Green Was My Valley*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_Green_Was_My_Valley)*,*[*The Song of the Carmelites*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dialogues_of_the_Carmelites)*,*and that series of Greek tragedies and Christian morality plays, [*The Twilight Zone*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Twilight_Zone)*,*let alone the televised homilies of Bishop Sheen.

So they are thin and pale and rickety to begin with, and we set them on the sea against the powers, who will toss them with tale after tale that tell lies about the human condition. First come bigoted anti-Christian parables like [*The Handmaid’s Tale*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Handmaid%27s_Tale)*.*Wretched enough, and then you must contend with villains made into heroes, like the pederast Harvey Milk, heroes made into villains, like [St. Junipero Serra](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jun%C3%ADpero_Serra), and titans of Christian civilization, like Shakespeare, twisted inside-out and made to march in a gay pride parade, or to cringe in the corner while a pinched little feminist plies the whip.

Against histories that never were and stories that seduce and lie, what defense do the young people have? Their attendance at Mass for 18 years? Let’s be honest. God sends us graces in the sacraments, and they have a power which no one of us may dare to circumscribe. But God does not recommend therefore that we be stupid. We are to be as wise as serpents, says the Lord, not as brainless as pigeons.

What will the young people have heard at Mass, or what will they have seen in a modern anesthetic church? Niceness, self-celebration; little about the terrible and invigorating battle that will end only when this old earth is reduced to cinders. They will not hear, in the ears of their minds, the brave and honest cry of the poet of “Abide with Me,” or the world-defying clarion of “Lo, He Comes.” They will have egotism, presumption, political posturing, Lady Sentimentality, musical smiley faces, and pink icing. Pigeons, against hawks. Or lions.

If the young people end their day with evening prayer, they will hear that the devil prowls about the world like a roaring lion, seeking whom to devour. They do *not*end their day with evening prayer. They end it in the exhaustion of a late-night cram session, chatter with friends, or a debauch. Thus prepared, they rise up the next morning to confront professors who either despise their faith or, worse, who simply take it for granted that the faith has nothing to say about anything important in life.

It is a quaint hobby, like needlepoint. The young Christian, having been bloodied at night against the lions of an evil campus culture—and the author herself confesses that she was often worsted in that fight—falls out of bed the next morning, sometimes alone, girds himself in slovenly clothing, does not forget to pray so much as it never occurs to him to do so, and limps off to a class whose professor is ravenous for souls. All the professor needs to do, most of the time, is to summon up an imaginative world to fascinate the victim, and the battle is over.

And what is all of this for? Why should you finance such a place, plunging yourself five fathoms deep in debt, contributing in one year 10 or 20 times as much to the educational arm of Satan Incorporated as you do to your parish church? What do you get from it? *The Catholic Digest* author does not address the point because, I fear, she does not know what she has missed. She has been led through the whorehouses of Paris, and she has come through it with her faith still breathing. I thank God for that. But why should you give $50,000 to the whorehouse? Were there no other places to go?

For the problem with the college is not only what students learn there, but what they never get a chance to learn. Every hour you spend in the whorehouse is an hour *not spent somewhere else:*in the hills along the Loire, among farm folk if there are still such, singing songs their grandparents sang, or in the cathedral of Notre-Dame, surrounded by the stories of the saints of God. Their hands are not being trained for spiritual warfare; their voices are not being trained for the songs of the soldier in a fighting Church.

They may have read a good book here and there, and sometimes under the direction of a teacher who is not unremittingly hostile to the faith. There are even faithful professors everywhere among the pagans, sometimes as many as three or four against a hundred. And there are groups of faithful Catholics, too, banding together for mutual support and instruction. It is better for you to join such a group *in partibus hostilibus*than to have your faith spinal-tapped by pleasant semi-Catholics at St. Eustaby. But do not underestimate the threat.

Nor underestimate what you may be missing. This semester at Thomas More College, I am teaching a course called *Coram Angelis,*“In the Presence of the Angels,” one in the sequence of courses required of all students. It is both an introduction to poetry, considered in all cultures but ours to be the noblest of human arts, whereof young people have been woefully deprived, and an application of the insights of poetry to the matter of Christian prayer, so that to ask why we pray and sing is also to ask what language is and what it is ultimately for.

Imagine the enrichment there. Imagine that combination of linguistic, philosophical, and theological acumen, with the power of story and the music of verse. The students will leave with imaginations armed as with triple steel, yet dynamic, potent, ready to take in hand the matter of the world and fashion with it deeds and works of beauty, to the greater glory of God.
Survival is not the aim. Victory is.



**ANTHONY ESOLEN is professor of English Renaissance and classical literature at Thomas More College of Liberal Arts in Merrimack, N.H. He is a prolific author and has translated several epic poems of the West. He is a graduate of Princeton and the University of North Carolina. He is on the advisory board of the Catholic Education Resource Center.**