

# Seminarians flocking to North American College in Rome

ROME - Standing on the rooftop of the Pontifical North American College, Monsignor James Checchio smiled as he looked out onto the Eternal City six stories below and marveled at the 450-foot grand dome of St. Peter's Basilica, pristine gardens and ancient buildings visible from every direction.

Firmly established in the heart of the Vatican, the college was inaugurated by Pope Pius IX in 1859 to help prepare Americans for the priesthood and give them a special connection to the universal church.

Next year, 200 seminarians from across the United States will study at the NAC - the highest number in four decades. The college also includes a graduate house where about 75 priests continue their theological studies after ordination.

"There's been a good resurgence in appreciation for what Rome has to offer," said Monsignor Checchio, rector. "One of the advantages is to be trained in the shadows of St. Peter's, near the tomb of Peter, and to be close to his successor, Pope Benedict. It certainly broadens one's view of things in the world."

In the largest numbers in many years, pilgrims are coming to hear Pope Benedict preach. That has also sparked a renewed interest in the college, the rector said.

Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien, who was rector of the North American College from 1990-1994, said much of the success of the college is due to the "very solid formation" provided by a "fine faculty and a great tradition right in the heart of the church."

"The bishops send us very fine students and they go home to serve in parishes and whatever else they are asked to do with great fidelity," he said. "It's really a gem and more and more bishops are appreciating it and I think more of our general Catholic population does as well."

The college gives seminarians "a real appreciation of the humanity of the church as

well as its divine foundation,” Archbishop O’Brien said.

Father Michael Triplett, ordained last year, is one of three men from the Archdiocese of Baltimore who currently study at the NAC. During his time at the seminary, he has witnessed many special events, including the beatification of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta and the funeral of Pope John Paul II. Father Triplett sang in the response choir at Pope John Paul II’s funeral and during Pope Benedict XVI’s first public Mass after his papal election.

“People are really interested in furthering their Catholic faith and coming to the city in prayer,” said Father Triplett, calling it “amazing” to see massive crowds flood St. Peter’s square. “People come for different reasons and they find different graces. It’s inspiring.”

Living and studying at the seminary with men from many different cultures has given him a deep appreciation for the many different cultural expressions of the faith, Father Triplett said. Admitting that he found it very challenging to learn the Italian language, the priest recalled that he sometimes didn’t understand any of his lectures when he first arrived at the college. The experience has given him a deeper sensitivity to what immigrant Catholics face everyday back at home, he said. It will make him a better priest.

“I understand a little more the challenge it is to move, to find a new home and to try to learn a new language,” he said. “It’s not as easy as some people tend to think.”

Monsignor Checchio sees nothing but growth for the historic seminary, growth in the numbers and also pastoral zeal. The NAC is replacing its athletic field and is making other physical improvements, he said.

“Our men are very dedicated to making their hearts more like that of Christ, especially through daily Holy Hours, through their studies and through their service to others,” Monsignor Checchio said. “The more we can make that a way of life, a part of our breathing of the men who study here, the better. The North American College will stay strong.”