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Faith @ work

an occasional series of stories exploring the lives of Catholic believers in the workplace

FSU vice president: 'I'm praying for wisdom'

JULIE BETTINGER | FLORIDA CATHOLIC CORRESPONDENT

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TALLAHASSEE | Her senior year in high school, Mary Coburn was dating a guy for all the right reasons. "He played on the football team and had a really cool car," she said.

He was also very active in an evangelical youth group and she started attending some of the outings. One night, she heard the pastor make an altar call, asking all those who wanted to become "born again" to come to the front of the room. Coburn said she kept her head down, trying not to call attention to herself.

On their next date, the young man handed her a pamphlet titled, "10 Reasons Why I'm Not a Roman Catholic." The first reason was, "Because they worship Mary."

"I dramatically crumpled it up and threw it at him," she recalls. And that was the end of the relationship.

But it was the start of a new and deeper relationship with the church for Coburn. With roots firmly planted in the Catholic tradition — her father went to the University of Notre Dame, her mother St. Mary's College — she said being in the faith had been part of her identity and she had never really given it much thought.

"It was the first time anyone had ever challenged me," she said, "and I realized I had been taking my religion for granted." Coburn decided that if her former boyfriend had 10 reasons why he was not a Catholic, she had better come up with at least 10 reasons why she should be. Nearly four decades later, she's still adding to the list.

FAITH ON THE FRONTLINE

As vice president for student affairs, Coburn oversees 12 departments at Florida State University, including the career center, housing and the health center. She leads about 500 division employees who serve more than 40,000 students.

Coburn describes her job as one focused mostly on student advocacy. On a micro level, that means face-to-face meetings with students, individually and in groups. She must also stay focused on the macro, including making decisions on policies and programs related to student needs.

There are many aspects of the Catholic faith that fit perfectly with her job description — the most obvious being service.

"I cannot imagine me being in a job that does not involve service to others," she said.

Coburn also serves as the Catholic Student Union faculty adviser and said that students witness to her all the time. "Their faith is so much deeper, richer and more visible than ours was in college."

Coburn's practice of the faith has evolved over the years. Once just a Sunday Mass Catholic, during Lent one year she committed to attending one weekday Mass, too. Another Lent, she went five days a week. "I kept taking those baby steps," she said.



JULIE BETTINGER | FC

Mary Coburn talks to students at the Catholic Student Union's "Spirit Night" at the Co-Cathedral of St. Thomas More in Tallahassee.

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After accepting the vice president position four years ago, she said, “I knew it would be really daunting.” She decided to start attending 7 a.m. Mass at the Co-Cathedral of St. Thomas More five days a week year-round.

“It helps me feel balanced within myself when I’m facing students who are struggling and not always making good decisions,” she said. Attending daily Mass happened to coincide with her daughters leaving home for college, which made it more manageable.

Mass is a discipline that fits her. “I’m very much an action person; I’m not contemplative,” she said. “I don’t do the sitting still and praying thing well.”

Coburn said she faces challenges to her faith daily and she continues to seek strength through prayer and the sacraments.

In addition to Mass, she actively prays during her 30-minute walks with her husband, David, at 5:30 a.m. weekdays. They both like to exercise and there are too many demands after work. Hers involve student activities and his the business of the state — he is chief of staff for the Florida Senate.

One of the questions fellow Catholics often ask Coburn is whether she can mention God in the university setting. Although she has worked for public institutions her entire career, Coburn has never denied her faith. “I don’t advertise it, but I’m honest about it,” she said.

She recalled a few years ago pausing with a colleague before going into what they knew would be a very difficult meeting. She let out a deep sigh and said, “I’m praying for wisdom.” The colleague answered, “So am I.”

Doors like this are opened all the time, and she said that gives her an opportunity to share her faith with others, whether it’s with students or faculty.

Said Coburn, “I find myself praying for wisdom often these days.”

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