

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

December 8, 2010 at 2:52pm

154-year-old American seminary in Belgium to close

by NCR Staff



Photo from the American College's 2007 sesquicentennial observance showing Archbishop Joseph Rauber, papal nuncio, and Cardinal William Levada

LEUVEN, BELGIUM -- The American College of Louvain, the seminary the U.S. bishops have administered in Leuven, Belgium, since 1857, will close at the end of this academic year. The decision to close the school in June 2011 was made by the board of bishops of the American College and was confirmed last month during the U.S. bishops' annual fall meeting.

The seminary community was told of the decision Nov. 17, and it was made public Nov. 22.

"Enrollment has not grown at the American College to a sustainable level. In addition, the seminary has struggled with obtaining qualified priests for its faculty," said a news release from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops announcing the school's closing. "Small enrollment creates significant financial challenges as well as difficulties for priestly formation," the release said.

The American College is one of two European seminaries governed directly by the U.S. bishops; the other is the Pontifical North American College in Rome.

Since 2005, enrollment at the school has been between 12 and 16 seminarians. A strengthened recruitment campaign brought enrollment up to 19 this year, administrators at the college told NCR. The seminarians come from the Milwaukee archdiocese and the dioceses of Green Bay and Madison, Wis.; Portland, Ore.; Rochester, N.Y.; Cheyenne, Wyo.; and Orange, Calif. Seminarians from the Holy Cross Fathers; the Salford, England, diocese; and dioceses in Eastern Europe also have students at the school.

The American College also has nine students in residence working on postgraduate degrees and about five people each semester on sabbatical, administrators said. The college has a capacity of 125 students.

The Program for Priestly Formation, the set of norms developed by the U.S. bishops to guide seminary formation programs, says, "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 this necessary community environment for priestly formation led to the decision to close the American College," the bishops' conference news release said.

The Pontifical North American College in Rome, which opened in 1859, has an enrollment of 239 students -- 226 Americans, 11 Australians and two Canadians -- for the 2010-11 academic year. It is "the largest enrollment in recent memory," according to a report from Catholic News Service.

The American College in Louvain has been affiliated with Belgium's Catholic University of Leuven since 1897. "Since the Catholic University of Leuven is greatly subsidized by the Belgian government, American College students have been able to study at Catholic University, which now ranks with Oxford, Harvard and Cambridge as among the world's most prestigious universities, at very low cost," administrators told NCR.

Depending on the student's academic program, the total cost of tuition, room and board for a seminarian at the American College of Louvain has ranged from \$22,000 to \$24,000 per year.

Although the American College is under the supervision of the U.S. bishops' conference, it has always supported itself with student tuition and financial gifts from donors, alumni and friends, "among whom, of course, have been a number of individual bishops and dioceses," administrators said.

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The American College in Louvain was established with the dual purpose of training young European men to serve as missionary priests in North America and to train young American seminarians in one of Europe's preeminent philosophical and theological educational centers.

More than 1,200 priests have received their seminary training at American College over the years, including Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, known for his radio and television programs, which ran from 1930 through the late 1960s. Other notable graduates include Bishop Edward Braxton of Belleville, Ill.; the late Bishop Charles Buswell of Pueblo, Colo.; and Bishop David Ricken of Green Bay.

Ricken is also chairman of the board of bishops for the American College, and it fell to him to explain the closing to the seminary community.

"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,"

Ricken wrote in a letter announcing the closure.

[Contributing to this report was John A. Dick in Belgium and Catholic News Service.]

Online

Read a short history of the American College of Louvain on the NCR Web site at NCRonline.org/node/21531.

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