AGGIORNAMENTO
ON THE HILL OF JANUS
THE AMERICAN COLLEGE
IN ROME, 1955–1979

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The Pontifical North American College opened its doors on December 8, 1859 with a modest contingent of thirteen students. Blessed Pope Pius IX had great hopes for the Church in the United States. As the Catholic Church was under siege throughout Europe, and especially in Italy, the Pope sensed the devotion, enthusiasm, and promise of the Americans. He hoped that the liberties enshrined in laws of the United States of America would foster and protect the ancient Church of Christ, allowing her to flourish and to renew her presence around the globe.¹

That same enthusiasm found expression on October 14, 1953, during the dedication of the new North American College seminary on the Janiculum Hill by another successor of Saint Peter, Pope Pius XII. Following the Allies’ victory in World War II, the common sentiment was that Americans could do anything. Pope Pius XII described that American verve, as had his predecessor nearly one century earlier, and tried to direct it as he dedicated the new American seminary and its chapel:

This is a building that has its foundation set deep in the generous and often trying sacrifices of the Bishops, the Alumni and the loyal faithful whom they serve. May God reward them. Its large and majestic though severe lines, drawn by an architect of rare distinction in his profession, have been measured by the far-seeing wisdom of a zealous hierarchy. Its completion lights a stronger flame of hope for the Church in the United States of America and in the world. All this, it seemed to Us, adds up to a grave and sacred responsibility that rests on you, Our dear young seminarians, and on those who are to follow you. Will the sacrifice cheerfully offered for your sake be repaid in kind and with interest? Will the hopes and plans cherished by your Bishops, cherished by Us, be fulfilled? Your eager hearts are quick to answer: yes. But reflect a moment. That will be true only under one condition: that you become priests worthy of the name.²

In 1953, the Pontifical North American College was led by Bishop Martin J. O’Connor, who had served as Rector since 1946. Born in Scranton, Pennsylvania in 1901, he lost his parents, Martin John

The original 1859 North American College which became the postwar Casa Santa Maria.
and Belinda Catherine Caffrey, when he was young. He received his elementary education at the local James Madison Elementary School, followed by studies at Saint Thomas High School and Saint Thomas College, leading to his graduation in 1918. He then began his studies for the priesthood, first attending Saint Mary’s Seminary in Baltimore, Maryland, and then Theological College at The Catholic University of America. At that point, the country was involved in World War I, and O’Connor enlisted in the United States Army. Following the hostilities, he returned to his seminary studies and was sent to Rome, to the Pontifical North American College on the via dell’Umiltà. There he completed his preparation for the priesthood and his studies, earning a doctorate in Sacred Theology from the Pontifical Urban College, and was ordained a priest in the Basilica of Saint John Lateran on March 15, 1924. O’Connor returned home and, after two years at Saint Peter’s Cathedral in his home diocese of Scranton, he was assigned to return to Rome for studies in canon law, earning a doctorate from the Apollinare in 1929. Once returned to Scranton, he held various diocesan posts, including Rector of the Cathedral of Saint Peter, Vicar General, and finally Titular Bishop of Thespiae and Auxiliary to William Joseph Hafey, Bishop of Scranton, being consecrated on January 27, 1943. Three years later, O’Connor was named Rector of his Roman seminary alma mater, the Pontifical North American College.

O’Connor’s seemingly effortless rise within the ranks of the Church had not prepared him for the strenuous labors that faced him in Rome, which would be his greatest work and legacy. O’Connor was not the first post-war Rector. That honor fell to a Chicago priest, Monsignor J. Gerald Kealy. A man of sterling record, intellect, talent, and administrative skill, athletic and handsome, Kealy was also known as a very happy and fine pastor in Chicago. Once arrived in Rome he discovered there was no place for him to live, except in an old building grandiosely named the Villa Gabrielli on the abandoned property that once housed a lunatic asylum on the Janiculum Hill, at that time owned by the American bishops. This was the site for the proposed new home of the American College.

The task of renovating the existing College properties was immense. The College in the city on the via dell’Umiltà and its summer Villa Santa Caterina in Castel Gandolfo had both been severely damaged during the war, having been used by the Mussolini government to house hundreds of orphans and displaced families with
Bishop Martin J. O’Connor (Rector, 1946–64) at the Villa Santa Caterina.
Chapter I
The Second Century Begins: Nova et Vetera

The Seminary: Bells and Obedience

Sunday, January 2 was the coldest day of 1955, and reached a high of 29 degrees, Fahrenheit late in the day.\(^1\) It was far chillier when the first bell rang at 6:00 a.m. This first day of the second 100 years of the Pontifical North American College began with no ceremony — and no heat, since that had been provided the night before per the usual schedule along with an allotment of hot water, from 5:00 to 5:40 p.m.\(^2\)

_Benedicamus Domino_, cried the 28 class Beadles, as each knocked on the doors of the members of his _camerata_ group throughout the residence hallways, waiting for the individual response, _Deo gratias_, drowsily given from within.\(^3\) Each man then managed as best he could, scurrying across the cold marble floor of his room and down to the common bathrooms for a rapid cold water wash and shave, in time for the 6:25 a.m. warning bell. Then, dressed in a black American College house cassock, with red sash, white clerical collar, and blue piping and buttons, the American seminarian made his way quickly and in silence along with the other 221 students to the chapel for 6:30 a.m. Morning Prayers, Meditation, and Low Mass — followed by a very un-American breakfast of Italian coffee and bread at 7:45 a.m. in the monumental refectory. Responding to the 8:55 a.m. warning bell, he returned to the main chapel for High Mass at 9:00 a.m.\(^4\) The next warning bell sounded at 10:25 a.m. The next warning bell sounded at 10:25 a.m., announcing the study period at 10:30 a.m., then Rosary at 12:35 p.m.,

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3. The student body was divided into groups known as _camerata_: each was dedicated to a patron saint, led by a Prefect, who interfaced with the student First Prefect and faculty; the group’s Beadle oversaw practical details of the group’s activities. These were important groups, as will be discussed later in this chapter.
4. January 2, 1955, Student Chronicles, Vol. I, NAC, Box S 77: High Mass was offered by Father Evangelisto, assisted by Fathers De Carolis and Schettler as deacon and subdeacon.
and another warning bell at 12:55 p.m. for 1:00 p.m. pranzo, or the main meal of the day. Finally, a brief rest for siesta — his only time alone before nightfall and bedtime.5

At 3:00 p.m., the Sunday afternoon “free-time recreation” period usually began, when sports and other on-campus activities were permitted. January 2 was an exception, since the house followed the Christmas holiday schedule, allowing for the second performance of the annual Christmas chorale, staged in the auditorium at 3:30 p.m. for guest priests and seminarians from the English, Irish, and Scots Colleges. On other Sundays, a late afternoon snack or merenda was provided at 5:00 p.m., followed by the 5:55 p.m. warning bell announcing 6:00 p.m. sung Vespers and Benediction; a 6:55 p.m. warning bell for 7:00 p.m. supper; 7:55 p.m. warning bell for 8:00 p.m. study period; 9:30 p.m. warning bell for 9:35 p.m. Night Prayers, and 10:00 p.m. “Lights Out”— when the College electrician turned off all power for the night in the student residential wings of the cavernous new seminary building.6 “The German College seminarians looked across the city from above the Piazza Barberini to observe each night what they thought was ‘greater-than-German’ discipline and precision, thinking that more than 200 Americans turned off their lights in the same second.”7 The remainder of the coming school year was similar: highly scheduled and passed primarily in silence, broken only by the frequent ringing of bells at the College, and classes at the Gregorian University.8

The Vice Rector, Monsignor Francis F. Reh of New York, was in charge, since the Rector, Bishop Martin J. O’Connor, was absent from the College. O’Connor had contracted influenza while in the United States during his annual November journey for the meeting of the American bishops and of the Episcopal Committee of the College. He returned to Rome for Christmas, and then traveled to Barcelona, Spain, arriving on December 29. He had been invited to dedicate the newest Marymount International School in Barce-

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6. Interview, October 13, 2014 by the author with Msgr. Roger Roensch: The College electrician recalled that he would replace regularly the electrical switches and wiring throughout the College because they had not been designed to support the massive electrical surge each morning when the power was switched back on.
7. Boston, August 15, 2015 E-mail, Bishop Walter Edyvean to the author.
8. January 3, 1955, Student Chronicles, NAC, Box S 77: “Today begins the inevitable classes at the Greg. Needless to say, none were too pleased but all were ready to accept the inevitable.”
Iona, operated by the Religious of the Sacred Heart of Mary, who had a similar school in his home diocese of Scranton, Pennsylvania. Soon after arriving in Barcelona, the sickness struck full force and he remained bedridden, unable to walk and under a doctor’s care until mid-March, with a high fever, radically fluctuating blood pressure, liver problems, and swollen glands. While influenza was still a serious malady during the 1950s, it soon became clear this had developed into something more serious. O’Connor wrote his friend, Count Enrico Galeazzi, the College architect,

> Both the doctors’ judgment and my own are in agreement on the fact that I must allow sufficient time to get some strength. This may be a month as the present condition has been building up for a long time….Unfortunately the infection disturbed my neck glands so that they are badly swollen. This deformity however is gradually disappearing, much to my relief. The Archbishop of Barcelona has come in person and calls by telephone to inquire about progress.10

Galeazzi was his good friend and confidant, and O’Connor wrote frequently. He continued describing his illness in another letter, “Without exaggerating the situation, I know that the strain and tension since 1946 have prepared the way for me to have this rest in Barcelona.”11 But this was more than a rest, for he was given two injections, and two other medicines orally daily for the next two months; unable to walk or offer Mass; and, for the first month, unable to get out of bed. “There will be very little medicine left in Barcelona when I leave,” he quipped to his Vice Rector.12

Since Reh had arrived at the College only a few months earlier, O’Connor’s illness and absence posed a serious challenge. The Rector’s absence for nearly three months, and Reh’s unexpected emergency administration of the College, prepared him for his own term as College Rector in the next decade.

**Finding Faculty**

Reh joined the College faculty in time to begin the 1954–1955 academic year, but was not the Rector’s choice. Following the Col-

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