

9/11 in Rome: Baltimore pastor was seminarian at Pontifical North American College

On the second day of the new semester at the Pontifical North American College in Rome, Father Michael DeAscanis and fellow seminarians were taking a mid-afternoon walk in the courtyard.

It was Sept. 11, 2001.

“One of the priests came by and said, ‘Did you hear that a plane crashed into the World Trade Center?’ “ he recalled.

There was no rush to televisions but the news “trickled in” over the next few hours, the pastor of St. Agnes in Catonsville and St. William of York in Baltimore recalled.

By the time they gathered for Evening Prayer, the seminarians knew of the fate of the World Trade Center towers and the airliners that hit the Pentagon and crashed in Pennsylvania, though the toll of 2,753 victims and 19 hijackers would not be known for days.

“We prayed for those who had died,” said Father DeAscanis.

That evening and the next day, they heard news reports and rumors of new threats of violence.

“We even heard of a threat against the courthouse in Towson,” he said.

“They did make significant changes to security at the seminary” and other sites including the Vatican, Father DeAscanis said.

Over the succeeding months the seminarians were on “heightened alert - careful of how we conducted ourselves while traveling” outside the seminary.

Although the seminarians heard expressions of sympathy and concern, distance from

home made a difference.

“There was a kind of feeling of being isolated from the events and not being happy about being isolated,” Father DeAscanis said. “We were in a foreign land where the people didn’t have a connection to it.”

He speculated that some might have longed to be at home, saying, “At a time when the country was uniting, we weren’t really part of that.”

Looking back on 9/11, Father DeAscanis recalls that many Americans saw the terrorism of that day as a “wake-up call.” Americans were shocked by the evil of that day. “People went back to church,” he said. “The churches were packed.”

In contrast, he said, “For those who are living their faith and are struggling with evil, it was not so surprising that there was evil. Priests and seminarians have a heightened awareness of evil in the world. We hear confessions, hear the bad things that people do – as well as the good.

“We were angered, but not shocked. And we were inspired to take our formation even more seriously, that we might be holy priests, a force for good in the world.”

According to the seminary’s website, pnac.org, Pope Pius IX opened the Pontifical North American College in December 1859, four years after he “first expressed to members of the American hierarchy his interest in the establishment of a national seminary in Rome for the formation of candidates from the United States, stressing the unique lessons to be learned in Rome: the unity and universality of the church, the traditions of our faith, and the ministry of the successor of St. Peter.”

Archbishop Edwin F. O’Brien was its rector from 1990 to 1994, and was formerly the chairman of the Board of Governors for the college.

Four men from the Archdiocese of Baltimore are currently seminarians at the Pontifical North American College: Chris de Deleon of St. Louis, Clarksville; Josh Laws of St. Stephen, Bradshaw; Joe Langan of St. John, Westminster; and Michael Rubeling of St. Peter, Libertytown.