News



Assoc. Professor Jane Regan, chairperson of Religious and Pastoral Ministry at Boston College, presides at a faith and formation presentation during the School of Theology and Ministry's 10th anniversary events. (Courtesy of Boston College)



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Editor's note: *This is the first part of a series focusing on seminaries in the United States. Every priest, including those accused of sexual abuse or those who disagree with Pope Francis, attended seminary. How are priests being formed? Who is teaching them? How are seminaries adapting to the new wave of abuse crises and condemnation of clericalism from the papacy? NCR will attempt to answer these questions and more. Stay tuned.*

It's a Tuesday afternoon in March, a Noreaster threatening snow is on the horizon, and nearly a dozen Jesuit scholastics are lined up in the back row of a classroom here. They are taking in interpretations of John Ch. 9, the story of the healing of the blind man, as part of their course on virtue ethics and the Gospel of John at Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry.

This is no cursory once-over. Jesuit Frs. James Keenan and Thomas Stegman, the professors, go through the details. A chapter that most Catholic Mass-goers will hear once a year during Lent is painstakingly analyzed for all its symbolic value. The questions are rapid-fire — about the meaning of the mud used to heal the man, why his parents seem to abandon him after he is healed and questioned by religious authorities, why the question is raised about whether the man born blind is a sinner by the fact of his handicap.

Alicia Brienza asks if there is an issue about consent raised in the passage (the blind man mentioned in John 9 gets in trouble with the authorities even though he never asked Jesus for a healing).

The issue of consent is much in the news today. And, in this class, while it includes the Jesuit scholastics intent on studies for the priesthood, it also includes a few dozen others, most of whom, like Brienza, are women. Scholastics are Jesuits in formation who have taken vows after their two-year novitiate period.

Their presence makes Jesuit formation different. Ever since the 1970s, Jesuits have been formed by taking classes that include lay students. Boston College is different from more traditional seminary programs offered in rural settings, away from the distractions of urban life.

At Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry, the sight of a neatly-pressed cassock is a rarity. The Jesuit students fit in with their fellow students. With rare exceptions, they don't wear clerical garb. They are neither expected to be experts for the rest of the class nor treated with any special favor or attention. They comprise 18 percent of the total student body in the graduate program, which was recently rated sixth in the world by the QS World University accrediting agency.

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Brienza told NCR that her voice, and other women's voices, provides a needed dimension in the formation of future priests.

"We're one half of the population that they are around and get to hear women's voices. It's very equalizing," she told NCR.

Stegman, who besides teaching is also dean of the school, noted that Jesuits who are ordained often don't end up in parish ministry. Their ministry is often different from that of diocesan priests, most of whom are focused on parish ministry. They will also live in religious community, while diocesan priests often live independently or with a fellow priest or two in a parish rectory.

Most older Jesuits were formed along the model of separation from the world, a reform in seminary education that developed after the Council of Trent. Stegman was trained in the newer model.

"The new model is that you should be studying in an environment similar to where you will be in ministry," he said, noting that Jesuits have in recent decades focused on collaborative work with laypeople.

Stegman is quick to point out that Boston College's School of Theology and Ministry is not a seminary, like St. John's next door, which trains priests for the Archdiocese of Boston and other dioceses. It is, rather, a theological center, offering master of divinity degrees and other credentials for laypeople, many of whom eventually end up working in parish ministry or education. The Jesuit students earn the divinity master's degree and also participate in ongoing formation that extends beyond their three years here.

Lay students include Grace Agolia, a University of Notre Dame graduate from Massapequa Park, New York, who is deaf and plans to work in deaf ministry. At Boston College, said Agolia, "You get a real sense of the diversity of the church."

The atmosphere here is studious but simultaneously relaxed. Morning classes include breaks for coffee and bagels. Community builders such as a weekly Mass at the main Boston College chapel, as well as a weekly afternoon repast, are regular features.

The Jesuit students, numbering about 65, come from Africa, Asia, Latin America and the United States Jesuit provinces. They live in a community near campus in a series of townhouses built on property sold by the Boston Archdiocese in a cost-cutting move emerging from expenses of the sex abuse crisis. Wild turkeys roam the grounds, sneaking up to the doorways to catch some heat in the late winter New England cold. A nearby trolley station offers easy access to downtown Boston.

Jesuit students attend daily Mass and work in service projects in the Boston area. The three-year program at Boston College is just part of a long series of Jesuit formation, which includes novitiate, philosophy (as brothers or scholastics), regency (a period of active ministry) and the three years at Boston College, which is focused on theology.

The Boston College program was formed in 2008 via the merger of the nearby Weston School of Theology, which closed, and the master's degree program in theology offered by the university. It is part of a long-term process of change in Jesuit formation, when large rural, isolated seminaries, such as the one in Woodstock, Maryland, were shuttered, and studies in urban centers became more common. Stegman said that the Boston College program offers a glimpse of the wider church that the Jesuit scholastics will serve as priests.

"The church is right here," he said, noting the international mix of students and its diversity in viewpoints. "We have some very traditional and very progressive students. It makes for a rich interchange in the classroom."



Boston College School of Theology and Ministry, Feb. 1, 2011 (Wikimedia Commons/Raaust)

Students, both lay and Jesuit, come down on different sides of wider church controversies. Some of the women students want a church open to ordaining them. Others are opposed. Some are inspired by Pope Francis. Others think he may be too tolerant of change in the church. The international students, numbering about 20 percent of the total population, often come from cultures where the education process is more lecture-centered and less interactive. Stegman said one goal is to harness that diversity, finding ways to surface all viewpoints.

For some students, Tuesdays can be a day of up to three classes, up to five and a half hours of intense discussion on the meaning of the church, Scriptures and, ultimately, God.

Each class begins with a prayer. On this morning, a selection from Thomas Merton was read: "*My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself,*

and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so."

A class on the Old Testament prophets explores the odd visions of Ezekiel. The Eucharist class explores the meaning of sacrifice and atonement, and how those concepts fit into the sacrament that the Jesuit scholastics will one day preside over.

Jesuit scholastics in the program say they like what they are getting, but add they have no personal experience of more traditional programs. Occasionally Jesuit scholastics will join their colleagues at St. John's for classes in areas such as canon law not offered at Boston College. It is perhaps the only place in the country where two Catholic centers that educate priests are literally next door to each other. But there remains a separation. Except for the occasional class together, the two groups don't regularly interact.

Scholastic Gregory Ostdiek, 48, is an Ohio native, graduate in engineering at the University of Dayton, who served a dozen years in the U.S. Navy before entering the Jesuits. He hasn't been trained in the more traditional seminary setting, so he said he couldn't comment on its strengths and weaknesses.

All he knows is that Boston College provides a world class faculty, which brings in both Jesuit and non-Jesuit experts, dedicated both to academics and how theology interacts with real-world pastoral ministry.

"It cannot be about just chasing footnotes. It has to be about more," he said about theology education.

Perhaps, he said, church seminary education is comparable to that of leadership training in the military. There are different models for both. In the military, officers are trained via service academies at West Point or Annapolis, officer candidate schools, or ROTC on civilian campuses. They each differ in the amount of separation from civilian society.

"You see something similar here," he said, noting that older Jesuits he knows will regularly reference their own more cloistered formation. "Here it's not just Jesuits by themselves. I'm with laypeople. That's huge," he said.

Matt Stewart, a Jesuit scholastic from St. Louis, is 37, and entered the community when he was 29 after working as a teacher at a Jesuit high school.

He said that Jesuit formation provides an antidote to the clericalism often lamented by Francis. Few admit to being infected by it. But the critique of church clericalism is critical of an over-focus on outward signs, such as wearing of cassocks and other sometimes flamboyant clerical garb, cloaking a resort to traditionalism that heavily relies on asserting clerical authority. Francis once famously warned against a formation that created "little monsters," newly-ordained priests who embrace clericalism.

Stewart said the formation process he has undergone makes that unlikely.

"The way the Society of Jesus does formation, you can't hide," he said. It's common for formation directors to pull aspiring scholastics aside, offering critiques on their personal quirks that create issues in the community.

As a Jesuit, he said, "you are doing real-life ministry from the first day." For him, it was praying with a dying nun at a nursing home on his first day in the community.

"We are not locked up somewhere," he said.

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