

Damien Project to repurpose shuttered Belgian seminary

Brian Roewe | Sep. 27, 2013

A prominent overseas seminary once responsible for training U.S. priests for more than a century is on the verge of a rebirth, but with a modified format and mission.

Closed in 2010 by the U.S. bishops, the American College of the Immaculate Conception in Louvain, Belgium, is undergoing extensive renovations to its buildings as well as a mission overhaul as part of a joint initiative among four groups: the Catholic University of Leuven, the Université Catholique de Louvain, and the Belgian and U.S. bishops' conferences.

The initiative, called the Damien Project, is "designed to continue and foster the strong links" between Catholic University of Leuven and the U.S. Catholic church, Lieven Boeve, dean of the faculty of theology and religious studies at the university, told *NCR* in an email.

The project intends to repurpose the century-old former seminary under a new name -- now simply the American College -- and use its facilities as the hub of a communal living environment intended for a wider audience of residents than it housed in the past. That means opening its rooms to laypeople, in addition to priests, deacons, and members of religious institutes and new Catholic movements, while maintaining a focus on those from the U.S.

The first step toward that path is the St. Damien Community. A primary facet of the project, the community will house Catholic students and scholars from the U.S. and across the globe. It is scheduled to open by September 2014, Boeve said. Students eligible for the community would take classes on the Catholic University of Leuven campus, from the undergraduate to the doctorate level, primarily in the areas of theology, philosophy and canon law.

Construction has begun on the old American College building, which will house the students, and should conclude by the end of summer 2014. The renovation costs total 5 million euros (\$6.53 million), primarily financed by the university, which has applied for subsidies from the Belgian government.

Boeve described the St. Damien Community (named after the leper saint of Molokai, Hawaii, whose crypt rests in Louvain) as one that offers students and scholars "a hospitable place, including a shared community life and spiritual guidance." Its goal centers on fostering students in approaches to open dialogue and reflective criticism (on themselves, their studies and society), as well as offering opportunity for spiritual reflection grounded in Catholic tradition.

A coordinator will oversee the community and the other pieces of the project, which include a sabbatical program for visiting scholars and students, and an annual summer academic program.

"The initiatives that arise from the project will help to enrich the university, which itself was born of and has grown within the Catholic tradition," Boeve said.

That the American College will once again house students, albeit from a broader pool than seminarians, was welcome news for members of the American College Alumni Association.

"I'm very optimistic about this, and I think the alumni association is as well," said Fr. Raymond Collins, president of the association and a former professor at the University of Leuven.

Collins cited the university's Maurits Sabbe Library as a major draw for students to join the community. The library, one of the largest theological resources in the world, houses more than 1.3 million volumes, many published before the 1800s.

"You just don't get that kind of research facility elsewhere," he said, adding that the alumni association plans to fund a scholarship for students and researchers.

Through the Damien Project, Boeve said, the American College can continue as "Leuven's window to North America." Under its modified form, though, that means widening the window, rather than returning to its roots.

In its previous form, the American College of the Immaculate Conception was solely a seminary, from its founding in 1857 until its closure in 2011. As one of two European seminaries governed by the U.S. bishops that was established in the 19th century, it served as a pivotal pipeline for supplying priests to U.S. dioceses at a time when few, if any, seminaries existed in the United States.

The early graduates primarily came from Europe, and the seminary's U.S. population wouldn't garner a near equal proportion until after World War I. By the end of World War II, most of its seminarians came from the U.S. and other English-speaking nations, such as Canada, Australia and Great Britain.

More than 1,200 priests received training at the American College of the Immaculate Conception, among them Archbishop Fulton Sheen, and current Bishops David Ricken of Green Bay, Wis., and Edward Braxton of Belleville, Ill.

When the U.S. bishops decided to close the seminary at the end of its 2010-11 academic year, they pointed to diminished enrollment numbers, which created "significant financial challenges," and made it difficult to recruit priests for its faculty.

At the time of its closing, the school enrolled 19 seminarians, or roughly 15 percent of its 125-student capacity. At the same time, the Pontifical North American College in Rome, which opened in 1859, enrolled 239 students.

"The [Louvain] seminary has served the church in the United States and other parts of the world faithfully, steadfastly and zealously throughout its 154-year existence, and so this is a sad moment for many of us," Ricken, chairman of the board of bishops for the American College, wrote at the time.

Despite their decision to shutter the seminary, the U.S. bishops remain partners in the Damien Project. Msgr. Ronny Jenkins, general secretary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, has been involved with the project, and has named Kurt Martens, an associate professor of canon law at The Catholic University of America and a graduate of the University of Leuven, as his representative on the project board. The bishops will have the opportunity to send students to the project, but are not expected to provide financial support.

Because the new American College is not a "resuscitation of the seminary activities," the factors that led to its closing, such as low enrollment, don't apply to the Damien Project, Boeve told *NCR*.

"The aim is to re-enforce the relationship between Leuven and the U.S. in new ways," he said.

An advertising campaign for the Damien Project and new American College will begin later this year. Those interested in information on its three initiatives can contact Ingrid Wouters (Ingrid.Wouters@theo.kuleuven.be).

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