

Pastoral Care for University Students

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Iforgive you all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” That is God’s living voice. It is a Word from outside in. It is Absolution.

As a college student, I loved that sentence of the liturgy. I wanted to hear it and knew I needed it. I went to the Divine Service—admittedly more out of habit than honest devotion—but never regretted hearing the Absolution again, even when I just stumbled into it.

I don’t boast that I had a greater sensitivity to sin or a heightened intuition of my identity as a baptized child of God than anyone else. I didn’t. In fact, my outward behavior would likely make a strong case that I cared little for the things of God. Still, I felt some of my sin and shame and occasionally carried a stricken conscience. I was a college student after all. And that sentence from the Small Catechism—“from the pastor as from God Himself”—became increasingly precious.

On the college campus today, students desperately need this same ministry of our Lord’s Absolution wherein God removes sin. But students come from so many different backgrounds and often don’t believe they need this divine sentence—this merciful judgment—at all. This is the result of too much static on campus, so many demands, so many options, so many flavors, so much emotion, entertainment, and theatrics. And worst of all, it is the result of too much unbelief.

Admittedly, one can hardly find a typical student on campus. But what can be found is the *Lutheran-from-birth* who has never gone to any church except the one she attended every week back home. She finds that a convenient excuse to keep herself from God’s presence and His speaking and giving on Sunday morning. She’s not as well catechized as her confirmation certificate might lead you to believe.

One can also find the student who got confirmed in grade school and hasn’t been to worship except for family Christmas. He’s a business major now, and mom thinks he’s doing well since he has a job lined up after graduation. His proud mom is wrong. His faith eroded. His Baptism is long forgotten. He’s just lost and stumbling

through life.

The painfully shy girl with the party-prone roommate is also there. She's not making friends and is terribly homesick and alone, so paralyzed with social fear that she doesn't connect with anyone, much less the local congregation around the Lord's altar.

Or consider the student who loves the fun high school youth group feel of one of the hip parachurch groups on campus, but under their influence, she begins to doubt her standing before God since she was baptized as an infant (which they claim doesn't count) and never made an adult decision for Jesus. Lured by an emotional plea to finally be a real Christian, she is being led away from the ancient faith of the catechism and Christ's work on the cross to the American religious ideal of having faith in her faith.

Think upon the student on the brink of despair—desperate, worn down with too much weight on him, and suffering from too many expectations. He just dropped another class and doesn't think he can stay in his major. Now he is left to wonder what his future looks like since he can't do what he planned to do for the rest of his life.

Don't forget the new freshman—not as mature as he thinks—who makes use of his new so-called freedom to get stupid drunk. Repeatedly. And his laptop has settled onto Internet porn. After all, who's to judge? Who is harmed? Who will ever know?

And then there's the young woman with the break-up of her first serious relationship where sex had become pretty routine and expected. But now sin awakes, and the guilt and stain remains in the conscience.

So, welcome to college, the place where standards evolve quickly and the next big thing is already making an appearance in some prof's lecture. College: it's where abortion is just as common among Christians as it is among unbelievers; where sexual intercourse is redefined as that which scratches a natural itch, hardly considered just a matter for holy marriage anymore; and homosexuality is an empowering personal expression not only to be tolerated but accepted by all.

Now, go down to the local coffee house and dive into the bohemian banter. Talk with the articulate young man who went to Lutheran school as a kid but now tinkers with Buddhism. Greet one of the other campus pastors who insists that there are many ways to God, and Jesus is just one of them. Happily serve as the religious resource for the guy writing an English paper on Flannery O'Connor's short stories but who isn't familiar enough with the Christian faith or Baptism to make his argument. Be refreshed by the young man who is comfortable enough to ask you, "Are you a priest? My friend and I were trying to list the Ten Commandments but can't remember them all. What's after 'No other gods'?" and talk for a while. Invite him to worship and the campus Bible study. You'll likely never see him again, but who knows?

College can be a black hole, especially for the Christian. The environment and the skewed priorities take their toll. The saddest student is the one who wakes up one day and wonders how he became this aimless person he'd never thought he'd become. Students have been swallowed whole by the prevailing culture that cares nothing for an incarnate God, a God who dies and is risen, and comes with light and life for you from the font and altar. Some of these students find you. Many still avoid you. By God in His mercy, you find some. Others just float and bump into things.

To this mixed and perplexed audience and to the little congregation gathered by the Holy Spirit around sermon and Sacrament, the campus pastor proclaims and delivers the glorious things of our crucified God. The Holy Spirit creates and nurtures His Church. The lost return to the Father and are catechized in the one, true faith. One by one, sinners learn Christ and speak a sturdy "Amen" to that sentence spoken for them: "I forgive you all your sins."

These students aren't so different from people you find in any parish. It is only that certain issues are magnified and age-driven. Sin and suffering is universal. Their need is universal. But the pastor comes for each of them where they are at—all those different places—with God's Word. He is Christ on campus. He brings a divine Word of Law that reveals where all the sin is and kills the old Adam. He also gives Absolution, His other Word that creates life and restores a new man through Jesus Christ.

The entire Gospel is summed up and delivered in that Absolution. The whole Christian life of the baptized is wrapped up in those words from the outside that God speaks into sinners. Hear the pastor say it, but know that it is not his sentence. It is Christ's sentence; it is the firmest place to stand when the world and Satan are swirling fast and dangerously around you. His sentence delivers what it says in His saying it: "I forgive you all your sins in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Rev. Peter Cage (CTS 1991) was a campus pastor in Muncie, Indiana, for seventeen years and has served Saint Paul Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne, Indiana, since 2007. He also has experience as a chaplain for the Air Force Reserves.