

Presence of Jesus felt on Va. Tech drill field

by Jean Denton
of The Catholic Virginian

It was an unusual sight in the middle of the Virginia Tech drill field—a white tent with a sign on the side proclaiming, “Jesus is Here.”

It also was an unusual setting for the exposition and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament — outside, amid occasional flying footballs and students passing by, chattering with friends on their way to class.

But for anyone on the university’s drillfield during the mid-week 24-hour Eucharistic adoration on March 18-19, it couldn’t go unnoticed.

For Catholics, it was a reminder of the real presence of Christ in campus life; for others, it was an opportunity to ask questions about Catholic belief or to accept the invitation to stop and pray with fellow members of their community.

For some, it simply gave pause.

That was the intention of the Virginia Tech Newman Community (Catholic campus ministry) in having a day of adoration in a place that is considered the hub and heart of the university.

The event was held in the fourth week of Lent on the open field that traditionally has been the site of cadet maneuvers, demonstrations and other displays of campus unity.

“Praying with Jesus in a group setting here in the middle of campus reminds me how important the (Catholic) community is to me,” said Chris Roy, a freshman engineering major from Richmond. He said he was glad to be able to stop by between classes and “say hi to Jesus” and pray with him.

“It is awesome knowing that people also will be coming here in the middle of the night,” he said. “It shows how important it is to this community. It says Jesus is alive here.”

Mr. Roy, a member of Richmond's Church of the Epiphany and active in the Newman Community ministry, noted that the event also provided Catholic students a chance to explain to others about the practice of Eucharistic adoration and the Catholic belief in transubstantiation.

Chris Hitzelberger, associate director of campus ministry at Tech, said some 80 students had signed up to be present throughout specific hours of the period of adoration. He and other staff members also were available during the time to answer questions and share information about the devotion and Catholic faith in general.

For those interested, they also provided a brief handout explaining: "why we pray to God," "why we believe Jesus is in the Eucharist" and "what we do in adoration."

The last part included a simple instruction that began: "If you've never been to adoration before, what should you do? Come in and sit quietly. Close your eyes and enjoy the silence."

While staff and student ministers were ready to respond to questions, Mr. Hitzelberger noted that he occasionally heard passing students informally discussing what was happening in the tent.



Newman Community staff member Carmen DeCelle (center left) explains adoration to a student.

“I’d hear someone ask what’s that all about and then another student, who obviously was Catholic, would explain about adoration or our belief in the presence of Jesus in the sacrament,” he said.

Father David Sharland, director of Catholic campus ministry at Tech, proposed the idea of having adoration on the drillfield.

“When I first came here, it seemed that students wanted to low-key their Catholicism,” he said, explaining that he urged them to consider whether they were comfortable enough in their faith to demonstrate it more openly.

But now, he noted, they were enthusiastic about offering adoration in a prominent place where they could share their devotion to God.

“It is a chance to evangelize as well as to experience and explain the real presence of Christ,” he said.

As Zach Hoopes emerged from the tent at noontime, the junior finance major from Springfield said, “I’m dedicating my prayer today to ask that Christ will work here on the closed-hearted or those who have never heard his message.”

He explained that he has witnessed Christ working in the quiet presence of the Blessed Sacrament.

“My prayer is that those people who are separated from God will show up here and come inside even if just for a few minutes,” he said.

Mr. Hoopes said he considered the day of adoration “a beautiful display of both confirming the belief that Jesus is truly present in the Blessed Sacrament and bringing him to others.”

The Newman Community originally had hoped to hold the adoration on April 16, the anniversary of the campus shootings in 2007 that took the lives of 32 people. However, the drillfield is reserved on that day for university sponsored memorial events.

Since the tragedy, Virginia Tech has made the commitment to service a tradition of the university community. The Newman Community itself has embraced that tradition through members’ wide participation in local service ministry and alternative spring break mission trips.

So emphasizing adoration at the center of the Blacksburg campus seemed significant, especially since six Newman groups had returned from alternative spring break missions only a few days before the adoration event.

“It’s important that we serve,” said Father David. “But sometimes we can get too caught up in the service and then we’re just social workers. We need to be rooted in Christ first and foremost so that when we go out and serve, it’s because of what we do here— before the Blessed Sacrament or on Sunday in the liturgy of the Eucharist—that transforms us.”



Students pray before the Blessed Sacrament.

As for evangelization, Michael Hearndon, a member of the university provost's staff, told Mr. Hitzelberger, "You are doing a great work here," as he approached the tent and peered inside. After the two spoke briefly, Mr. Hearndon, a non-Catholic Christian, went into the tent with an instruction sheet in hand and stayed for about 10 minutes.

"I sensed a peace, a calm," he said afterward. "I read the handout about how God is present and I started thinking about the blood of Jesus and what it accomplishes for me. You see that visual in front of you and you remember his body was broken for us. I thought of what it has meant for me and what it does now and I started praying over my family."

Becoming animated as he spoke, Mr. Hearndon added, "Sometimes believers read the Holy Scriptures and think well, that was back then when people were in the presence of Jesus.

"But when I walked in this tent, I was in his presence, especially with the other brothers and sisters — all adding our faith to each others' so there was no division, because we all believe in Jesus."

Terry Wnorowski, a staff member at the VT veterinary school, had heard about the event through St. Jude Parish in Radford where she is a member and arranged to meet her husband Dennis there over their lunch hour.

“What a great way to share faith, especially in the middle of the drill field,” she said. “You walk across the field with people playing football, meeting friends, all this activity going on and then you have this time of silence with God.

“It makes it so real,” she said, smiling broadly. “It makes it so obvious: God is part of college life — he’s part of everything here. This is just beautiful.”