News



People attend Mass at Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia, April 3, 2003. (Newscom/The Washington Times/ZUMAPRESS.com)



by Heidi Schlumpf

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Editor's note: *As #MeToo took off and the goal of making women safe from sexual assault became a movement, some noticed little action in the Catholic sphere. At least in the public Catholic sphere. But in quiet conversations, private Facebook pages, online forums and discreet email chains, Catholic women were discussing their experiences inside various Catholic institutions.*

As these discussions deepened, Catholic women discovered stories of assault, harassment and abuse were common, though rarely widely shared. Groups of alumni from Catholic colleges in particular found among themselves disturbing patterns that led them to question how committed their schools are to protecting young women.

As these women search for ways to hold their schools accountable, they've turned their focus to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, the federal law that mandates procedures for handling complaints of sexual discrimination, harassment or violence.

One of those colleges is Christendom College.

Christendom College in Front Royal, Virginia, is one of a handful of U.S. colleges or universities that refuses to accept any federal funding, and thus is not required to abide by Title IX.

Christendom sees itself as a bulwark against an aggressive secular society and is committed "to the restoration of a truly Catholic culture."

But a group of Christendom alumni — including as many as 19 who allege they were raped, sexually assaulted or harassed there over the past two decades — are calling for the school to voluntarily submit to Title IX rules. They also want Christendom's president, Timothy O'Donnell, to resign because they say his administration did not adequately handle issues of sexual violence.

"In recognition of the gravity of the college's failure, the best way to promote healing on the campus is for [O'Donnell] to resign and for the board of directors to appoint new leadership," said Adele Chapline Smith, founder and president of the

Christendom Advocacy and Support Coalition (CASC).

The coalition, which now has 45 active members and more than 250 followers on Facebook, was formed after allegations about sexual assault on campus — and the university's failure to respond appropriately to them — were revealed on a Catholic blog in January.

Smith was one of the victims who agreed to tell her story because she was concerned about the welfare of current and future female students. "While I love Christendom, I'm also aware that in several areas it is deeply flawed, and I wanted that fixed," she said.

The college responded with a Jan. 18 statement from O'Donnell that accused the blog of having "misleading information and serious inaccuracies" but apologized for those who "feel they were not properly responded to concerning an alleged sexual harassment and assault."

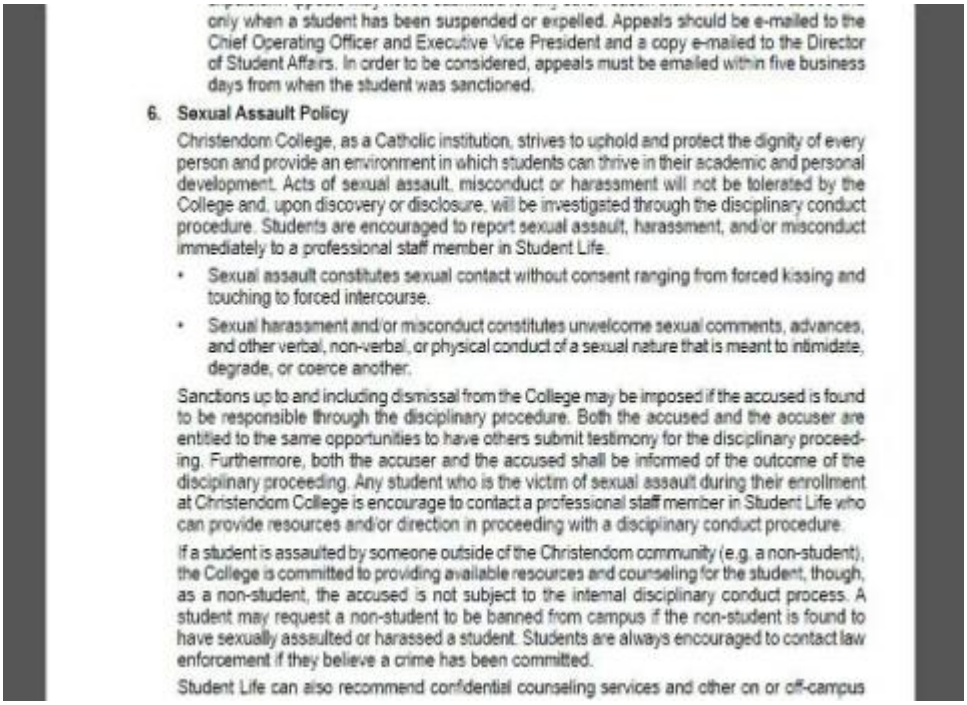
"In retrospect, the College may not have served these victims as well as we could have, and for this hurt we are truly sorry for any additional pain that this may have caused," O'Donnell said in that statement.

A second statement a week later included an even stronger apology, saying the school "failed some of our students" and thanking the blogger "for giving these women a platform to share their voices with us."

The school also invited victims to meet with Executive Vice President Ken Ferguson, accompanied by a certified trauma counselor and the victim's support people. It also announced that it had hired auditors to review campus compliance with best practices in handling cases of sexual assault and harassment.

Ferguson did not respond to NCR's attempts for comment. The college's public relations specialist also declined NCR requests for interviews with O'Donnell or other administrators "due to the sensitive nature of the issue."

In 2013, Christendom updated its student handbook to include a sexual assault and harassment policy that encourages reporting of allegations to Student Life staff for investigation through the school's disciplinary conduct procedure.



only when a student has been suspended or expelled. Appeals should be e-mailed to the Chief Operating Officer and Executive Vice President and a copy e-mailed to the Director of Student Affairs. In order to be considered, appeals must be emailed within five business days from when the student was sanctioned.

6. **Sexual Assault Policy**

Christendom College, as a Catholic institution, strives to uphold and protect the dignity of every person and provide an environment in which students can thrive in their academic and personal development. Acts of sexual assault, misconduct or harassment will not be tolerated by the College and, upon discovery or disclosure, will be investigated through the disciplinary conduct procedure. Students are encouraged to report sexual assault, harassment, and/or misconduct immediately to a professional staff member in Student Life.

- Sexual assault constitutes sexual contact without consent ranging from forced kissing and touching to forced intercourse.
- Sexual harassment and/or misconduct constitutes unwelcome sexual comments, advances, and other verbal, non-verbal, or physical conduct of a sexual nature that is meant to intimidate, degrade, or coerce another.

Sanctions up to and including dismissal from the College may be imposed if the accused is found to be responsible through the disciplinary procedure. Both the accused and the accuser are entitled to the same opportunities to have others submit testimony for the disciplinary proceeding. Furthermore, both the accuser and the accused shall be informed of the outcome of the disciplinary proceeding. Any student who is the victim of sexual assault during their enrollment at Christendom College is encourage to contact a professional staff member in Student Life who can provide resources and/or direction in proceeding with a disciplinary conduct procedure.

If a student is assaulted by someone outside of the Christendom community (e.g. a non-student), the College is committed to providing available resources and counseling for the student, though, as a non-student, the accused is not subject to the internal disciplinary conduct process. A student may request a non-student to be banned from campus if the non-student is found to have sexually assaulted or harassed a student. Students are always encouraged to contact law enforcement if they believe a crime has been committed.

Student Life can also recommend confidential counseling services and other on or off-campus

Clip from page 29 of Christendom College student handbook, found on the school's website March 20, 2018

Smith calls the changes "a very good first step," but admits she was shocked to learn, in 2011, that the school did not have such a policy in its handbook. "I was floored," said Smith, whose friends at other colleges told her they learned about consent and their rights in case of a sexual assault.

Smith, who is 27 and now lives in Rochester*, New York, chose Christendom over colleges that tout their adherence to Catholic orthodoxy, such as Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio, because of its small size, but after she was raped by her boyfriend during her sophomore year and subsequently harassed by him on campus, she came to regret being on a campus of fewer than 500 students.

"There wasn't anywhere to go," said Smith. The school had no counselor, and the nurse only worked a few hours a week, she said. When Smith told a priest in confession what had happened, he advised counseling, but without a car and the nearest town five miles away, she had no way to get there.

"I couldn't bring myself to say the word 'rape,' but I knew what happened wasn't consensual," said Smith, who nevertheless blamed herself. Overwhelmed by guilt and shame and without any mental health resources, Smith struggled and her grades plummeted, which disqualified her from a planned study-abroad trip to

Rome.

When she finally reported the rape to a dean at the school, the police were called and Smith learned that, because the incident had occurred in a state park, the legal jurisdiction fell under the park rangers. The rangers told her that without a rape kit or other evidence, she was unlikely to get a conviction.

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The school did not act on the rape accusation, but because there were witnesses to his harassment of Smith on campus, her attacker was suspended from living on campus for a year and was ordered to have no contact with Smith. She considered that a slap on the wrist, especially since a professor took the male student into his home during his suspension.

In fact, that same professor's son is also accused of sexually assaulting a Christendom student. Caroline Pollock said he forced her to have oral sex and verbally and physically abused her when she was a freshman and 18* years old.

Pollock, now 37 and living in Fredericksburg, Virginia, found little support from anyone on campus. She tried to confide in two faculty members about her "boyfriend troubles," but neither probed to ask if she had been abused.

"I'm sure they had no idea what to do, because [they thought] these sort of things don't happen at Christendom," said Pollock. The school, at the time, had a strict prohibition against even mild public displays of affection, such as holding hands or kissing.

As a senior, Pollock wrote a paper for a theology of the body class in which she revealed that she had been sexually abused by her boyfriend and had contemplated suicide. "My professor gave me an 'A' on the paper and said I had a really good understanding of God's love and healing forgiveness, but didn't say anything like, 'Are you OK? Do you still feel suicidal?' "

Bridget Randolph, who graduated in 2009, said she had little awareness of the issue while a student at Christendom, which "seems so safe and wholesome, but maybe wasn't so much under the surface."

Randolph, who works as a marketing consultant in New York, was not a victim of sexual violence but helped found the Christendom coalition to support her fellow alumnae.

Yet some other alumni have not been so supportive. Randolph has been surprised by the reaction, privately and on social media, to the revelations of sexual assault on her alma mater's campus. Some have blamed the victims, while others seemed unaware of what "consent education" would entail, she said.

> "When we hold ourselves up as a culture where there is nothing to worry about here, it can be a problem, because people are not taught about how to be safe."
>
> — Bridget Randolph, Christendom College alumna, class of 2009

"Frankly, it's disappointing to think that a fellow graduate of a college like Christendom, where so much of its mission is about creating a stronger witness in the world for Christ, would not see the importance of standing up with these women," said Randolph.

Christendom was founded in 1977 by Warren H. Carroll, a convert to Catholicism, to build a Christian society in a secular age, hence the name "Christendom," according to an online description of its history.

Christendom's orthodox Catholic identity is what attracted Randolph to the school, but in the wake of the sexual violence allegations, she wonders if some of the school administrators' and faculty members' attitudes toward gender and sexuality were helpful. Perhaps the emphasis on chastity and purity in discussions about sexuality was not enough, she said.

"There was this misperception that sexual assault or rape is a sexual crime, but really it is an act of violence," she said, adding that this misperception can lead victims to blame themselves or be reluctant to report the assault.

Also, the college's strict rules about sexuality implied that sexual assault didn't exist there, Randolph said. "When we hold ourselves up as a culture where there is nothing to worry about here, it can be a problem, because people are not taught about how to be safe," she said.

The dress code at Christendom, since updated, also seemed to suggest that it was women's responsibility to prevent sexual assault. "The onus was on you to keep boys thinking about you in a clean manner," said Pollock. "If a guy sees your shoulders and is aroused, it's your problem."

Pollock, like a large number of Christendom students, was homeschooled and thus had "very little sexual relationship education." (Christendom promotes itself to homeschooled Catholics, and there is a historical connection: The wife of Christendom's founder started Seton Home Study School, a Catholic homeschool organization.)

Although Pollock is still Catholic, she said she struggles with her faith because of how some Catholics have treated her. Later, in her 20s, when Pollock became pregnant before marriage, she was shunned by her parents' conservative Catholic friends, and some students on Christendom campus called her a "whore" when they learned about her rape allegations.

Smith still has her faith but has been disappointed by the "toxicity of certain Catholic individuals," she said. "I have to remind myself that they do not represent the Catholic faith."

Although the university has begun to implement some parts of Title IX, the coalition of rape survivors and their supporters want more, including the public reporting of statistics about sexual assault on the campus. The Clery Act has required such reporting since 1990, again for schools that receive federal funding.

The coalition also is calling for external accountability, since the school is not legally bound by Title IX. And they firmly believe that resignation of O'Donnell — who was named to the pontifical council for the family by Pope Benedict XVI — is necessary.

"Reform can't happen if the person reforming the system is the one who created it," said Randolph. "I believe he is someone of integrity and will do what's best for the college."

A petition on Change.org launched about two months ago in support of keeping O'Donnell as college president had 1,072 signatures as of March 21.



DisHonorRoll is made possible through a grant from the Media Consortium.

Some supporters of the president suggest he was unaware of the incidents. But Smith knows O'Donnell knew about her attack. "And if he didn't know about the others, that's a gross failing on his part," she said. "Either way, he wasn't doing his job."

Even O'Donnell's niece is calling for his resignation because he did not help her when she revealed domestic violence in her family of origin. Maria Ford Mochow, who graduated in 2008, said O'Donnell tried to minimize her father's verbal, emotional and physical abuse in their family when she experienced flashbacks and other psychological effects while a student at Christendom.

"He failed me both as an administrator and as an uncle," said Mochow, who calls him "a domestic violence apologist and enabler."

"It's important for people to know that even good, well-intentioned people have very backwards ideas [that] can destroy people's lives," said Mochow, who has joined the coalition. "A president of a college in the 21st century can't have those moral blind spots."

Still, other members of the coalition are optimistic that the college will respond to their demands and become a safer place for female students. Said Randolph: "We believe this is a chance for the college to become a gold standard for what this should look like."

[Heidi Schlumpf is NCR national correspondent. Her email address is hschlumpf@ncronline.org. Follow her on Twitter @HeidiSchlumpf.]

***Editor's Note:** An earlier version of this story incorrectly identified the current residence of Adele Chapline Smith. Smith lives in Rochester, New York. An earlier version of this article gave the wrong age of Caroline Pollock when she was a freshman at Christendom. Pollock was 18 years old when she was a freshman.*