



Now a decade old, the International Theological Institute in Austria exercises an increasingly important influence through its graduates, particularly in Eastern Europe.

COURTESY OF ITI

Breathing with Both Lungs

■ **Kartause Maria Thron, a 14th-century former Carthusian monastery in Gamsing, Austria, where the ITI is located.**

By Jeff Ziegler

Among the lesser known of the 482 saints canonized by Pope John Paul II is St. Zdislava of Lemberk (c. 1215-52). While on an apostolic journey to the Czech Republic in 1995, he canonized her and said:

The life of St. Zdislava, who was

born in Moravia and lived in northern Bohemia in the thirteenth century, is marked by an extraordinary capacity for self-giving. This is shown particularly by her family life, in which as the wife of Count Havel of Lemberk she was—to use the words of my venerable predecessor Paul VI—“an example of marital fidelity, a support of domes-

tic spirituality and moral integrity.” It is also confirmed by her generous efforts in charitable and relief work, especially at the bedside of the sick, for whom she showed such care and concern that even today she is remembered as the “healer.” St. Zdislava, by intensely living the spirituality of a Dominican tertiary, was able to make a gift of herself, in the words of Jesus: “It is more blessed to give than to receive” (Acts 20:35). This is the secret of the great attraction which her figure always exercised during her life, as well as after her death and still today.

Among the lesser-known acts of John Paul’s reign was the Congregation for Catholic Education’s decision in October 1996 to establish a pontifical institute in Austria and formally entrust it to the patronage of St. Zdislava. In the decade since it was founded, the International Theological Institute for Studies on Marriage and the Family has gained the reputation for offering a rigorous grounding in theology in an atmosphere of fidelity to Catholic teaching. While few in number, the 127 graduates of its master’s, licentiate, and doctoral programs are quietly exercising an increasingly important, and even disproportionate, influence in Catholic academia and in other Catholic spheres, particularly in Eastern Europe.

SELFLESS SURRENDER TO TRUTH

In his homily at the opening of the International Theological Institute (ITI) in January 1997, Cardinal Christoph Schoenborn of Vienna, the institute’s grand chancellor, exhorted faculty and students to follow the example of St. Thomas Aquinas and surrender to the truth of the Catholic faith:

Thomas Aquinas is a holy theologian. He is not holy despite his theology, but was pronounced holy *as* a theologian . . . When the Church declares someone a saint, she recognizes that the mystery of Christ clearly radiates from him, the wisdom of the cross, the weakness of God which is more powerful than all human wisdom. In what is the theology of Thomas Aquinas a visible expression of the mystery of the cross? . . .

Thomas was a holy theologian, because he did theology, not to please others, not to become famous, not to be interesting, not to develop "his own original point of view" and then defend it obstinately, but because his theology flowed from an unconditional surrender to the truth, which is Christ . . . Selfless surrender to truth—in this selflessness of Thomas's theology one can see the light of the wisdom of the cross. He selflessly communicates the light of truth. He selflessly allows himself to be penetrated by the light of truth . . . This is the selflessness of the great teacher: not to put on imposing airs as an intellectual, not to use complicated technical jargon to impress and blind students and thereby to make them unfree and immature under tutelage.

Under the leadership of Dr. Michael Waldstein, a tenured Notre Dame professor who became the ITI's founding president, the institute developed a curriculum of almost unprecedented scope that reflected the breadth of his own academic background. A native Austrian and an alumnus of the Great Books program of Thomas Aquinas College in California, Dr. Waldstein holds advanced degrees in philosophy from the University of Dallas, theology from Harvard University, and Sacred Scripture from the Pontifical Biblical Institute. Now a senior professor at the ITI, he recently completed a more precise re-translation of Pope John Paul's audiences on the theology of the body that has been published by Pauline Books and Media.

Centered on Sacred Scripture and the Fathers and doctors of the Church, the institute's STM (master of sacred theology) curriculum includes selections from the writings of ten ecumenical councils, a dozen popes, and Saints Augustine, Benedict, Cyprian, Leo, Jerome, Anselm,

Bede, Thomas Aquinas, and Alphonsus Liguori.

STM students also read an extraordinary array of prominent ancient, medieval, and modern thinkers—some pagan, others Catholic, and still others hostile to the teaching authority of the Church. Among them are Aristotle, Euclid, Lucretius, Plato, Arius, Nestorius, Eusebius, Bacon, Balthasar, Raymond Brown, Copernicus, Descartes, Darwin, Fitzmyer, Galileo, Goethe, Hobbes, Hume, Kant, Kierkegaard, Luther, Machiavelli, Marx, Nietzsche, Pascal, Ratzinger, Scheeben, and Wojtyla. All students are required to learn Greek and Latin, while Hebrew is offered as an elective.

In keeping with its emphasis, the institute organizes lectures, symposia, and conferences on marriage and family life and offers a course in natural family planning instruction. Classes are conducted in English and German.

FROM THE EAST AND WEST

During the last decade of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II repeatedly challenged the Church to "breathe with both lungs" of Western and Eastern Christianity. In response to this challenge, the Eastern Fathers are particularly well represented in the ITI's curriculum: students encounter the works of Saints Athanasius, Basil, Cyril of Alexandria, Dionysius, Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, John Damascene, and Maximus the Confessor.

Like its curriculum, the institute's student body is composed of students from both the East and the West. According to statistics provided to CWR by ITI development director Virginia Mortensen, the majority of graduates come from the United States, Ukraine, Romania, Lithuania, and Slovakia; current graduates come from those nations as well as Austria, Belarus, Canada, Estonia, France, Germany, India, Italy, Poland, Russia, Slovakia, and the United Kingdom. One third of the 55 students are Eastern Catholics, and Mass is offered daily in both the Roman and Byzantine Rites. During their years at the institute, Eastern Catholic students become more familiar with the Rosary, while Westerners become acquainted with the haunting strains of the Akathist—a Byzantine hymn to Our Lady composed by St. Romanos the Melodist in the sixth century.

"Its location in the heart of Europe,

and the international nature of the ITI, and thus the distinctive nature of its student body and faculty, make the ITI an experience of the universal Church that the United States cannot provide," says Dr. Max Bonilla, vice president for academic affairs at Franciscan University of Steubenville. A member of the institute's board of trustees, Dr. Bonilla told CWR that "the cultural and linguistic richness of the student body allow American students to study theology from a variety of perspectives that

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strengthen their understanding and admiration for the Catholic Church."

Father James McCann, S.J., executive director of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Ad Hoc Committee to Aid the Catholic Church in Central and Eastern Europe, which has given \$1.5 million to the institute over the past decade, concurs:

In a unique way it brings together Catholics from the East and West...It brings together and builds true mutual respect for the traditions of Latin and Eastern Rite Catholics alike. It has created a loving community in which families thrive and where young and old genuinely learn from each other. It provides at the same time a strong theological and philosophical formation and a community of learning to bridge the academic and the pastoral dimensions of Catholic life.

INFLUENCE IN ACADEMIA

Reflecting upon the first decade of the ITI's existence, Dr. Waldstein told CWR that "we have succeeded for the most part in reaching our main goal, which is the deep formation of the mind and also the heart of our students and faculty through a rigorous theological education at the feet of the great

masters of theology in a rich setting of Christian community."

Perhaps because of the rigor of the theological education, any concern that graduates of a new institute would have difficulty being accepted for studies elsewhere or finding academic positions has proven unfounded. Thirty graduates are studying for advanced degrees, and dozens more are involved in the educational world:

- nearly three dozen alumni are on the faculty or staff of colleges and universities in Austria, Estonia, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, Nicaragua, Ukraine, and the U.S.
- a dozen are involved in secondary school education, and one founded a Catholic middle school in South Carolina
- five teach in seminaries in India, Italy, Slovakia, Ukraine, and the U.S.

Father Gregory Arby, an Indian priest who is now a professor of dog-

One former student, Fr. Florin Vasiloni, is now an archpriest with oversight over 27 parishes; he served as the Romanian Greek Catholic Church's official representative to the parliament's national prayer breakfast in November.

matic theology at St. Joseph's Pontifical Seminary in Kerala and editor of a Catholic magazine, told CWR that "my thinking pattern became more in the direct track with the Church because of the ITI." Oleg Novoselsky, who teaches at a Ukrainian university and seminary, says that his years in Austria have helped him develop "lucidity in thinking and in presenting arguments, prudence in theological research, faithfulness to the truth, to the Church."

The writings of three young alumni have already exerted an influence in the theological world. The author of *Men and Women Are from Eden: A Study Guide to Pope John Paul II's Theology of the Body*, Mary Healy is also coeditor of *Behind the Text: History and Biblical Interpretation* and *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation*. Alyssa Lyra Pitstick's newly published *Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* has provoked much discussion

in the journal *First Things*. Father Johannes Schwarz's doctoral dissertation on limbo was noted last year in European and American Catholic media venues as diverse as *Catholic World News* and the *National Catholic Reporter*.

In addition, an American alumnus is editor of Sophia Institute Press, while another, now academic dean at a public charter school, has served as editor of Emmaus Road Publishing.

INFLUENCE IN THE CHURCH

The influence of the institute's alumni extends beyond the world of Catholic academia and publishing. A remarkable 20 percent of the institute's alumni are priests, religious, consecrated laity, or seminarians. While some found their vocations during or after their years at the institute, others—particularly Eastern Catholics—were sent to the ITI by their bishops for seminary study. Msgr. Larry Hogan, who has served as the ITI's president for the past year, told CWR, "Among the most significant accomplishments I would not leave out the seminary program which continues to prepare a generation of new priests for service to the church. Based on the spiritualities of both lungs of the Church, East and West, it would be difficult to find its equal in the Church."

One former student, Fr. Florin Vasiloni, is now an archpriest with oversight over 27 parishes; he served as the Romanian Greek Catholic Church's official representative to the parliament's national prayer breakfast in November. A British alumnus recently wrote the diaconate training texts for his archdiocese. Austrian and American alumni have served as staff or board directors of pro-life organizations and lay apostolates, including Jugend fuer das Leben (Youth for Life), the World Youth Alliance, and Catholics United for the Faith.

It is perhaps in Eastern Europe, though, that the institute's influence has been most manifest. "Graduates have begun to exert a very positive influence on the life of the Church over a remarkably wide array of countries, extending from Central and Eastern Europe to the farthest reaches of the former Soviet Union," Father McCann told CWR. "In a variety of settings, from family life centers in Lithuania to youth formation teams in Ukraine, from catechetical groups in Romania

and Slovakia to parish councils in Tbilisi, Georgia, graduates are building the pastoral capacity of the Catholic Church and helping to form a Catholic conscience for today's Europe."

Several Eastern European alumni work for their dioceses, whether as family life directors or bishops' secretaries, while others work in parish marriage and family life ministry or religious education. A Lithuanian alumnus who is a doctoral candidate at the Sorbonne writes commentaries on the Sunday readings for the Internet version of his nation's largest newspaper. A Czech alumnus founded a consulting group that is raising funds to build a major pilgrimage and retreat center. An Estonian alumnus is spokesman for the Catholic Church in his nation and has helped translate the Roman Missal and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* into his native tongue. One alumnus is business manager for a Greek Catholic journal; another is president of a Catholic radio station in Lithuania. One alumna is secretary to the president of a Ukrainian Catholic university, while another serves as secretary to the head of a religious community.

FUTURE CHALLENGES

The institute's ecclesiastical degrees were recently granted recognition by the Republic of Austria and thus by the European Union. In preparing the paperwork for this recognition, the ITI had to examine the differences that distinguish it from other Catholic theological institutions.

Commenting on these differences, ITI president Msgr. Hogan, an American-born priest incardinated in the Archdiocese of Vienna, told CWR:

In general it may be said that the ITI provides a stronger philosophical foundation and Thomistic orientation than that offered by similar institutions. Introductory courses in which the professor lectures to explain the material are less common at the ITI, which emphasizes the reading of texts and their discussion (seminar method) even at introductory levels of learning . . . This method is reserved for more advanced students at other faculties . . .

Because of its mission to be a bridge between the Eastern and the Western branches of the Church, the ITI provides a number of cours-

es in Byzantine theology, combined with a rich Byzantine liturgical life that is not found elsewhere in Austria and very seldom elsewhere. Taking seriously its specialization in marriage and family, the ITI provides the theological foundation for this study without, however, the practical courses in counseling, etc., that would be characteristic of a marriage and family institute as such, which the ITI as a theological school is not.

While both Dr. Waldstein and Msgr. Hogan—who earned his doctorate at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and knows eleven languages—serve on commissions of the Austrian bishops' conference, "this does not mean that all the bishops in Austria are enthusiastic supporters of the ITI," says Msgr. Hogan. "Bishops who have theological faculties in their dioceses are committed to supporting them." Nevertheless, he says, "The acceptance of the ITI in Austria has grown stronger over the years, although some members of theological faculties still consider the ITI as competition."

Since its inception, the ITI has held classes at Kartause Maria Thron in Gaming [pronounced Gah-ming], a former Carthusian monastery that houses the Austrian program of Franciscan University of Steubenville, which played a key role in the ITI's early development. According to archival material provided to CWR by Franciscan University chancellor Fr. Michael Scanlan, T.O.R., the ITI was founded following the closure of a marriage and family institute in the Netherlands. After the German bishops were invited to continue the work of the institute (and demurred), the Holy See asked the Austrian bishops to do so, and through the assistance of Franciscan University, the ITI began to offer classes a year before its opening as a pontifical institute.

Kartause Maria Thron also houses the Language and Catechetical Institute and the Austrian program of Ave Maria University, whose students take classes at the ITI. The ITI is currently seeking larger facilities closer to Vienna.

In a letter published last year on the institute's web site, Cardinal Schoenborn wrote that the Congregation for Catholic Education is encouraging the ITI to add more faculties and become a

Catholic university. Until a full-fledged faculty of 12 chairs develops, however, "it would be premature of speak of developing into the Catholic University of Austria," Msgr. Hogan

already strong. So many well-educated Catholics, fluent in English, fast becoming the lingua franca of all of Europe, and keeping in close touch to share and reflect on their exper-

■ Newly ordained graduate Fr. Yuriy Kolasa of Ukraine gives a fellow ITI graduate his priestly blessing.



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told CWR. "The move to a new campus should solidify our identity in a healthy way and compel us to interact more frequently with other theological faculties in Central Europe."

Whether or not the institute grows into a Catholic university, Msgr. Hogan desires to continue the institute's legacy of service to the Church. "A short time after our local ordinary [Bishop Klaus Kueng] became bishop of the diocese [St. Poelten], Dr. Waldstein and [I] had a long talk with the bishop: 'How can we help you and the diocese, Your Excellency?' With that attitude we want to say to all of the bishops who send students to us: How can we help you? How can the ITI better serve the Church? In that spirit the ITI is going forward."

While the ITI is already having a remarkable influence through the lives of its graduates, Father McCann believes that "it is in the future that we will see most clearly the lasting benefits of Gaming. The Gaming network is

iences—this group will contribute mightily to the leadership of the Church."

In this way, the pontifical institute that the Church entrusted to the patronage of St. Zdislava will continue to fulfill the hopes expressed by Pope John Paul in her canonization homily:

Her example seems remarkably timely, particularly with regard to the value of the family, which—she teaches us—must be open to God, to the gift of life and to the needs of the poor. Our saint is a marvelous witness to the "Gospel of the family" and to the "Gospel of Life," which the Church is more than ever committed to spreading during this transition from the second to the third Christian millennium. ■

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