

Woodstock Theological Center to close in June

Jerry Filteau | Feb. 15, 2013
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After almost 40 years as a leading U.S. institution of Catholic theological research and reflection, Woodstock Theological Center will close its doors June 30.

Formed by the Jesuits in 1974 and based at Georgetown University here, the center has been a significant resource for developments in Catholic thought on a variety of issues.

The center's closing will not affect the vast and historic Woodstock Library at Georgetown, one of the most notable Catholic theological libraries in the country, which will remain at the university.

The late Jesuit Frs. Avery Dulles and Walter Burghardt were among internationally noted scholars who served as senior research fellows at the center. Burghardt started its Preaching the Just Word project, which continues to help hundreds of priests across the country better integrate Scripture and Catholic social teachings in their homilies.

Jesuit Fr. Gasper Lo Biondo, director of the center since 2002 and an expert in economics and globalization, said the decision to close the center was part of "an ongoing strategic reflection" by the three East Coast Jesuit provinces -- New York, New England and Maryland -- that govern it.

It comes in conjunction with plans to merge the three provinces into one within the next few years "because of the diminishing number of Jesuits," he said.

"They're looking at the allocation of resources -- both men and money," he said.

He said when Woodstock College, the first U.S. Jesuit seminary, closed its doors in 1974, it freed up a number of Jesuit theologians for other work, and at the time, little theological research was being done at Catholic colleges and universities across the country, so the center filled a need.

"In 40 years, the situation has changed very much," Lo Biondo said. "The whole context has changed. In the last 40 years, theological research has been taken up by the universities more."

The three East Coast provinces staff 12 Jesuit colleges and universities, he said. "And, of course, the highest priority is teaching young Jesuits theology, preparing them for priesthood" at the Jesuit schools of theology and ministry at Boston College and at the Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University, in California.

With those other needs, the East Coast provincials "decided they would not be able to sustain a commitment to Woodstock because theologians of the caliber to be Woodstock fellows are needed elsewhere," he said.

Besides Dulles and Burghardt, other nationally known Jesuit thinkers and movers who have helped form the Jesuit core of senior fellows at the center in recent decades have included Frs. John Langan, David Hollenbach, Drew Christiansen and Fred Kammer.

Woodstock Theological Center has ongoing programs on Catholic social teaching, social ethics for business, spirituality, religion and public policy, public policy and government, science and religion, and interreligious dialogue.

It has also sponsored research, forums and seminars on a variety of other issues, including health care, immigration, women's issues, Catholic education, evolution, spirituality, ecclesiology, and values in public life, to name a few.

The center currently lists 14 research fellows, among them:

- Jesuit Fr. John Haughey, senior fellow in the center's Science and Religion program and in the Arrupe Program in Social Ethics for Business. A former theology professor at Loyola University Chicago, he also coordinates the center's research on the theology of Catholic higher education and directs a four-year-old colloquium of scholars on the Catholic intellectual tradition's response to those who argue that science and technology will eventually replace religion.
- Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, director of the Religion and Public Policy program. He is a former editor of *America* magazine, author of a trilogy of books on how the church is run at the diocesan, national and international levels, and an expert on church affairs frequently cited by CNN, The Associated Press, *The New York Times* and many other print and broadcast media here and abroad, including *NCR*.
- Franciscan Sr. Ilia Delio, director of the Science and Religion program. With two doctorates, in theology and pharmacology, she is a former chair of spirituality studies at Washington Theological Union and author of more than a dozen books on spirituality and on science and religion.
- John Borelli, a leading expert on ecumenical and interreligious affairs. In 16 years on the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' ecumenical and interreligious staff, he coordinated the U.S. Catholic-Buddhist and Catholic-Hindu dialogues and three regional Catholic-Muslim dialogues, as well as assisting in the Catholic-Anglican and Catholic-Orthodox dialogues. Since 2004, he has taught at Georgetown and served as special assistant to the president for interreligious initiatives, coordinating programs and activities to increase interreligious dialogue and understanding throughout the university.
- Fr. Raymond Kemp, a Washington archdiocesan priest, who succeeded Burghardt as director of Preaching the Just Word and also directs the center's Faith in the City Project and participates in its migration program. He has been noted for years for his innovative work to help revitalize education, social services and pastoral life in East Coast urban areas from Washington to New York.

The center has also had a longstanding program of international visiting fellows, promoting U.S.-international collaboration in theological exploration. This academic year it has three international fellows:

- Julie Clague, a theologian at the University of Glasgow, Scotland, who is exploring changing nuances over the past century in the understanding of "Christian conscience" as it relates to evolving understandings of Catholic identity.
- Fr. Denis Edwards, a theologian at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, who is exploring how Catholic Trinitarian and incarnational theology can contribute to a fully Christian ecological theology.
- Xiaoyu Peng, a history professor at Peking University in Beijing who has a doctorate in medieval studies from The Catholic University of America and is researching how the works of Jesuit Fr. John Courtney Murray, Msgr. John A. Ryan, Dorothy Day and other leading U.S. Catholic social thinkers might contribute to building up a sense of social justice in a non-Christian nation such as China.

The Woodstock Theological Center inherited its name (and library) from Woodstock College, the first Jesuit seminary in the United States, which opened its doors in 1869 in rural Woodstock, Md., a few miles west of Baltimore.

The seminary's most notable faculty member was Murray, who taught there from 1937 to his death in 1967. Murray's writings on the distinct roles of church and state in society have had enormous influence on U.S. Catholic theology since the middle of the 20th century, and on world Catholicism since the 1960s, after they served as the main basis of the Second Vatican Council's Declaration on Religious Liberty.

In 1969 the seminary was moved to New York, where it worked in collaboration with Union Theological Seminary and the Jewish Theological Seminary -- a short-lived experiment that ended in 1974 with the closing of the seminary and the transfer of its library to Georgetown University.

Although the library is still called the Woodstock Library and its arrival coincided with the opening of the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown, Lo Biondo said the collection is owned by the Jesuits and is on permanent loan to the university, which funds its maintenance and operations.

With 190,000 circulating volumes, 700 periodical titles and rare-book holdings of approximately 17,500 titles, the library describes itself as "one of the oldest and most notable theological libraries in the United States."

Among valuable works in more modern parts of the Woodstock Library's collection are the complete works of Murray and two sets of the writings, including unpublished writings, of the noted French Jesuit paleontologist and philosopher Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

The library says its 17,500 rare book holdings include "an outstanding collection of 15th- through 19th-century counter-reformational and American theological works" as well as a recently acquired "collection of primary Jesuit resources assembled by Libreria Antiquaria Soave, Torino [Turin, Italy], entitled *De Societate Jesu ...* a collection of primary texts stretching from the founding of the Jesuits to the Suppression in 1773."

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