

April 18, 2008

At University Visited by Pope, Students Find a Catholicism That's 'Not in Your Face'

By [NEELA BANERJEE](#)

WASHINGTON — When he was growing up in Hamilton, N.J., Dean Petrone went to Mass every Sunday. Now, as a 21-year-old junior at the Catholic University of America here, he never goes, Mr. Petrone says.

But the change, which he attributes largely to his being busy, reflects one of the university's strengths, he says.

"It is as religious or as Catholic as you want it to be," Mr. Petrone said Tuesday at a picnic table in front of the student center. "It's not really in your face."

Mr. Petrone's experience with Catholicism at Catholic University, where [Pope Benedict XVI](#) addressed Catholic educators Thursday evening, was echoed in interviews with more than a dozen students there this week. Most were Roman Catholic, some were not. Some Catholics said they attended Mass every week, others hardly at all.

All said Catholicism at the university, the only one founded by the nation's Catholic bishops, was an influence they sometimes welcomed and at other times strained against.

"People here are doctrinally Catholic," said Paraic Maher, a graduate student in philosophy, "but they are culturally secular."

In his speech to the educators, the pope spoke of a need for Catholic universities to emphasize their Catholicism, and though many Catholic students said their university's religious affiliation had had little to do with their decision to enroll, they also said Catholicism clearly infused academic and social life.

"I feel that there are more opportunities to do service and that there is a nicer atmosphere here than at a secular university," said Anne Chriszt, who has attended Catholic schools all her life.

"But from a theater standpoint," said Ms. Chriszt, who studies drama, "we can't put on certain plays, like 'The Vagina Monologues,' for instance, which I find kind of ridiculous. It's not as if we are condemning the church in doing the play."

While some students grumbled about a requirement that they take theology and philosophy, others said they enjoyed the inquiry encouraged in the courses.

"From the first day of class," Mr. Petrone said, "a professor will tell you that you should feel free to challenge or object."

Emily Viano, 19, who was having lunch with friends, said, "You're taught from every angle, not just the Catholic angle."

Mr. Maher, originally from Ireland, said the university's hewing to important traditions in Catholic education had drawn him here. "In the humanities there is a greater respect for what classical authors say, and there is a great respect for the classical view of man in the philosophy credits," he said. "There is an interpretation here of reason and desires in pursuit of something true, good or beautiful."

Many students said they were excited by the pope's appearance at the university, even if they did not share all his views.

"Not everyone can say that the pope came to their school," said Olivia Buthod, a senior from Tulsa, Okla. "There are certain things I like about him, and certain things no. I like his undying support of the role of art and music in the church, because as a musician that's important to me. But I'm not so orthodox about my beliefs as he is."

The impending visit led to special security precautions over the last two months, students said. Ms. Chriszt's dormitory is

adjacent to where the pope was to speak. It was searched, and students there were told that on the day of the visit they were to stay away from the windows and keep shades drawn.

As a result, Ms. Chriszt said on Tuesday, she planned to be on the lawn with thousands of others for the pope's arrival. "It's better than staying cooped up in my dark room," she said, "and staying away from the windows."

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