

History of NFCCS at the College of New Rochelle

The National Federation of Catholic College Students had its origin in Catholic Action movements in Europe during the early twentieth century. During his papacy, Pope Pius XI (1922-39) championed the cause of Catholic Action and social justice. His encyclicals found eager readers among American Catholic college students, often the sons and daughters of immigrants who had prospered and could afford to send sons and daughters to college. Following the guidelines of the three nineteenth century Councils of Baltimore—meetings of American bishops which established the guidelines for the growing American Roman Catholic population and directed Catholics to give their children a Catholic education,—families selected a Catholic institution where the faith of the young adult would be nurtured – and preserved. Until the early 1960's Catholics were still a minority, albeit growing, in the USA, frequently subdivided into various national and ethnic subgroups, especially in urban parishes where national churches established in an immigrant neighborhood continued to draw the sons and daughters of immigrants into parochial schools. Across the country, growing Catholic college enrollments reflected the ethnic groups that had settled in the area. In the first half of the 20th century, Catholic college students were frequently the first generation of their family to have the possibility of higher education.

Internationally, the Bolshevik Revolution and religious repression in Russia with the establishment of “godless” atheism and—and the advent of the Communist state, suppression of the Church in Mexico in the 1920's and attacks on clergy and religious during the Spanish Civil War were of grave concern to Catholics. Catholics had again become a target of political factions. This “Terrible Triangle” as well as the global Depression had caught the attention of persons of faith world-wide after the Great War in Europe ended in 1918.

In 1921, Pax Romana (Latin for Roman Peace—the period of peace in the Roman Empire) was founded; it was an international peace organization for Catholic university students. Catholic Action would be encouraged by the Ursuline nuns, a religious order of women founded in 1535 which became known for the education of women and girls. The nuns at The College of New Rochelle belonged to the international Ursulines of the Roman Union. As such, there were strong links with Ursuline schools world-wide, particularly in Europe and common educational goals. *Serviam* (“I will serve) was a motto given to all Ursuline students worldwide in 1931 in response to papal pleas for Catholic action among youths.

American Catholic colleges had a mission to educate their students well as *both* Americans *and* Catholics with both civic and religious involvement as one outcome of the college degree. Consequently, Catholic colleges provided both religious and secular extracurricular activities for their students: Sodality, choir, sports, language clubs, debate teams, clubs for various majors, service organizations, dramatics, student publications, student government, etc. the goal of integrating faith with social action was an underpinning of extracurricular activities at many colleges. With few exceptions, Catholic colleges were single sex institutions and inter collegiate organizations provided opportunities for young Catholics to meet, work together, and socialize—perhaps marry. Newman clubs at secular private and public colleges and

universities provided Catholic sacraments, lectures, spiritual support, and education to students. Their chaplains often coordinated activities with local Catholic colleges.

At the College of New Rochelle

At the College of New Rochelle student service organizations had begun to form in the 1920's—the Mission Club which supported Ursuline missions in the US and abroad, Doctors' Daughters (provide medical supplies) and the Sodality incorporated service to the needy as part of its mission. The popular Debate Club frequently selected themes of peace and social justice for their intercollegiate debates. The long-time Ursuline goal of educating College of New Rochelle students to be articulate women of faith, service, and action was clear.

In 1937, Dr. James Eagan, a new professor of history at CNR established a Peace Group. Peace activists on college campuses urged students to study the causes of war. The winds of war in Europe were blowing harder and American college students debated their role in assisting their Britain and France. Articles in *Tatler*, the student newspaper, featured information about peace activities and lecturers were invited to campus to explore the issue with students. Dorothy Day, a well known pacifist and founder of *The Catholic Worker* addressed CNR students several times. Additionally, Catholic speakers like the Harvard-educated Jesuit, John La Farge who was the editor of the American Jesuit weekly, *America* periodically addressed CNR students. La Farge would play an influential role in the future organization of NFCCS. He had a particular concern for the plight of American blacks and founded the Catholic Inter-racial League in 1940 to explore race relations. He spoke at CNR, Manhattanville, and other colleges about the injustices suffered by black Catholics and charged students to *do* something about this national shame. *America* regularly included articles about the nation's and the world's religious and political scene.

On October 24, 1937, Manhattanville College of the Sacred Heart, then located on the edge of Harlem in Manhattan hosted a meeting of ten local Catholic colleges for men and women. Staffed by the international order of the Religious of the Sacred Heart, Manhattanville's nuns like the Ursulines, were also eager to further the apostolate of Catholic action and study of social problems among their women students. At the meeting, a Manhattanville student who had attended a recent Pax Romana meeting in Paris proposed the establishment of a "National Federation of Catholic College Students" for American Catholic college students. Four students from CNR and an alumna attended. Interest in the organization grew, and it was formally instituted in 1938. The CNR Peace Group sent members to the newly formed NFCCS regional meetings

By 1943, CNR was sending representatives to regional meetings in the New York-New Jersey area. Peace and interracial justice were key subjects being addressed by members at their various campuses. CNR already had a Peace Group and Interracial Group and members often joined NFCCS as well. World War II limited the ability for students to travel around their regions but at the war's end, NFCCS grew rapidly on the many women's and men's Catholic colleges in the region. In the 1950's, NFCCS began to sponsor low cost student trips abroad or Easter break trips to Bermuda—popular among students who could

afford them—and a good way to meet other Catholic college students—or just have fun! A 1956 graduate recalled a NFCCS trip to Europe accompanied by two priest chaperones--13 countries by bus for \$1,000—"we had a blast!" Eventually, each campus had one or several moderators including the deans of students who met annually. Usually they were members of the religious congregation that sponsored the college.

Rebuilding the family as the core unit of American Catholic society was seen as a major priority in the post Depression, post World War II era. Each college in the NFCCS New York New Jersey Region was responsible for a particular commission to promote. The College of New Rochelle became the regional headquarters of the Family Life Commission. Members published brochures on the subject. The family as the basic unit of society and of the Church was to be promoted and enriched by faith and practice. By 1950, CNR's Family Life Commission was publishing a newsletter, *Cana Notes* which included articles on the national scene of the Family Life Commission, a family photo contest featuring a family photo and information about the family, a Christmas and Easter article. This newsletter became *Family Life Notes* in 1953 which reported on the NCCS annual national meeting and the Family Life Commission as well as brief articles about marriage and the family, book reviews and the Christian tradition of blessing of an engaged couple and other practices for a Catholic home. Practical advice about readiness for marriage in terms of maturity and economics were included locally, CNR offered student speakers to local parishes and high schools on topics like "Following the Crowd", "What makes a date?", "Going steady", "Are you ready to marry", "Do clothes make the girl?".

At the College of New Rochelle from the 1950's through the late 1960's, seniors took a required theology course on the Christian life and the sacraments with emphasis on the sacrament of marriage. Frequently, NF members were also members of YCS (Young Catholic Students) and NSA (National Student Association). Colleges in the New York-New Jersey region also had smaller units of several of the commissions. This may have weakened the organization as its foci became more disparate.

In 1956, the United States was galvanized by the Hungarian uprising and its swift and violent suppression. NFCCS students took particular interest because of the long history of communist domination and the sorry situation of Catholics under the Hungarian communist regime; their cardinal archbishop had been imprisoned for years. In response, NFCCS took a strong public stance against the uprising and invited Hungarian students housed at Bard College to visit their campuses. Peace, racism, and the plight of international students studying at US colleges and universities took the attention of the NY/NJ regions' members. Speakers at regional meetings enlightened NFCCS members about issues that had not deeply touched their isolated campuses—called "ivory towers" by some critics. In conjunction with Pax Romana, funds to aid Hungarian students and to sponsor African student scholarships began.

At CNR, the Family Life Commission continued to offer a program of a Marriage Institute working with local members of the Christian Family Movement and sent its publications to all regional groups. By 1960, NFCCS members were taking a critical look at themselves and NFCCS—what is a Catholic college; what motivates a student academically? What is the student's responsibility? Does a Catholic education stifle intellectual vigor? Students questioned the quality of faculty and their teaching, the theology and philosophy curriculum, scholarship aid and finances. Unrest and criticism were in the air. Student

representatives at the annual congresses brought back to campus the more global concerns of Catholic colleges students nationwide.

Vatican II and “the times are a-changin”

In 1959, the newly elected pope, John XXII, announced a meeting of the world’s bishops and advisors that would address needed changes within the Roman Catholic Church. In the US, the Council enthused the laity and, especially Catholic college students, who were reading the new theologians, the documents being issued by the Council, and interest in a renewed Church, grew. Inter-faith dialog took a place among subjects addressed by NFCCS regions. The folk song writer, Bob Dylan sang about the “changing” times in his 1964 album describing inequities and appealing for change. The student unrest that occurred in the 1960’s world wide affected NFCCS. The eighteenth national congress of NFCCS in 1961 took as its theme: “Freedom and Responsibility in a Democratic Society”. In 1963, CNR formed the new International Student Commission with the purpose of “to alleviate some of the pressing and depressing problems faced by foreign (sic.) students...” With a large residential population of students and a few international students in each class, CNR students became aware of the difficulties faced by their classmates and new friends: language, money, morale, isolation and sought to address them.

NFCCS became progressively involved in issues like academic freedom, when some St. John’s University professors were dismissed and a well-known Jesuit was “silenced”-- no cause given. The War on Poverty, civil rights marches, voter registration, and increasingly, the Vietnam War and stirred up the passions of many students. NFCCS helped sponsor a Martin Luther King scholarship fund for admission of needy African American students (the College had only a handful of students of African heritage). In 1965, CNR sponsored a number of “Poverty Projects” to conscientize students about the issues.

While student activism rose—volunteer opportunities, lectures, anti-war marches, tutoring, student protests, etc., the growing variety of issues inspiring responses and reactions ultimately contributed to the dissolution of NFCCS. CNR students increasingly expressed deep concern about the lack of diversity they were experiencing at college and among their peers. The question of the sectarianism of NFCCS (Roman Catholic) and the relatively small but vocal-and very politically active-- colleges represented by the NSA (National Student Association --25%) was fiercely debated by interested parties. There was waning interest in continuing membership in NFCCS and also NSA. In the fall semester of 1966, the student s’ College Council voted to disaffiliate the College of New Rochelle from both organizations citing student disinterest. *Tatler* reported on the process in detail. The times were “a changing.”

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