

# **U.S. seminary in Belgium to close in June due to falling enrollment**

WASHINGTON – The American College of the Immaculate Conception in Leuven, Belgium, will close at the end of this academic year because of the small number of seminarians and difficulties in obtaining qualified priests for its faculty.

The decision to close in June 2011 was announced to the public Nov. 22 by Bishop David L. Ricken of Green Bay, Wis., who chairs the board of bishops of the American College. The seminary community had been informed shortly after a Nov. 17 confirmation of the board's decision by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, meeting in Baltimore.

"The 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," Bishop Ricken said in a news release.

Founded in 1857 by the U.S. bishops and associated with the Catholic University of Louvain, the college originally had a dual purpose – to train young European men to become missionaries in the United States, especially for the immigrant population, and to offer U.S. seminarians "the philosophical and theological riches available at Europe's oldest Catholic university," according to the seminary's website.

Belgium was chosen as the site for the first U.S. seminary in Europe because the original plan for such a college in Rome could not be carried out because of political upheaval in Italy in the mid-19th century.

The Pontifical North American College, which opened in December 1859 in Rome with a dozen students, has an enrollment of 239 students – 226 Americans, 11 Australians and two Canadians – for the 2010-11 academic year; that was described on its website as "the largest enrollment in recent memory."

Monsignor Ross A. Schecterle, rector of American College in Leuven, told Catholic News Service that four seminarians will be ordained during this academic year, and another 10 – eight from the United States, one from England and one from China –

will be continuing their studies elsewhere.

Several other students from Old College, the Holy Cross undergraduate seminary at the University of Notre Dame, will return to Indiana after completing a semester or year abroad this year. The Leuven school has a capacity of 125 students.

“Emphasis in the next six months will be placed on the continuing formation of our seminarians until the end of this formation year 2010-2011 and will focus on cooperating with the ‘sending’ dioceses for placement for the seminarians in the next step of their formation process,” said a joint letter from Monsignor Schechterle and Bishop Ricken.

They said the USCCB “will be working closely with us for the proper disposition of the property and patrimony of the American College.”

A USCCB news release about the closing said that “despite strong efforts, enrollment has not grown at the American College to a sustainable level.”

“Small enrollment creates significant financial challenges as well as difficulties for priestly formation,” it added.

The norms for priestly formation in the U.S. bishops’ Program for Priestly Formation note that “the seminarians and faculty form the heart of the seminary community, and this reality needs careful cultivation so that the distinctive aims of seminary formation can be achieved.”

“The difficulties in maintaining the necessary community environment for priestly formation led to the decision to close the American College,” the news release said.

Bishop Ricken expressed gratitude to the Archdiocese of Mechelen-Brussels, the theology and philosophy faculties of Catholic University of Louvain “and the people of Belgium for their support and collaboration ... for these many years.”

In addition to the training of seminarians, the American College had in recent years expanded to offer graduate studies for priests, deacons and religious as well as sabbatical programs, a four-week summer institute and two-week renewal programs for priests, religious, deacons and laypeople.

More than 1,200 priests received their seminary training at American College over the years, including Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen.

At the 75th anniversary celebration for the seminary in 1932, Bishop John J. Lawler of Rapid City, S.D., said that school had made “a notable contribution of science and piety and heroic effort to the development and growth of the church in our country.”

“A thousand of them – a thousand thoroughly equipped apostolic men – have left these hallowed walls to spend themselves for the things of the higher life and among them there have been savants – men of the highest intellectuality,” he said. “Among them there have been also humble missionaries – men who have been content to labor in obscurity and silence with the zeal of a St. Francis Xavier.”

The two world wars closed the seminary for a total of 18 years and the seminary was partially destroyed during World War II. When it reopened in 1952, it was with its first U.S.-born rector. The post had up to then been held by Belgian priests.

During the 1960s, the American College accepted responsibility for the pastoral care of the Catholics among the 10,000 Americans then in the Brussels area, attached to NATO and the Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe or working in various international business enterprises.