Christendom College offers a traditional approach to Catholic education. It’s also thriving.

Old School
The New Cool

By Richard Poe

Pope John Paul II anointed Warren Carroll’s work with this salute during a private audience: “You have done a great work for the church.”

“It was the supreme moment of my life,” the 77-year-old founder of Christendom College recalls of his meeting with the pontiff in 1992, accompanied by Christendom President Timothy O’Donnell. “The Vicar of Christ smiled upon us. He knew who we were and what we had done. I am going to put those words on my tombstone.”

Why would the Pope concern himself with a tiny, liberal arts college in Virginia? The answer is that Christendom College is more than just a school. It is a crucible of change, inspiring Catholic educators worldwide to restore ancient tradition and return to what its followers believe is sound Catholic doctrine.

Christendom’s perseverance comes at a time when other Catholic institutions have been roiled in controversy. In April, for instance, Georgetown University agreed to a White House request to hide the gold-lettered name of Jesus under black plywood during President Barack Obama’s speech there. In May, Notre Dame University gave Obama an honorary doctor of laws degree.

In another era, Obama’s pro-choice policies would have made him unwelcome on any Catholic campus. His support for abortion rights is a direct assault on the Catholic way of life. Catholic bishops and laypeople alike protested Notre Dame’s unseemly groveling before Obama.

But many Catholic colleges no longer listen to bishops, their critics contend. Many no longer espouse or defend church teaching and are Catholic in name only, such observers say. Such schools grovel shamelessly before anyone, including President Obama, whose favor might prove useful in procuring money, power, and influence, they say.

“Every Catholic college and university which wants to retain its independence should begin by never taking one penny of government money. We have never done that,” Warren Carroll declares.

Born in Minneapolis in 1932, Carroll earned his doctorate in history from Columbia University. He married Catholic educator Anne Westhoff in 1957, and he converted to the Roman Catholic faith the following year.

Together they founded Christendom College in 1977 in an abandoned elementary school in Triangle, Va. They had $50,000 in seed money and 26 students. A $4,000 heating bill nearly doomed the school before it opened, but an unexpected check from a local donor saved it.

“God always gives you what you need, nothing more,” Carroll recalls. “He won’t allow a project he likes to fail for lack of funds.”
The Carroll's faith has kept Christendom growing for 31 years. The college moved to its 72-acre campus overlooking the Shenandoah River in 1979. In 1997, the Carroll Institute in Alexandria, which became its graduate school, offering master’s degrees in theology and catechetics. Christendom now enrolls 422 undergraduates and 12 graduate students.

Virginia's top five public universities received $126 million this year from Obama's $787-billion America Recovery and Reinvestment Act. Even so, they raised tuition 5 percent to 7 percent. Obama gave nothing to Christendom. But in June, the college received the largest donation: a $3.75 million bequest from the late Mrs. Helen Hasty Perreault. While other schools raised tuition, Christendom dropped 1 percent, to $18,120.

The Newman Guide to Choosing a Catholic College gives Christendom a glowing report, stating, “While some Catholic colleges in this Guide may match its Catholic commitment, it is unlikely that any exceeds it.”

By contrast, Notre Dame University gets a thumbs-down from The Newman Guide, published jointly by the Cardinal Newman Society and the non-denominational Intercollegiate Studies Institute of Wilmington, Del.

Christendom professors and students adhere to a very different and strict standard.

All board members and faculty are Catholic. Each year they go before the bishop of Arlington, who heads the local diocese, and vow to uphold the church's teaching authority, called the magisterium. Any faculty member who strays from church teaching can be fired.

“We attract students who know what they're getting,” says O'Donnell, who has been president since 1992.

One thing students get is a strict moral code. Men and women live in separate dormitories and may not visit each other's dorms. Predictably, mischief among students is rare. But wedding bells peal often.

About 25 percent of Christendom's students find spouses at the school, says Christendom spokesman Niall O'Donnell.

Warren Carroll stepped down as president of Christendom in 1985, serving as chairman of the history department until his retirement in 2002. He still teaches history classes once a month but now devotes most of his time to completing the final tome of his six-volume history of Christian civilization.

Carroll believes that the seeds he and his wife planted have taken root. “I regard Christendom College as a model for Catholic education, not only in America but throughout the world.” Carroll tells Newsmax.

Among those colleges following Christendom’s example, Carroll mentions the University of Steubenville in Ohio, Ave Maria College in Florida, Southern Catholic College in Georgia, and Campion College in Australia.

“They’re teaching orthodox Catholic truth,” he says. “I do believe the new orthodox Catholic colleges will supplant the others.”