

Dear Simcha,

I'm writing to you in the hopes of coming to an understanding of the rationale and intentions behind the recent blog posts you have published regarding Christendom College. In the spirit of full disclosure, I'm coming from the perspective of a recent alumna (2015) who is baffled and perplexed by some of the allegations leveraged against the College. I do think we can find some common ground, and I appreciate your desire to stand up for those who have suffered from sexual assaults. However, when we're talking about preventative measures to take against the rape epidemic on college campuses, we have to acknowledge that Christendom College gets more things right than most colleges in the country.

What this letter is not:

- This letter is not a defense of Christendom leadership, nor does it presuppose any intimate knowledge of the allegations made or the response from the administration. However, my direct experience with the administrative staff and leadership at Christendom has always been very positive, and based on my personal experience with them I have every confidence that the decisions were made with prudential consideration, and with the intention of acting for the good of the entire community at large.
- This letter has no intention of casting doubt on the accusations of sexual assault made. It is not my place to disbelieve these individuals or to imply that they are presenting things inaccurately.

Rather, my intention is to respond to your explicit and implicit suggestions that the culture of Christendom College facilitates sexual assault. This letter is a defense of Christendom College culture.

Your recent blog post states:

"A source close to Christendom says that people send their children to Christendom because "they've raised them in a bubble and they want that bubble to continue." She said mothers of students have told her they don't want to talk to their children about consent, because it might make them curious about sexual matters. She says that, in recent years, the male students have been given more talks and education about how to treat female students with respect and dignity, but the word "consent" is not used."

You also quote a source saying, *"A lot of their policies create an environment where stuff like this can happen, and especially where it can go unreported."*

Additionally, "In many cases, says a source close to the college, the rules regulating campus life arise from an ideology, and not from a practical understanding of student behavior. The lower echelons of the administration, those who deal directly with students, struggle with trying to convey ideas like safety and consent without subverting the founders' notions of what virtuous student life looks like."

I've heard the phrase "Christendom bubble" countless times. As a freshman I laughed at it ironically and, admittedly, with a little biting deprecation. However, my perspective on the "Cdom bubble" changed enormously after I graduated and began working for Students for Life of America, a pro-life organization that trains college students to stand up for life on campus. During the year that I worked for SFLA, I visited almost every college campus in New England, from the small, rural ones in northern VT and NH to the Ivies. My experience with college campuses and students has still not ended, as I now work at a university and have daily contact with both. Outside the "Christendom bubble," I experienced the *real* rape culture first hand. The college campus rape culture does not start and end with actual instances of

sexual assault. It is much broader. It starts from the moment a freshman walks on campus. It starts when students attend Sex Week activities, like [this one](#) at Harvard, or [this one](#) at Yale, or [this one at Brown](#). Brown, always a class act, also has a [page](#) on their student resources website about sex toys. Not to harp on Harvard (as I've seen these events at schools all over the New England area), but students at the top university in the country also have exposure to such high-class events as [Primal Scream](#) (when Harvard students gather naked in the quad and run laps in the dead of night. No, not a joke.) or can join such profoundly educational clubs such as [Harvard Munch](#), a club dedicated to promoting "kinky sex." Campus rape culture is promulgated when students are taught and encouraged to approach sex with a cavalier, experimental, and dangerously risky attitude. Sex and human sexuality is reduced to the mere experience of pleasure, a bar so low that it allows all kinds of deviant sexual acts in the name of recreation. It's a bar so low that when the natural human instinct to create rules and guidelines to regulate and understand human interactions kicks in, the best standard we can come up with is consent. Consent is the low bar standard because it allows any kind of sexual act or sexually deviant act you can imagine, at any time, in any place, for any reason, with any one. *Consent is necessary, but it is by no means sufficient.* During my time at Christendom, it's true that I never saw an infographic poster explaining consent to me. I did however, learn that *marriage* is the real standard by which sexual activities should be measured. Marriage goes beyond consent; marriage is a vow. Two people can consent to mutually use each other for their own pleasure and then walk away the next day, but in marriage people vow to put the other first, to be committed to loving that person for life, and to treat that person as an end rather than a means. The marital act and the act of rape are at two opposite ends of sexual morality. Merely consenting to sex outside of marriage is still an act of using another person – granted, with permission – but using nonetheless.

Luckily, many secular universities also have the presence of organizations that combat the ideology that sex is a free for all—organizations like the [Love and Fidelity Network](#), the [Anscombe Society](#) and the countless religious and conservative student groups on campuses across the country. For most secular colleges, these organizations and the ideas they espouse are part of the culture. At Christendom however, these ideas are the entire culture. Christendom College is one of a small handful of campuses in the country that wholeheartedly and ubiquitously promulgates the highest and most all-encompassing standard, rooted in a profound philosophical understanding of the human person. Yes, Christendom has high standards. Your piece claims that "*the rules regulating campus life arise from an ideology, and not from a practical understanding of student behavior.*" Yes, Christendom's policies are rooted in a philosophical and well-reasoned account of human nature and the ideal circumstances that facilitate human flourishing. However, Christendom has no pretenses that it is perfect, or that its students are perfect. And this recognition of the tension between the ideal standard and the reality of flawed human nature is not just talked about in discussions of original sin in theology class. One of my first memories as a freshman at Christendom is a talk that Amanda Graf, a staff member in the Student Life office, gave a talk to a group of women in one of the women's dorms. After welcoming the students back to campus, she discussed a wide variety of issues that women face in college – from mental disorders, to dealing with wounds from the past, to navigating relationships – and encouraged us to seek out help from her and the other staff members of Student Life if we ever needed help. She told us we are all broken in some way, and that her door was always open if we needed to talk. That was a recurring theme in my Christendom experience: no one is expected to be perfect, but we are expected to try. No, Christendom's policies are not unrealistic – they are a challenge. They *dare us to be great.*

So yes, Christendom kind of is like a bubble – or, more accurately, an air pocket. A pocket of fresh air offering an oasis away from the sewage of the culture at large. Popping the bubble is not the answer, and

I shudder to think of a world without Christendom. We need these last bastions of Catholic culture to fight back against all that is going wrong in the world around us.

Your blog makes the claim that Christendom's "sheltered, highly structured campus culture actually facilitates sexual assault." Please explain to me how Christendom culture promotes sexual assault. Better yet, please go write a story about Brown University. Rumor has it [their rate of sexual assault is one of the highest in the country](#).

The conversation about sexual assault on campus must be taken seriously, and as a culture we must do what we can to implement preventative measures. However, it seems to me that when approaching the situation analytically, we should look at colleges like Brown as an example of "what not to do," and colleges like Christendom – though not perfect – as a model towards which to strive.

All the best,

Jane Riccardi (Class of 2015)

I received an inundation of positive notes from the women of the Christendom College community (from both students and alumni). Their words are a testimony to the standards of truth, beauty, and goodness that run deep in the heart of the Christendom community. Here is a small sample of the 100+ notes.

I am writing to express my experiences of Christendom College's campus life. I am currently a senior and have lived on campus for the last four years. During this time I have never experienced any negative, harmful, abusive or inappropriate words, gestures or interactions from any men on campus or even in the surrounding area. On the contrary, the men of Christendom have continuously treated me with respect, kindness and true Christian charity. The friendships that I have formed at Christendom have helped me to grow as a student, woman and a Catholic.

I believe that my positive experiences here are a direct result of the dedication of the administration which actively promotes true manhood and challenges the youth to higher standards. One popular event on campus is Into the Deep, a men's group that is led by my faculty for young men, encouraging them to grow in strength, purity and virtue.

In addition to my experiences in the women's dorms, I have been able to gain insight into life in the men's dorms through my younger brother, who is currently a sophomore. My brother has formed strong male friendships with men who are kind, courteous and respectful towards all of the women on campus.

It must be always remembered that sin is present in the world because of the Fall. Even in a wonderful environment like Christendom, there is still temptation and sin. However, I made the choice to come to Christendom, even though it was expensive and far from home, because I wanted to receive an education at a college that would respect me as a young Catholic woman. My experiences here have not disappointed me.

My high school friends have told me about their experiences at my local community college, and life at Christendom is nothing like secular institutions. Here I feel safe and respected

by all of the men, women, faculty and staff on campus. As I prepare to graduate, I look back on my years here as some of the best of my life. I am so blessed to be a part of this college!

Rachel Gerring

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My name is Colleen Beebe and I attended Christendom from 2010-2014. My time at Christendom was the most important time in my life. Christendom provided a VERY safe environment for me to grow and flourish as a strong and willful woman. I was treated with the utmost dignity by faculty, staff, and students. Christendom taught me the value of true friendship and provided the best education I can ever imagine. I would not be the woman I am today without Christendom College. This college encouraged me to live a life that was whole and free from fear, free to be who I was made to be in the eyes of God. Every person who attends Christendom College is broken because every human is broken, but the faculty and staff both try to fortify the students in faith and lovingly bring them to the Divine Physician in all that they do. They worked tirelessly to bring peace, love, and support to myself, friends, and to many others before me. While the administration is flawed in their humanity, they dedicated themselves to protect, support, and educate the women who were a part of that institution. Beyond the administration, I also had many experiences where my fellow male classmates would go above and beyond to protect and support us women. When we wanted to go to a bar or explore Rome at night on our own, these men stepped up if we asked for their help or protection every time. I would recommend this college to any woman. I loved that college so much that my younger sister decided to attend and is a current student. I know that it may not be the best fit for everybody, but it was the best environment I have ever lived in outside of my home! I will be praying for you and your family!

God Bless,

Colleen Beebe

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I am a freshman at Christendom College and could not have had a better experience so far. The vibrant catholic culture is prevalent throughout campus and the student body is supportive and kind. I have never felt to be in any danger at any time during my time at Christendom thus far and I look forward to continuing my education here.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Eller

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I chose Christendom for its uniquely Catholic education and culture. Since arriving here a year and a half ago, I have been met with experiences both good and bad, with the good strongly outweighing the bad. My classes are wonderful and so are the professors. The Catholic culture here is very strong, mostly due to the exemplary chaplains that we have right here on campus. I have been treated with respect by almost all the guys here on campus, and on the rare occasion that a man has been disrespectful it has had nothing of a sexual nature about it. I know about and agree with the fact that there have been problems in the past and that there are problems here now. However, I would like to simply say that in comparison to other colleges the problems that Christendom does face are significantly less.

Sadi Martin, sophomore

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I have never felt safer in my life than I do at Christendom. It was by Dr. O'Donnell's class this past semester that for the first time I truly understood my dignity and my worth. The people and this college and the culture which it creates has proven to me that my dignity as a human being but most especially as a woman will be upheld. The men of Christendom are real men who will stand tall for the ladies here. We the students stand strong with the faculty and staff and can say with total confidence, that we feel safe here at Christendom College.

Catherine Zerbo

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I transferred to Christendom from the University of Washington in 2006. Upon my arrival, I was overwhelmed and happily surprised by the character of the male student body at large. They were gentlemen. Whenever I hung out with groups of my male peers, I never felt uncomfortable. If I was at an off-campus party, there was never a time when I did not feel safe. Unlike my experience at UW, it was clear that a woman's dignity was highly valued, and I witnessed that in the students, faculty, and staff. Christendom was a wonderful experience for me, and I will always cherish my time there.

Regarding the steps Christendom has implemented, it is extremely evident that Student Life has made enormous efforts to reach out to the students and become more proactive. I'm not merely talking about the policies; I'm talking about the formation programs offered. Student Life had begun hosting a formation series (I do not know when it officially started). Since that time, it has only expanded and has gathered and influenced hundreds of students over the years. A structured women's formation series was launched in 2014. This series invited the female faculty and staff, local alumnae, mental health professionals, religious Sisters, grad students, and others to speak to the girls on campus about relevant topics chosen by the students. Topics included mental health, the single life, the married life, the feminine genius, the cycle of sin & despair, self-worth/self-condemnation, social media, healthy relationships, gossiping, life after college, prayer life and discernment, and many others. Moreover, local deputies have visited campus to discuss safety and self-defense to the women. These (non-mandatory) talks occur 4-6 times each year and gather an average of 80 girls each talk. The series was so successful that a similar series was launched for the men on campus shortly thereafter. Additionally, what is even more impressive is the efforts the students themselves have made to address such issues. The students have formed accountability groups, arranged talks in the campus halls, hosted events with guest speakers, and so forth. These small-scale events were not ordered by the administration; they were organic and voluntarily organized by the students - both the men and women.

There is so much more I could include, but it would take the length of a Bible to get it all down. Overall, I look back at Christendom with many fond memories, and I am proud of the efforts undertaken by faculty, staff, and students over the years to keep Christendom a safe place for all students. These efforts cannot be ignored. Pax.

Caitlin (2009)

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Christendom College is a fantastic school. I feel safe anywhere at any time on campus, and I know that the College always has the well-being of its students as its top priority. I am so happy to attend school there, and am proud to call myself a Christendom student.

Emily Golden

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I was a student at Christendom College in the early 1990s. My experience was very positive with regard to how women were viewed and treated by the men (students, faculty, and staff) on campus. My dad wisely gave me campus safety guidelines before I left home (I was only 17, after all), but I never felt any sense of danger, even late at night. Christendom's culture gave me a sense of being cherished, respected, and protected on every level, and I was certainly not treated as inferior because of my gender. Furthermore, I found the rules regarding PDA to be beneficial for my relationships rather than a cause for seeking off-campus solitude. I had an off-campus boyfriend (son of a professor, who was studying at another nearby school) almost my entire freshman year. We did not feel the need to leave campus to express our feelings for one another, and the boundaries provided by the campus culture and rules helped us learn to regulate our sometimes-overwhelming feelings and desires. My boyfriend lived just a mile away, but we rarely went to his house to spend time together (even though we easily could have had the place to ourselves much of the time). He began coming to campus for events after we met, and we found plenty of healthy, safe ways to enjoy each other's company. My experience at Christendom College was wholly positive in all the ways relating to my dignity as a person, and as a woman in particular. I firmly believe a woman's dignity and worth is of greater concern to the faculty and staff at Christendom than that of nearly every other Catholic college in our country. I highly recommend Christendom to any woman seeking a high-quality Catholic Liberal Arts education.

Tanya (1992-1995)

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My name is Alyssa (Gray) Hichborn, class of 2002. Christendom College was a breath of fresh air for me coming from CA where dating was fraught with expectations of physical contact. I admit that Christendom's policies were a bit of a culture shock at first, but I found that these very policies gave true freedom and easier interaction between the sexes. I am so grateful to Dr. O'Donnell personally for reaching out to each freshman class to welcome them and to explain the Christendom difference. Dr. Keats is another hero. I met my husband there and so many blessings have flowed from the education itself. These attacks against the college's reputation are deeply saddening.

In Christ,
Alyssa

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I have experienced firsthand the secular and immoral side of culture growing up, and I can honestly say I have never felt more loved and protected in such faith filled culture, surrounded with respectable young men, and supportive young women. I have been shown a great amount of respect by the faculty, the staff, and especially my fellow classmates. This college has challenged society to rise above the standards outside of Catholic culture, and for each individual to strive for something greater, especially myself.

Meredith Ethridge

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During my time at Christendom College, I have experienced nothing but respect and courtesy from the men on campus. I firmly believe that the culture on this campus upheld by Dr. O'Donnell and the entirety of the faculty and staff promotes a healthy and dignified relationship between men and women. While this culture should not be viewed a bubble which separates us

from the evils of the world, it is however a place that acknowledges and upholds the dignity of women. All men on campus continuously go out of their way to protect women in every situation. This is something I think is undeniably unique to Christendom College, and I am truly grateful to the College for providing me with this community in which I can form true and solid friendships with men and women, and grow in my faith.

Sincerely in Christ,
Mikaela Bailey

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I am a student at Christendom College in the second semester of my freshman year. The College has been an incredible blessing to me and has fostered an environment in which I have grown spiritually, intellectually, and as a woman of Christ. I have never felt unsafe or threatened here under any circumstances. The men here are gentlemen who treat women as ladies deserving of respect and dignity, and truly exemplify what it means to be authentically Catholic men.

In Christ,

Katherine Flynn
Class of 2021

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I am currently a sophomore at Christendom College and truly enjoy the Catholic lifestyle here on campus. I have never felt violated or in danger of inappropriate conduct from other members of the college. The staff here at Christendom is always ready to listen to anyone and would help any person that has been violated in any and all ways they can.

Rosemarie

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I believe Christendom is one of the safest campuses in the United States and I will continue to support the college and its President.

In Christ,

Member of the class of 2020

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My name is Marie-Therese O'Reilly and I am a current student of Christendom College and member of our campus community. Here at Christendom I am witness to a community in which the student body, faculty, and staff are firmly dedicated to upholding the beauty and dignity of each person on a daily basis. As a woman on campus, I have never felt anxious or threatened, confident that I will always be treated with the utmost respect. At Christendom College I am truly immersed in a culture of virtue, not a culture of rape.

My response: there are bad people everywhere. I have met bad people at Christendom. However, these few people are in no way representative of Christendom as a whole. Even as a cradle Catholic who grew up in a very traditional environment, I have never before seen so many young people within one community who are fighting the good fight, for chastity and for the other

virtues.

Because Christendom has a dress code, I feel safe knowing that I and the other women at the College are not objectifying ourselves in the eyes of the young men around us. Because Christendom has single-sex dorms, I feel safe knowing that men and women are forced to part ways at night. Because Christendom has an extraordinary faculty who call us continuously to a life of virtue, I feel safe knowing that I am not alone in my desire for chastity.

Marie-Therese

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Christendom College provides a secure and supportive culture for its students. I am a freshman at Christendom, and I know that I am respected and loved by students and faculty alike because Catholic charity reigns on campus and indeed permeates the atmosphere of the college. I can walk freely on campus without fear of attack; moreover, I am secure in the knowledge that the men of Christendom hold a deep respect for the women of Christendom. I have loved and continue to love my time here at Christendom, which provides a culture of respect and security for the dignity of each person.

Sincerely,
Bridget Duffy
Class of 2021

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I know that I am one of the few privileged women in this world to have the opportunity to attend such a wonderful institution as Christendom College. I am surrounded by like-minded individuals that value and exemplify professionalism and the utmost respect for others. The men on this campus live to the highest standards, and by their example they have shown the entire female population of Christendom what a true virtuous man is. I have never felt safer in the presence of the opposite sex than I do at Christendom College.

Cecelia

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I am a female student from the class of 2020 at Christendom College, and Christendom College has a very positive atmosphere for women. Everyone here greatly respects the dignity of everyone, especially that of women. I feel respected by all of my classmates, especially the men on campus. Christendom does have its problems, but that does not mean that it has a “rape culture.” I don’t necessarily feel comfortable walking alone in the dark across campus, but I would feel that way anywhere. That’s not an attitude I have exclusively at Christendom. As a woman I know I have to be aware of my surroundings, but again, I know that I have to be aware everywhere. If I ever felt there was truly a danger to my safety, I would leave immediately. I’m not concerned some rapist will come out of nowhere to assault me here.

Once, the college watched a movie together. In one scene, a man hesitated before walking into a woman’s bedroom. (The two characters weren’t married, and it was assumed they would be sleeping together.) I was floored when the young man I was sitting next to whispered under his breath, “be a gentleman. Be a gentleman.” Just about every man in the room had the same reaction. Everyone wanted that male character to respect the dignity of the woman in the scene. Obviously, Christendom has problems. Christendom can continue to improve. But we have amazing people here who respect the dignity of the human person.

Member of the Class of 2020

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My name is Bridget Schneider. I am a student at Christendom and am currently in the class of 2021. I love the community on this campus and believe it is a wholesome environment. I feel safe and secure on this campus, more so than anywhere else. I would say Christendom's community encourages and supports an atmosphere of virtue from the classes, the liturgy, to the people, and day to day activities. I have never felt threatened as a woman in this community. Thank you.

God Bless!

Bridget