

Visit to the Campus Ministry Program at Ave Maria University in Florida, USA

By Joseph G. Healey

Two Maryknoll priest friends of mine and I visited the Campus Ministry Program at [Ave Maria University](#), a Catholic university in Ave Maria, Florida, USA on Friday, 24 March, 2023. The main purpose was to learn about a Model of Campus Ministry that has not been in our [Small Christian Communities](#) (SCCs) Research so far – coming from the conservative, traditional, devotional side of the Catholic Church. This is part of “deeper listening” to other views and experiences in the “[Synodal Process](#).”¹

The university website states:

At Ave Maria University, we are proud of our Catholic identity and we are committed to learning, teaching and serving according to the faith. Ave Maria University was established in 2003 as a Catholic University according to the guidelines of the *Code of Canon Law* by the Most Rev. Frank J. Dewane, Bishop of the Diocese of Venice in Florida. The recognition of Ave Maria University as a Catholic University is granted upon the university’s commitment to continue to be guided by the teachings of the Catholic Church and faithfulness to the apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*.

Ave Maria University began as a dream in the mind of our founder, Tom S. Monaghan, to restore Catholic higher education amid an age of secularism, progressivism and even doctrinal divergence in Catholic institutions. The goal of AMU was simple: to build the foundation of a truly Catholic university that would form future generations of truly Catholic men and women faithful to the Magisterium of the Church.

The Campus Ministry Page states:

The Catholic Faith is the heart and soul of Ave Maria University, and we will do everything possible to help our students become the next generation of great saints! At AMU you’ll nourish and vivify your Catholic life with access to daily mass, confession, spiritual direction, daily rosary and so much more. Form your mind, build lasting friendships and enliven your faith at AMU!

¹ Alloys Nyakundi who is involved in campus ministry in Kenya says: “We must understand the different models different universities use in their ministry.”

At AMU, our students' spiritual welfare is our top priority. The Holy Eucharist and the Sacrament of Confession² were given to us by Our Lord so that we may stay close to him and save our souls. That's why we ensure that as a student at AMU, you'll be able to attend daily Mass and frequent confession as often as you like.

We were warmly received on the campus by both students and staff. Upon arriving we asked two students – one young man and one young woman – the location of the Campus Ministry Office. They both knew immediately and gave us clear directions. We wonder if we would arrive on campuses like Notre Dame and Georgetown would the students have answered so readily and clearly.

In chatting with the students I always like to talk about sports. This is one way of engaging them about something they like. Right now the state of Florida has two teams in the 2023 Men's College Basketball Final Four – Miami and Florida Atlantic University.

We participated in the 12 Noon Mass at Ave Maria Catholic Parish that adjoins the campus. Of the 150 persons in the congregation around 50 were students.

We found the Campus Ministry Program well organized. We had an interview with Ms. Kerry Estes, Director of Mission Outreach. She was very helpful and explained the following:

1. Ave Maria has 1,300 students, 80 % Catholics. They are divided into 17 Residence Halls by gender. Morning and Evening Prayers are organized by the students. Mainly the Rosary and devotional prayers. Emphasis on *Bible Study*. Some *Lectio Divina* (lectionary based using the *Gospel* of the following Sunday). Some Zoom gatherings during Covid.
2. Rather than Campus Ministry being coordinated by one Religious Congregation or Society, Ave Maria prefers a mix of the priest staff – presently a Franciscan, a Benedictine and a diocesan priest.
3. Emphasis on a close relationship with Jesus Christ. In the Campus Ministry Lounge the coasters on the beverage counter have the words: "I can do all things through/in Christ who strengthens me" (*Philippians* 4: 13).³ This is part of the strong Faith Formation Priority of the university. This priority carries over to the alumni who continue to network with other original members of their Residence Hall.

² The new name is the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

³ This is a key Scripture text in our Campus Ministry Programs in Eastern Africa.

4. When asked about Immersion Trips⁴ Kerry described Ave Maria University Study Programs in Europe and Cultural Programs in Europe.
5. When asked about the [2021 – 2024 “Synodal Process”](#) in the Catholic Church Kerry explained that the Ave Maria University students’ views were sent to Venice Diocese in Florida and then she has heard nothing more.

We ran out of time but would like to have asked:

1. How many international students are at Ave Maria University?
2. From the graduates how many have become priests, religious brothers, religious sisters or vowed laypeople.

We visited the Canizaro Library. We found very few [Orbis Books](#). We gave some Orbis Books on SCCs to the Acquisitions Librarian. She said that she had never heard of Orbis Books, but did know of Maryknoll through her connections to the Franciscans.

Overall an enjoyable learning experience.

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⁴ The more common meaning of Immersion Trips is “domestic and international opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to explore what it means to live a *faith* that does justice and to deepen their relationships with God.”