



*Students complete Catholic Christian Outreach's "popcorn" survey, the first step toward involvement with the organization.*

# HIGHER LEARNING, HIGHER POWER

**A movement among Canadian university students celebrates 20 years of evangelization**

BY PATRICK SCALISI

Prior to his encounter with Catholic Christian Outreach (CCO), Brian Bird described his faith as "very routine."

"Going to a Catholic high school, you have monthly Mass, you have penitential services for confession every couple of months — it felt really businesslike," he said. "I didn't really have a deep appreciation of the richness of the Catholic faith."

That changed when Bird, a member of Coquitlam (B.C.) Council 5540, encountered CCO during his first semester at Simon Fraser University in Burnaby. "CCO's faith studies were extremely informative for me," said Bird. "They allowed me to regain an appreciation for Scripture." Now entering his senior year, Bird feels more in touch with his faith than ever before.

This is the very goal of CCO, an evangelization movement aimed at university students. Colleges and universities are considered institutions of higher learning, but young people often leave religious questions behind when they go away to school. While many students have a lapse in faith that can last years or even a lifetime, CCO wants to

ensure that faith doesn't end at a university's front door.

## **'THE LOUDEST MUSIC AND THE BIGGEST POSTERS'**

The idea of Catholic Christian Outreach was originally conceived by André Regnier, who had a conversion experience in 1981 while attending the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. As a student, Regnier came to appreciate his faith but could not find other Catholics who shared his enthusiasm.

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"I thought I was the only Catholic who felt the way I felt," said Regnier, who is a member of Centennial Council 8008 in Ottawa, Ont.

At the request of a classmate, Regnier attended a youth rally for evangelical Christians. While Protestantism didn't hold much

appeal for him, the event itself set Regnier's heart on fire and provided an early template for CCO.

"They had a real love for Jesus," Regnier said of the rally audience. "He was real and significant and relevant in their lives. You could see it just by the way they were talking."

Regnier wanted to emulate that zeal in his own life, but didn't know of any group that could measure up to the experience. Instead, he continued to pray and attend weekly Mass, even while many of his peers moved away from their faith.

Regnier added, "I remember saying, 'God, I want to do something about this. I want to stop the bleeding. Count me in. I'm willing to do whatever it takes.'"

A solution began taking form during Regnier's fifth year at the university. Before graduation, he and his future wife, Angèle, began collaborating with their parish priest on the creation of a faith outreach program for Catholic university students. Regnier knew the program would only succeed if it were highly visible and dynamic.

"When I first started the movement, I knew that the only way we could grow is by reaching people," he explained. "We wanted to have the loudest music and the biggest posters."

After several years of planning, CCO was born in 1988. What began with four students now encompasses hundreds of people at nine universities across Canada. Today, the organization remains dedicated to its original goal. "Our main purpose was to reach out into the university, to get those Catholics who have wandered," explained Regnier.

## **'PRACTICAL TOOLS'**

Involvement with CCO begins simply. Early in the academic year, CCO staff members conduct a survey for "starving" college students. While Regnier admits that some people only show up for the free popcorn, hun-

dreds more provide contact information requesting additional information. A member of the CCO staff then contacts each respondent via telephone — not through e-mail or a form letter.

"We find that it's that personal contact, that personal invitation, that makes all the difference," Regnier said.

From there, students are invited to join CCO's faith study program, where they can learn, discuss and interact with Catholic classmates.

For Ian Anderson, CCO's invitation came at a time when his faith had fallen by the wayside. Anderson, a third-year kinesiology major at the University of Saskatchewan, said his faith had been "heartfelt, but not very practical." He added, "I hadn't had too many opportunities to put my faith into practice and make it active."

Anderson encountered CCO shortly before attending the university, and he had a desire to learn more after the academic year began. He took the program's survey and became involved with CCO's faith study group.

"CCO is so good at giving you practical tools to share your faith," said Anderson, who is a member of Mary, Mother of the Church Council 11888 in Saskatoon. "It has given me the courage to speak boldly about the faith and not worry so much about what other people are thinking."

In addition to growing in his own faith, Anderson became involved with CCO's outreach activities, including evangelical mission work. In the summer of 2007, Anderson spent four months in Vancouver promoting faith studies and sharing the Gospel. Among his tools was a small booklet titled *The Ultimate Relationship*, which CCO publishes and distributes.

Anderson calls *The Ultimate Relationship* "the single most valuable resource that CCO puts out." In it, the basic Gospel message is coupled with analogies to help readers understand fundamental Catholic truths. "It's very simple, and it's universal," explained Anderson.



*André Regnier (second from right), founder of CCO, and Jeff Lockert (second from left), president, meet with Supreme Knight Carl A. Anderson and Deputy Supreme Knight Dennis A. Savoie at the Supreme Council office Oct. 31.*

### THE CANADIAN INVASION

The Knights of Columbus are present at universities throughout Canada. Is it any wonder, then, that collaborations between the Knights and CCO have been growing for most of the organization's 20-year existence?

"The Knights always have been — on the local level — tremendous supporters and collaborators with CCO," said Jeff Lockert, president of CCO and a member of Divine Infant Council 7873 in Ottawa. "The Knights have supported students going on mission, have supported our activities financially and have helped us with promotion."

Just a few years after founding CCO, Regnier began reaching out to the Knights for support. "They did what they could to connect CCO with other councils throughout the city," he said, adding that councils donated anywhere from \$100 to \$3,000.

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The link between the two groups, though, goes beyond financial aid and moral support — it is a connection fueled by a basic love of the Church.

"The Knights of Columbus and CCO have worked together great in the past," said Anderson, who

enjoyed the Knights' hospitality during his stay in Vancouver. "Being a Knight and a CCO member, I see that the mission is really similar."

This compatibility includes, among other things, the emphasis both groups place on promoting vocations. "CCO has seen so many young men and women called to the priesthood, called to the religious life, called to marriage," said Lockert. "This is another shared value we have with the Knights of Columbus."

### THE NEXT 20 YEARS

This past October marked CCO's 20th anniversary, and the organization is looking to the future. CCO has recently unveiled a new Web site ([www.cco.ca](http://www.cco.ca)), a redesigned logo and new promotional products.

"There's a lot of different initiatives that we're doing to make people know that we've been around for 20 years and, more importantly, what we're going to do for the next 20 years," Regnier said of the anniversary celebration.

Eventually, Regnier would like to see a CCO presence at every major university in Canada — a goal that does not seem unrealistic in light of the organization's continued, exponential growth. Word of mouth has spread through two decades of alumni. Many have found that CCO still enriches their faith life and they continue to support the organization's mission in some capacity.

CCO even received praise from the Vatican following World Youth Day 2002 in Toronto. In a letter to Archbishop Thomas C. Collins, then-archbishop of Edmonton, Alta., Pope John Paul II wrote, "As members of Catholic Christian Outreach you are generously responding to that appeal [of the new evangelization] through your courage to be disciples of Jesus..." ■

Patrick Scalisi is the associate editor of *Columbia*.