

This school sits perched on heights of excellence

Gregory Kane

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THE STORY goes that the land on which Mount de Sales Academy sits in Catonsville is the highest point in Baltimore County -- so high that if you stand on the front steps and cast your gaze southeast, you'll clearly see the Key Bridge.

Now Mount de Sales sits near the top of all Roman Catholic schools in the country. Last month, the 152-year-old academy was named one of the Catholic High School Honor Roll's 50 best secondary schools in America. Last week, faculty and students at Mount de Sales were still -- oh, what's the word here? Ecstatic? Giddy? Proud? All of those and much more.

"It kind of shocked me," said Megan Kunkel, a 14-year-old freshman at the academy. "I was really surprised, but proud at the same time."

Charles Evans has been teaching 16 years at the all-girls school.

"I was honored and dumbfounded," Evans said. "Of course, I thought we deserved it. This is a very special school. It's soundly traditional and soundly Catholic. I'm very much at ease here."

It may have been Mount de Sales' "sound, traditional Catholicism" that helped the school become one of the top 50. The school's principal, Sister Elizabeth Anne Allen, explained the three criteria used for naming schools to the honor roll.

"They were academic excellence, Catholic identity and civic education," Allen said. "We felt those categories matched our strengths here."

Academic excellence was determined by the average SAT scores at Mount de Sales, the number of Advanced Placement courses offered and the percentage of students who enroll in college. Judges from the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty, which developed the honor roll as an independent project, then looked at the school's curriculum, textbooks, availability of sacraments and retreats, and opportunities for spiritual growth as part of the religious identity component.

Judges then considered the school's government courses and the number of girls in community outreach programs to determine the level of civic education. Allen gave as an example of community outreach those Mount de Sales girls who volunteered to testify in [Annapolis](#) on the issue of parents being notified when their underage daughters seek abortions. It seems some young ladies at the academy have detected the great liberal disconnect on abortion: It's a woman's right that liberals want extended to girls, and they want that right to include girls not telling their parents.

"One of the girls said, 'My mother had to sign a permission slip for me to be here,'" Allen recalled. Such things do, indeed, solidify a Catholic school's Catholic identity, even if the girls weren't wearing their Mount de Sales uniforms during their testimony.

"We didn't want it to appear they were forced to go," Allen explained.

Good luck forcing the young ladies at this school to do anything. If the words of Kunkel and two of her schoolmates are typical of Mount de Sales students, all 462 girls are where they want to be.

"When I applied here," said 17-year-old Maureen Maselko, "I saw it was a really strong school in academics, athletics and religious values. I picked this school because I loved it. I just felt at home here. It's a strong, faith-based atmosphere." Maselko commutes to the academy from Howard County.

Kunkel, from Perry Hall, likes the school's "beauty and atmosphere." Sally Green, 16, of Catonsville went to Catholic schools from kindergarten through eighth grade and had two older sisters graduate from Mount de Sales. Green found herself in what Allen called Mount de Sales' "acceptance priority" for students: Catholic kids coming from other Catholic schools; non-Catholic kids coming from other Catholic schools; and daughters or siblings of alumnae.

Even with that priority, girls at Mount de Sales come from 64 ZIP codes and more than 70 feeder schools. They come from Laurel, Frederick, Owings Mills, [Ellicott City](#) and Columbia. The 90-plus girls who come from Carroll County almost match the 110 from Catonsville.

In Mount de Sales' Class of 2005, there are two National Merit Scholarship semifinalists and five students who received commendations. Two of the top five African-American students in the country, Allen said, are Mount de Sales students. Of the 113 girls in next year's graduating class, more than 20 have received state or national recognition for academic excellence.

Not bad for a school that the Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia started in 1852. (Another Dominican Sisters school, St. Cecilia Academy of Nashville, Tenn., also made the top 50.)

And just what you would expect from a school that still offers a course in Western Civilization (Evans teaches it) and has the guts to call it that.

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