

Newman graduates apply their faith-based education in the real world

Newman Theological College may seem an unlikely breeding ground for gaining an impressive following on Twitter.

But Father Harrison Ayre – whose philosophical tweets have garnered more than 8,000 followers and 48,000 “likes” – credits his time at the Edmonton school of theology for helping shape those thoughts.

“Everything I do on Twitter, in terms of my social media outreach, I would honestly say has been fed because of my education,” said Ayre, who tweets as [@FrHarrison](#). “Everything I do on Twitter is really an expression of my intellectual formation from Newman.”

He earned a master of divinity degree at [Newman](#) before being ordained to the priesthood in 2015. Now a 35-year-old pastor based in Port Alberni, B.C., he is one of 31 graduates – seminarians, teachers and lay ministers – who were to receive their diplomas at Newman’s 2018 convocation ceremony on Oct. 13. Father Harrison completed a master’s degree in theology.

College president Jason West said graduates know how they will use their education, which is meant to be integrated into their lives and used as guidance on issues of theological, moral, and social importance.

“It should really be something that sparks our evangelism, that helps the faculty and our students become a centre of theological voice, especially in Western Canada.”

Father Harrison is doing just that. He started the hashtag #celibacymatters in March and it quickly began trending on Twitter.

It became such a sensation that Ayre was named one of [“Nine Priests You Need to Follow on Twitter”](#) for his “vicious takedowns of those who put down the chastity and celibacy of priests,” according to U.S.-based Catholic blog site EpicPew.com.

“Father Harrison is good at that, at being able to present ideas in a way that highlights what’s positive, without really backing down,” West said.

Ayre often takes his ideas beyond the 240-character limit of each tweet by using Twitter threads to provide insight on a particular topic. And when he learns something new, he shares it.

“I don’t like just learning things for my sake. I want to disseminate them and communicate them in a more approachable way,” said Ayre, who is also a frequent

guest on Grandin Media's online talk show, [Left Footers](#).

"Something that Newman really taught me was this idea that theology and spirituality are intimately connected with each other. So what we believe impacts how we live; how we live impacts what we believe. I see what we believe as so important that I want to communicate it properly, so that people become great saints."

Reaching out Twitter has been fruitful. Ayre has received cards in the mail and even gifts from people who follow him on Twitter. Some of his followers, mostly young people in their 20s and 30s, have renewed their Catholic faith thanks to him.



Red Deer teacher Jo-Ann Kelly says her Newman education has helped her explain complex topics to students. Thandiwe Konguavi, Grandin Media

Jo-Ann Kelly of Red Deer is also using her Newman education to help draw young people to faith.

The Grade 8 teacher is using her master's degree in religious education to answer difficult theological questions from her students. While she still does not have all the answers, Newman has given her the confidence to point her students in the right direction.

"You can't embrace questions without knowledge. You can't permeate what you don't understand," said Kelly, who converted to Catholicism 20 years ago. "I now understand the deeper, true meaning and purpose of my life."

Newman Theological College helps prepare Catholic teachers for leadership in their school districts.

But some programs, such as the EXCEL Academy for religious education, are not offered each year. This is reflected in a decline in enrolment from 232 students last year to 173 in 2018-19.

A mother of four, Kelly completed her degree while teaching full-time and she appreciated the small class sizes at Newman Theological College. She would catch up on her reading during her son's football practices, her daughter's freestyle ski training, and at hockey tournaments.

Ayre juggled pastoring a parish of 500 registered families as well as speaking and retreat engagements in Canada and the U.S. Ayre said it wasn't easy, but he would recommend a theological education at Newman "100 per cent.

"It's something that builds community, builds discussion, it builds friendship, it builds intellectual formation and ultimately, it builds up our soul to know God better, which is never a bad thing."