

Unapologetically Missionary

The Augustine Institute in Denver educates for the New Evangelization.



An Augustine Institute student taking a distance-learning class

by Matthew A. Rarey

The Augustine Institute (AI) is one of the newest centers of the New Evangelization proposed by Pope John Paul II and continued by Pope Benedict XVI. In October, the Holy Father chose the New Evangelization as the theme for the 2012 Synod of Bishops. Like the New Evangelization itself—the call to proclaim the Gospel to a world that truly does not know Jesus Christ and the Catholic Church, especially in the post-Christian West—the AI is contemporary in approach but rooted in the Catholic faith whose truths, residing beyond time, are forever “new” and, thus, compelling for men of all ages.

Located in Denver, Colorado, the AI (www.augustineinstitute.org) offers a master’s degree in theology with concentrations tailored to students’ post-graduate plans to serve the New

Evangelization, from youth ministers to deacons, from diocesan catechists to those who go on for doctorates and work in academia. The student body has increased significantly since the AI’s founding in 2005, from the inaugural class of 11 to the current enrollment of more than 230, which includes 74 on-site students and 160 in the distance education program. For the AI’s faculty and students, it is the Holy Spirit that is igniting their distinctly Catholic evangelical ardor.

“There’s a temptation for anybody who wants to be a devout Christian to approach the world with negativity, anxiety, and fear,” says AI president, Dr. Timothy Gray. “But the world needs to be engaged with joy and love, rooted in a mature understanding of our faith—not an understanding situated in a falsely idealistic sense of the past that engenders cynicism and frustration when one confronts harsh present realities, both within the Church

and the world at large. So we are especially blessed to have St. Augustine as our patron saint. He had to fight the Donatists, who believed the Church had to be pure and perfect, and walked away from the Church when they encountered problems. We want to form students who have a deep resolve to renew and serve the Church, *especially* when they see problems.”

Faculty and students interviewed for this article repeatedly stressed this theme, saying it distinguishes the AI from similar graduate-degree programs: namely, that if the Catholic faith is to be effectively promoted through the New Evangelization, it cannot be learned as if it existed in a vacuum. Rather, “the Faith must be presented in the context of a sophisticated cultural critique that understands the problems of the modern world as well as the perennial tug-of-war between sin and salvation,” says the AI’s founding academic dean, Dr. Sean Innerst, who

also teaches catechetics. "The sacred doctrine of the Church surfaces out of history, where God reveals himself."

So it is fitting that the AI has St. Augustine for its patron saint, a man of history who emphasized how God works in history. The institute also takes inspiration from St. Thomas Aquinas, who adds the doctrinal precision and articulation of the faith that surfaces out of

ing leader of FOCUS, the Fellowship of Catholic University Students. Heeding the late Pope's call, all are now well-established leaders in the New Evangelization: teaching in universities, undertaking lay apostolates, writing books, and hosting television programs that teach the faith, particularly on EWTN. Their names are familiar to ardent Catholics whose faith they have fired

reasons. First, priestly and religious vocations grow best in committed Catholic families. That pretty obviously requires well-formed Christian men and women in good marriages. But second, and at least equally important, lay people can evangelize today's secularized culture far more easily than most clergy.

The great value of the Augustine Institute is that it's fundamentally, unapologetically missionary. It has an excellent faculty and outstanding academic curricula and standards. But it never forgets its main purpose: to graduate mature, motivated Catholic lay men and women—people who want to win the world for Jesus Christ, and have the brains, skills, energy, and courage to do it.

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that history. The AI also publishes the international Thomistic journal, *Nova et Vetera*, and hosts an international academic conference each year related to it.

Without two other patrons, however, the AI simply would not exist: Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Charles J. Chaput, who has made the Archdiocese of Denver a mountain fortress of the New Evangelization by giving sanctuary to dynamic young movements serving the Church.

THE DENVER CONNECTION

When Denver hosted World Youth Day (WYD) in 1993, Pope John Paul II used this big city in the Rocky Mountains as a launching pad for the New Evangelization. Special seeds were planted that day, says Dr. Edward Sri, AI provost and professor of theology and Scripture.

"John Paul II chose Denver because it's a modern city: young, a center of technology, but also very close to nature and the great outdoors. It was the perfect place to call on Catholics to engage the modern world and transform it for Christ. We all were here," he says of the men who would found the AI 12 years later, "and afterward went home to our respective cities. But one by one, we eventually came back."

The men referred to are Timothy Gray, Sean Innerst, and Curtis Martin, with whom Dr. Sri served as a found-

and informed, both cradle Catholics and newcomers to Catholicism whose conversions they inspired.

"We all were friends by the time we came to Denver in '93, having studied together [mainly at Franciscan University of Steubenville] and worked in various academic and lay apostolates across the country," continues Dr. Sri. "To found a graduate school with the aim of training leaders for the New Evangelization—this was the kind of topic we talked about at barbecues. The Augustine Institute really is a school that flowed out of personal friendships, united by a higher vision."

And they all were shepherded back to Denver by the man who was appointed archbishop there in 1997, Charles J. Chaput. He came to the diocese intent on founding a new seminary—for this purpose he brought with him Timothy Gray and Sean Innerst, who served as directors of religious education in the diocese he led previously, Rapid City, South Dakota—and eventually a separate graduate school to raise up leaders for the New Evangelization. His Excellency explains:

We opened St. John Vianney Theological Seminary in Denver in 1999 with the clear intent, right from the start, of providing an equally strong graduate formation program for lay people. We had two

When plans to found the AI were drawn up in 2005, says Dr. Sri, "it was a convergence of old friends brought together by Archbishop Chaput."

According to the AI's website, "Graduation is only the beginning"—a common phrase in academic literature. But what elsewhere sounds trite is simply true at the AI, where students are studying to become missionaries.

The curriculum has two main emphases, theology and Scripture, with related concentrations. For example, a student desiring post-graduate work might opt for a concentration in Sacred Scripture with an emphasis on Greek that would serve an academic purpose suitable to Ph.D. studies. A student intending to serve in parish ministry, however, might opt for the concentration in evangelization and catechization, which also entails a ministerial internship. Regardless of concentration, however, the curriculum's devotion to the New Evangelization means relating theological and moral teachings to real-world political, social, and moral questions, such as those posed by the 2008 presidential election and President Barack Obama's acceptance of an honorary doctorate from the University of Notre Dame, two events that sowed confusion in the minds of American Catholics (including clergy) not firm in their faith.

The curriculum expanded in the fall of 2010 to include a concentration in systematic theology geared toward students interested in preparing for a rigorous doctoral program. And a concentration in youth ministry will debut next summer under the direction of James Beckman, a nationally recog-

nized leader in youth ministry for the past 20 years. His specialty is training leaders for an evangelistic field that has tremendous potential for impacting the next generation.

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DISTANCE LEARNING

The youth ministry concentration will be available to students on campus as well as those in the distance education programs. With students hailing from 35 states as well as Canada and Australia, the distance program is an example of the New Evangelization's embrace of cutting-edge technology. Teaching assistants handle online course management and a student blog forum, but AI professors do the teaching and interact directly with students through online question and answer sessions. Their lectures are recorded, put on DVD, and mailed to the students.

"I put together a course on salvation history with Tim Gray that's been doing really well," says Professor Jeff Cavins, a former Protestant pastor whose area of expertise is teaching Scripture. "Students need to know the overarching story of salvation, not just individual books of the Bible," he says. "What I think makes [the AI] so unique is that we have professors who know the content really well, and are able to communicate the content in a way that is applicable to students' lives—an emphasis beyond head knowledge, the goal being to transform their own lives so that they can help transform the world."

AI graduate Kathleen Fehder of Louisville, Kentucky earned her master's degree from the distance education program in the summer of 2010. She was enamored of the program from start to finish, having first learned about it at a lecture given by Jeff Cavins. "The

program gave me the tools to solidly support what the Church teaches and has always taught. Whether we were reading a speech by the Holy Father, a modern encyclical or the writings of the Church Fathers, we studied them all in the light of tradition and Scripture."

Mrs. Fehder, a mother of five, is working to promote a formal course of Scripture study in her diocese's grade schools. "So many Catholics are sacramentalized and catechized but never really evangelized, and that comes in large part through reading the Word and hearing it proclaimed in the light of the Church's tradition and Magisterium," she says. "We often see Protestants embracing the Bible with joy, whereas Catholics tend to have a muffled response. Who wouldn't want to go with the joyful ones?"

Because leaders in the New Evangelization must engage the whole person, they must be spiritually and socially well-formed for the task. Accordingly, the AI emphasizes holistic formation.

Daniel Campbell enrolled in the AI's on-campus program in the spring of 2010. A University of Notre Dame graduate from a nominally Protestant family, he was working in medical research in preparation for medical school when he entered the Church, at which point he began to re-think his academic and career path. His vitalized interest in theology caused him to consider graduate school. Like the path to Rome, he attributes the path to Denver to Divine Providence.

"This is where God wanted me to go," says the San Diego native while driving to an afternoon class. "I know it sounds like a platitude, but it's sincere. The more specific qualities—the great professors, the focus on personal formation in addition to academics—just helped make the decision to enroll all the easier."

Campbell is taking the new concentration in systematic theology, which he hopes will help him discern whether to pursue doctoral studies. Because he is a new Catholic, however, learning how to live a fully Catholic life is just as desirable as the scholarship. "The atmosphere of fellowship, prayer, and holiness here is incredible," he says of the institution, whose professors, being friends themselves, are eager to nurture in their students the universal Christian vocation to friendship, which is invaluable to the New Evangelization's success.

Recognizing the desire of young

Catholics to experience the fullness of the faith, the AI also hosts a five-day College Student Summit each May for undergraduate university students across the country, most from secular schools. The summit is modeled on the retreats that Pope John Paul II gave when he was a university chaplain, combining prayer and catechesis with fellowship and outdoor recreation in the Rocky Mountains. Evidencing a key feature of the New Evangelization, the summit features a course on Catholic worldview, with discussions on Catholic responses to contemporary social and moral problems—answers these students are unlikely to find on their secular campuses.

Students at the AI, meanwhile, have recently begun benefitting from the appointment of a full-time chaplain. Father John Riley, on long-term loan from the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, celebrates daily Mass, hears confessions, offers spiritual direction, and gives retreats.

A PATRON SAINT FOR MODERNITY

When the AI's founders met to decide what to call their new institution, the "Eureka!" moment came when Professor Sean Innerst suggested naming it after St. Augustine of Hippo. It immediately was accepted because of the saint's contemporary relevance. This Church Father boldly pronounced the faith at a time of cultural upheaval, with Rome sliding into decadence as the barbarians beat at the gates. He did not merely enunciate doctrine, but addressed pressing contemporary issues in light of the faith, from immoral practices to theological heresies. Although Rome would fall to the barbarians and experience a dark night, Augustine's words and witness helped promote the flowering of Christian civilization after she rose from her stupor and foreswore pagan behavior and false religion.

Like its patron, the Augustine Institute is promoting timeless truths in a timely manner, and doing so in times eerily similar to those of the late Roman collapse. Because the stakes remain the same, they are just as worth fighting for: the salvation of a civilization and the souls who inhabit it. The New Evangelization is new merely in form, not substance. ■

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