

Opening a Dialogue, in the Classroom and the Church

By: Hailey Ibberson

Twice a week a number of students at the Catholic University of America walk into a classroom at CUA and retune their ears to a delicate British accent just for a few hours. They sit at desk like any other class, but they learn about the relations of the Catholic Church to the other predominant churches in the world from a man who has been on the front lines of these conversations.

Msgr. Paul McPartlan works with the office of “Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity” at the Vatican. This council appoints its members to dialogues between churches, which aim to unite the Catholic Church with other Christian religions. McPartlan worked on the international dialogue from 2002-2012, as well as the international Anglican dialogue. Then in 2005, he took up work as a member of the International Catholic-Orthodox Dialogue.

Also in 2005, McPartlan was invited to teach at the Catholic University of America and appointed to the position of Carl J. Peter Chair in 2006.

“My work on those different ecumenical dialogues benefits my work here,” McPartlan says, “I’m talking with fresh knowledge of the latest situation.”

His focus in the Theology Department at CUA is Systematic Theology and Ecumenism. He regularly teaches an Honors Course about the Church as a community and an institution, and a high level course for seminarians training for the priesthood about the ordained ministries. Additionally, he teaches classes on ecumenical theology, Catholic-Orthodox dialogues, The Vatican II Council, and the relationship between the Eucharist and the Church.

These focuses nicely mirror the other aspects of his work in the Catholic Church, which he feels services his work instructing young scholars.

Flannery Jamison, a senior with a minor in theology and theology honors track, took McPartlan's class on the Church as a community and an institution a little over a year ago. She took his class not only to fulfill a credit, but an interest as well, she says.

"His class wasn't easy. I certainly had to earn the grades I received. But it was worth it. I retained more of that material than other classes," Jamison says.

Elizabeth Vinarski, also a Catholic University senior, took McPartlan's class because it was the only course that fit into her schedule that would fulfill both her honors track and her theology credit.

"He was really funny to have as a professor and you could tell he was very passionate," Vinarski said. He brought a positive energy to the room and general excitement about learning that Vinarski says was infectious.

McPartlan taught theology for ten years from 1995-2005 at Heythrop College in London, next to the High Street Kensington tube station. McPartlan says he was called to the life of service, and teaching seemed to be an obvious second to him. All aspects of his service, he says, relate back to his calling to the priesthood.

“I felt very much drawn to be a priest,” McPartlan said.

The idea of joining the priesthood came to him as he was studying mathematics at Cambridge. As he neared the completion of his degree, he made the decision to act on the calling he felt toward religious life.

While he was getting his teaching qualification in London, he decided to apply to the diocese of Westminster.

Though he spends much of his time in DC at Catholic University, he is still a priest of Westminster. His clerical superiors gave him specific permission to take the position he holds at CUA, and he regularly reports back to him.

He serves the DC community, but DC is not home. He was born and raised in New Castle in North England. When asked where he calls home presently, he hesitated a moment before laughing and saying, “In a sense, New Castle still.”

“Growing up in England as a Catholic, you are always very conscious of other churches as well. Inevitably, you reflect on relations between the church and what is dividing them.” Though his interest in this calling was perked later in his life, he understands retrospectively how he was groomed to be a part of such dialogues.

England’s tragic history of lives lost to religious battles, with a monarchy largely connected to the shifting of religions in the country and the persistent rivalry between Christian faiths even today, was a present conflict in McPartlan’s childhood.

McPartlan says, though the churches in England are no longer fighting one another, he was aware of the divide as a youth. He says, even as a child, it’s difficult not to wonder what thing must be separating them.

McPartlan returned from a trip to the UK to visit family and friends two days ago and he plans to return to London Easter Weekend to serve mass.

“I alway enjoy doing the regular things priests do-- you know, celebrating mass and preaching,” McPartlan said.

He says there is a distinction between his calling to the priesthood and his calling to participate in these dialogues. He was called to a life of service, and once he had committed to his life of serving the Catholic Church he was called to serve in these more specific ways, he says.

The Vatican II Council gave the go-ahead for the Catholic Church to be involved in the already active ecumenical movement. Towards the beginning of his priestly training, as he was pursuing his doctorate at Oxford, McPartlan developed a particular interest in these ecumenical dialogues.

During his time at Oxford he was sent to study at Venerable English College in Rome. All of his lectures during his time there were done in Italian. He did not speak Italian when he left for Rome, but in time he picked it up as his third language.

“In my own life one particular encounter that was very interesting for me: when I was finishing my studies in Rome a particular Greek Orthodox Theologian, named John Zizioulas came to Rome as a visiting professor to give course for just six weeks in 1984,” McPartlan says.

He took a moment to carefully spell Zizioulas’s name, unprompted, with a sort of reverent respect. His encounter with this man was his first encounter with an Orthodox (“with a capital O”) theologian.

“I was able to have a lot of conversations with him outside of the course and that encounter encouraged my own interest in Catholic-Orthodox dialogue,” McPartlan says, “That was a big factor in my own life.”

McPartlan and John Zizioulas are still in contact today. He says Zizioulas became a bishop in 1986 with the title Metropolitan of Pergamon. The mention of this sparked an idea in McPartlan’s eyes.

McPartlan stood up with purpose and intention, walked across the room, grabbed a very large book off the wall, and returned to his seat, and leaned in over an opened bible. He opened the book right up to the Book of Revelation/Apocalypse with no flipping through pages. He pointed out the passage where Pergamon is mentioned. He pulled out a map shortly after to point out the exact location of Pergamon.

He seems to have a rather advanced understanding of geography from his work with people around the world.

As he described the ecumenical work in which he takes part, he speaks with certainty genuine excitement for the goodness he takes part in. He says the good and necessary work in the ecumenical movement has been a long time coming.

“The church itself is divided. This is a very damaging thing,” McPartlan says.

“His work in ecumenism was also, at its heart, the work of rebuilding, and the sort of person to do that work is kind-hearted and understanding, and it really showed,” Jamison said.

“At the last supper when Jesus’s ministry was coming to its completion he prayed that all of his followers would be one so the world may believe,” McPartland says, “We are made to be one and the sign of Jesus’s grace at work is that the church should be one unity family with a message of unity and peace to the world.”