

Reflecting on the Rome Seminar

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Looking forward to the week-long banquet of spiritual, intellectual and yes, physical experiences that awaited us, our group of four from CNR walked up the steep and narrow road beside the 12th century church of Santi Quattro Coronati (the Four Crowned Saints) in Rome, part of the fortified abbey that provided refuge to early popes. The late afternoon sun bronzed the high walls on each side of the road and released the scent of fallen oranges and early summer flowers. We soon reached the Lay Center at Foyer Unitas, near the top of the hill inside the courtyard of the Irish College, where we were greeted with warm hospitality and cool beverages most welcome after our trek in the hot sun.

This third annual Rome Seminar in June 2007 began appropriately with greetings between old and new acquaintances. Our leader, Donna Orzuto, Director of the Lay Center at Foyer Unitas and Professor at the Pontifical Gregorian University, introduced us to the history and mission of the Lay Center and described our schedule for the week, the banquet, ahead, which would provide us with direct encounters with the spiritual and intellectual legacy of the Catholic faith, the *raison d'être* of The College of New Rochelle and indeed of all of Catholic Higher Education. The Seminar is a joint project of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU), the association of our 230 Catholic colleges and universities in the United States, and the Lay Center at Foyer Unitas, an institute providing a Catholic environment for the education and formation of lay people, including residential opportunity for international lay students studying in Rome at Pontifical universities.

With "Rediscovering our Roots: Spirituality and Catholic Higher Education" as its topic, the 2007 Seminar was designed to acquaint or re-acquaint participants with dimensions of the Catholic intellectual and spiritual legacy

in order to more effectively lead Catholic higher education, particularly our own institutions, to fulfill the purposes of Catholic higher education: the search for truth, the whole truth about nature, man and God. In the words of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, "This is the way of serving at one and the same time both the dignity of man and the good of the church."

The goals of the seminar would be accomplished through preassigned readings, meetings with appropriate officials of the Holy See, daily liturgical celebrations, visits and guided tours of sites which have particular historical significance in our Catholic tradition and continuous opportunities for participant conversation about the current issues of Catholic higher education in the world, especially in the United States.

In addition to myself, the College of New Rochelle team for this seminar included President Stephen Sweeny and two administrators from Student Services, Meghan Toomey and Tiffani Blake, both Assistant Directors of Student Development. This combination afforded us the special gift of different experiential perspectives for reflection, reaction and planning future activities upon our return to CNR. Joining us were presidents, provosts, faculty and administrators from eight other Catholic higher education institutions from across the U.S. and a representative from Australian Catholic University.

The opening session on "Implementing the Principles of the Compendium of Social Teachings of the Catholic Church in Catholic Higher Education" was presented by His Eminence Renato Cardinal Martino, President, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, which was responsible for assembling the Compendium. As I listened to His Eminence, what struck me most strongly was the importance of being intentional and explicit about why we, as a Catholic college, engage our students and our whole community in social jus-

tice programs and activities. Our gospel call to justice and peace grounds these programs and activities not as “trendy” for higher education but rather as the very essence of implementing the social teaching of the Church. Later, the first of our daily liturgies and celebrations of the Eucharist truly joined us together with one another and our shared faith in our quest to enrich Catholic higher education.

Tuesday morning found us at the Vatican in the offices of the Congregation for Catholic Education and meeting with Most Reverend J. Michael Miller, then Secretary, Congregation for Catholic Education, who spoke with us about the “Spiritual Principles of Catholic Education,” especially higher education and the particular challenges in the United States. He addressed the identity and mission of Catholic institutions of higher education, listing qualities and characteristics essential to their Catholic identity, while acknowledging the challenges of fully meeting these criteria. He was especially eager to remind us of our call to partner with sister institutions in developing countries and to share our comparative wealth of resources with them.

Needless to say, this presentation led to lively discussion among the participants after the formal presentation ended and for the remainder of the day.

During the Wednesday audience with Pope Benedict XVI, held away from the now oppressive heat in the spacious audience hall, our seminar group was especially honored to be welcomed by name by the Holy Father. The many attending groups from

around the world served as a powerful and dramatic reminder of the global church today.

During lunch, hosted by the Canadian Ambassador to the Holy See, we enjoyed a lively dialogue with Archbishop Agostino Marchetto, Secretary, Pontifical Council for Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant Peoples, which affirmed the Catholic higher education call to access so central to CNR’s mission and practice. Over the coffee that followed, many of us had the pleasure of meeting with Donna Orzuto’s students from the Gregorian Pontifical University, and talk then became more about practical academic issues: required courses, teaching styles, subjects of study and evaluation. Nothing like meeting with real students to keep college and university faculty and administrators focused! Perhaps most appropriately after the academic conversation with students, the day concluded with Eucharist celebrated in the Rooms of St. Ignatius.

Away from Rome on Thursday to Subiaco, we had morning prayer at the monastery of the Sacro Speco, lunch at the Foresteria of Saint Scholastica, tours of the monastery and finally a seminar presentation by Reverend Jonathan DeFelice, OSB, President of St. Anselm College on “Founding Religious Charisms and the Transfer to Lay Leadership in Catholic Higher Education.” This is a topic with which CNR has been familiar for some time but which many of our sister institutions in the U.S. are only now confronting. Nevertheless, the transition in whatever stage does demand attention and intentional

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strategies to educate and inspire ourselves and our colleagues if we are to move forward in new ways while maintaining the Catholic identity that has been and continues to be our source. This demands our ongoing attention, creativity and inspiration.

And indeed it was inspiration that we were offered when we joined together on Friday morning at the Irish College to hear the stimulating and concluding presentation on “The Vocation to Catholic Higher Education” by Reverend Monsignor Roderick Strange, Rector, Pontifical Beda College. The week drew to a close with dialogue and conversation and finally, most appropriately, celebration of the Eucharist by Most Reverend J. Michael Miller, who then joined the seminar participants for the closing reception and dinner under the orange trees at the Lay Center.

Coming to the original physical sites of so much of our Catholic spiritual and intellectual legacy indeed provides a richness and power to understanding and inspiration to know more. From the almost overwhelming resplendence of St. Peter’s Basilica to the monastic cave of St. Benedict at Subiaco or the Rooms of St. Ignatius, the breadth and depth of the great artistic expressions of faith that surround the ceilings and walls of the great cathedrals, our spiritual and intellectual legacy permeated my senses and my being and urged deeper learning, further dialogue and reflection and expanded creativity to engage the CNR Community in discovering/rediscovers, creating/recreating and enlivening the continued Catholic identity of The College of New Rochelle into the 21st century.

“Recognizing human dignity, acknowledging human rights, working for the common good of society and seeking solidarity are inclusive of all people regardless of their personal religion and beliefs. Through the Seminar. I discovered that Student Services is integral in the out-of-the-classroom experience for students and that we are mandated through our commitment to CNR and its mission to educate students on these principles so that they exhibit them in their endeavors upon graduation.”

—Tiffani Blake, Assistant Director of Student Development