

UBI EPISCOPUS: A CONVERSATION WITH DONALD CARDINAL WUERL IN THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY YEAR OF ST. PAUL SEMINARY, PITTSBURGH

Alexander J. Schrenk



Pittsburgh Seminarian Donald Wuerl meets Pope Paul VI (1964)

Source: Alexander Schrenk



Msgr. Donald Kraus and Seminarians at St. Paul Seminary

Source: Alexander Schrenk



Fr. George Saladna, St. Paul Seminarian, and the bus to Duquesne University

Source: Alexander Schrenk

Ubi episcopus, ibi ecclesia. “Wherever the bishop is, there is the Church.” These words of Saint Ignatius of Antioch in his *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* are intended to make a theological point about the hierarchical unity of the Church. A practical corollary of that spiritual reality, however, is that no one has as broad and deep an experience of a particular local Church – from the administrative and pastoral, fiscal and spiritual – than its bishop.

For that reason, when Father Joseph Mele, Father Michael Conway, John Bates, and I met last summer to discuss plans to put together a first-ever, fiftieth-anniversary history of St. Paul Seminary in Crafton, we knew that we needed to have the input of the one man who, better than anyone currently living, has the broadest experience of the institution. That man is His Eminence, Donald Cardinal Wuerl. He was a seminarian for the diocese when the seminary was founded by then Bishop John Wright in 1965, he served as its vice-rector and then rector from 1980 until 1985, and he oversaw its administration as bishop of the diocese from 1988 until 2006. Because I study at the Pontifical North American College in Rome, I was given the task of interviewing His Eminence. As a cardinal and a member of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Congregation for Bishops, he is often in Rome.

Upon making the appropriate inquiries, I received the reply that His Eminence was happy to carve out an hour from his busy schedule to speak to me on May 17. We would meet in the parlor of the suite that bears his name at the North American College.¹ There, our conversation lasted longer than an hour. While I have had the privilege of speaking with Cardinal Wuerl at (admittedly, much less) length in the past, I could not help but be impressed and humbled at his willingness to spend such a substantial length of time with me. His attention and alacrity during the interview testified as much to his personal graciousness as to his keen interest in seminary formation as a bishop, and to St. Paul Seminary in particular.

The purpose of this piece, then, is to present some of the many fascinating and helpful insights that Cardinal Wuerl imparted to me during that afternoon conversation in Rome. His recollections of St. Paul’s Seminary were at once illuminating and humorous, thoroughly imbued with an obvious pride and affection for the seminary and its faculty and students. Eventually these recollections will be shaped into a chapter of the forthcoming history of the seminary.

The first question that I asked His Eminence concerned the origins of St. Paul Seminary. At present, it is unique among seminaries in the United States, because it is the only diocesan minor seminary that serves only a single diocese.² Since Cardinal Wuerl served many years as personal secretary to Cardinal Wright, I thought that he would have some special insight into Cardinal Wright’s original vision for the seminary.

First, however, Cardinal Wuerl gave me some insight into his relationship with Cardinal Wright. “Remember,” he told me, “this was the time of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council.” It was obvious that Bishop Wright seized on the talents of the young Donald Wuerl early on, even before his ordination: “He assigned me as a student here. And then, when he would come for the Council, I would be his gofer: go for this, go for that.

I really enjoyed it, because it gave me a little bit of an insight into what was going on in this whole council process.” Of course, Cardinal Wuerl’s back-of-the-scenes insights into the unfolding of Vatican II could easily serve as an interview topic in and of themselves, but we soon returned to the topic at hand.

He continued on to say that one of Bishop Wright’s greatest desires was to found a seminary of Pittsburgh’s own. That had long been

a wish of the diocese’s pastors. The first bishop, Michael O’Connor, made the establishment of a seminary one of his top priorities.

He created St. Michael’s Seminary as one of the first acts of his episcopate, but for reasons relating to the failed creation of a separate Diocese of Allegheny, it closed in 1876. Philosophical and theological training for Pittsburgh seminarians was handled for the most part after that at St. Vincent’s Seminary in Latrobe, although in the 1950s and 60s, with a swelling number of seminarians, other institutions were utilized as well. Cardinal Wuerl himself, for example, studied at St. Gregory’s Seminary in Cincinnati before being selected for the prestigious Basselin Scholarship program at Catholic University’s Theological College in Washington, D.C., followed by theological studies in Rome.

Bishop Wright’s vision was not merely limited to the foundation of a minor seminary, however. Although they never came to fruition, there were plans for a theological institute as well. Before speaking with Cardinal Wuerl, I knew that such a project had been considered, but I was unaware of just how developed these plans had been.

In fact, the diocese already owned the land where the theologate was intended to be: the prospective property was a large parcel of land in Sewickley. What’s more, he told me that “when I was here as an undergraduate student, [...] we had loads of men at the *Casa*,³ studying, getting degrees. Ed Bryce was getting a degree, Don Kraus was getting a degree, we had at least in Europe – in Germany, France, and Rome – men getting their degrees in theology, scripture; George Saladna was in the *École Biblique*. The vision was not just a vision: it was a plan, that there was going to be a theologate, and the faculty was being prepared.”

It was no secret, then, that St. Paul’s was only part of what was to be a much larger project. According to Cardinal Wuerl, the structure of St. Paul’s was modeled on that of the North American College – that is, the seminary as a primarily residential facility, or, in Church parlance, a house of formation. In such an arrangement, seminarians live, work, and pray at the seminary, but the academic courses are hosted at an external institution. In Rome, that is usually the Gregorian University; in Pittsburgh, it was to be Duquesne University.



Bishop Leonard with St. Paul Seminarians

Source: St. Paul Seminary

The founding of a theologate, however, implies a much greater degree of preparation. For one, it sounds as if it would have been a new construction from the ground up. St. Paul’s, in contrast, simply moved into the old buildings and grounds of St. Paul’s Orphanage in Pittsburgh’s East Carnegie neighborhood, which had been abandoned upon the advent of Social Security and Child Welfare programs. Moreover, while a house of formation requires only a few priest faculty members to serve as rector, vice-rector, and

spiritual directors, a full-blown theologate would require a stable faculty of highly educated professors in addition to a separate administrative and formational faculty, all of them priests. It is little surprise, then, that when the social-cultural upheaval of the latter part of the 1960s began to permeate the Church, the first sacrifice made would have been the laborious task of founding the theologate. In Cardinal Wuerl’s words, “in the wake of the Council, [...] this was also the cultural and sexual revolution, and things began to go in a different direction, and the numbers [of seminarians] dropped precipitously. So the plans to go ahead with the theologate stopped. We owned the property up until much, much later.”⁴

What became of the faculty of the theologate, then? Many of the men mentioned by Cardinal Wuerl are still serving in the diocese. Father Edward Bryce, for example, is currently pastor of St. Bede in Point Breeze. He studied sacramental theology at the Gregorian University and upon his return to Pittsburgh, taught as a theology professor at Duquesne University from 1965 to 1971. He later went on to become the founder of the diocesan Justice and Peace Office, leading among other things, pro-life activities for the diocese. In a phone conversation with Father Bryce, he informed me that Bishop

Wright's intentions for him and his fellow student priests were very clear – while it never reached the point of a public announcement, they knew that they were being trained as professors for a future theologate.

The two other men, Father Donald Kraus and Father George Saladna, did end up being involved in seminary formation for the diocese.⁵ Father – later Monsignor – Kraus had already earned a doctorate in philosophy from St. Louis University, and, as Cardinal Wuerl accurately recalled, obtained a doctorate in theology from the *Angelicum* in Rome. Father Saladna studied at the *Biblicum* (that is, the Pontifical Biblical Institute) in Rome, with a year at the École Biblique in Jerusalem as well. They, respectively, would go on to become the first rector and vice-rector of St. Paul Seminary. Monsignor Kraus served in that position longer than any other rector, from its founding in 1965 until Father Wuerl himself took over the reins between 1980 and 1981.

Although there is more to say about the foundation of St. Paul's, my interview with the Cardinal shifted eventually to his own recollections as seminary rector. To begin, I asked whether it was difficult to step into the shoes of Monsignor Kraus, who had been rector so long that the seminary had become, inevitably, identified with him. In response, Cardinal Wuerl had only positive things to say about Monsignor Kraus's tenure: that he "had done what he needed to do, to stabilize the place, to get it going." Building on that solid foundation, when Cardinal Wuerl was appointed rector of the seminary he was not aiming to take the institution in a different direction than Monsignor Kraus had worked for, but simply a broader one.

After all, although he may have studied in Rome during the Council, Monsignor Kraus was still a product of his earlier generation of priests. "He saw the seminary as seminary and not a place for other activities to go on," according to Cardinal Wuerl. That attitude was, in fact, well suited to running a large institution, one where the energies of a varied and numerous student population would have to be focused. And a large institution St. Paul's was at its founding. Its two dormitories, then housed in both Boyle and Domenec Halls, were full, and until the societal and cultural upheaval of the 1970s, it counted a total enrollment of more than a hundred. By the time Cardinal Wuerl was made rector in 1981, the total seminary enrollment was closer to thirty men.

Cardinal Wuerl's tenure as rector, therefore, was marked by a great expansion of the role of the seminary in the diocese. "I wanted the

seminary to be, with all that potential there, to be the center of the diocese: the non-administrative center, the educational, intellectual center." Many of the programs that continue to mark the experience of Pittsburgh seminarians today were initiated by Cardinal Wuerl.

The first of these was a continuing education program for the diocese's priests. After the many ecclesial changes of the 1970s – many of them more a product of speculation than actual Church mandate – there was a need for keeping the knowledge of priests current with what the Cardinal himself called "good, solid stuff." In conjunction with the founding of a continuing education program, there was also the beginning of a tighter partnership with Duquesne University. For the first time, Cardinal Wuerl arranged to have our

diocesan priests, such as the future Daniel Cardinal DiNardo, teaching courses that were cross-listed between the seminary and university catalogs. These courses were wide-ranging: there was "an introduction to Scripture; we had a metaphysics and Christian philosophy; we had a course in priesthood; a course in liturgy; and some of [these courses] were taught on campus, and some of them were taught at St. Paul's."

This supplemental education was a great benefit for Pittsburgh seminarians. "They used to say here [in Rome]," Cardinal Wuerl recalled, "they probably still do – that the Pittsburgh men who came to North American for theology were the best prepared. Because they had all these courses." Those additional courses were not only of benefit to the seminarians. Cardinal Wuerl recalled that in one of the courses, "one of the guys in class – who was not one of ours, he was a lay student – was just overwhelmed by the idea that Jesus

came back from the dead." Although he was a student at a Catholic university, he had evidently never been exposed to the idea, or, at least, not so clearly or effectively as he was in the seminary course.

Cardinal Wuerl's rectorship also saw the beginning of the apostolic works program, now an indispensable element of priestly formation that coordinates with local charitable institutions to allow seminarians to develop their pastoral skills in concrete pastoral situations. The initial and longtime coordinator of that project at St. Paul's was Sister Judith Worden, a Sister of Mercy who had been serving as vice-principal of Canevin High School when Cardinal Wuerl took her on. Having a woman – even a religious sister – serve on a seminary faculty in the early 1980s was, Cardinal Wuerl admits, a "breakthrough" for the time, but it opened the door for Pittsburgh



8 miles from home

seminarians to deal first-hand with the work of the Sisters of Mercy in the diocese.

Many of the programs and initiatives started by Cardinal Wuerl as rector of St. Paul's would strike most seminarians today as entirely commonplace. That is not a coincidence, nor is it a matter of Cardinal Wuerl being ahead of his time. Much more than that, it is because, in what may be some of the most historically interesting memories that Cardinal Wuerl shared, the formation program at St. Paul Seminary ended up setting the tone for seminaries across the country.

The history of how that happened has a direct relationship to Cardinal Wuerl's own story. In 1980, Pope Saint John Paul II asked for an apostolic visitation to all the seminaries of the United States. That process set into motion a major reworking of seminary formation all over the world, which had been operating under less than clear guidelines since the Second Vatican Council. Cardinal Wuerl, serving at that time as rector of St. Paul's, was also appointed to be secretary to the apostolic visitor, Bishop John Marshall. As such, the whole visitation was, without exaggeration, "run out of one room" on the second floor of Domenec Hall at St. Paul Seminary.

The visitation process took more than six years to complete, with more than twenty teams visiting upwards of 220 institutions across the United States. The work of that visitation culminated in the 1990 Synod of Bishops on Priestly Formation. Cardinal Wuerl, by that time Bishop of Pittsburgh, served as one of the members. To conclude the synod, Pope John Paul II promulgated his Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, a document that still defines the Church's vision for priestly formation. It also led to the revision of the Program of Priestly Formation, a document that lays out in practical terms the procedure of formation of Catholic priests. That revision was done largely in line with the recommendations of the apostolic visitation – that is, recommendations drafted in the upper room of a building at St. Paul Seminary and first put into practice here, in Pittsburgh. If there is any indication of the pride that Cardinal Wuerl takes in what he was able to contribute to the Church while serving as rector of St. Paul's, it might be in the form of a physical object: the pectoral cross that Pope John Paul II gave to all the bishop-participants of the synod as a memento. "The cross from that synod," Cardinal Wuerl shared with me, "is the one that I wear when I'm at home."

Cardinal Wuerl also shared much more with me about the history of the seminary, from the many remarkable priests who worked and resided there during his tenure and contributed to the formation of the diocese's future clergy, to his recollections of the seminary's role in the filming of his catechetical television series, *The Teaching of Christ*. Those stories, however, will have to wait for the publication of the seminary's history to be shared.

As I began by stating, Cardinal Wuerl's personal involvement with St. Paul Seminary over so many years and in such a diversity of roles means that his perspective on the institution's history is extraordi-

narily valuable. The only other figure in its history whose service spanned a comparably broad period of time was its long-serving first rector, Monsignor Kraus. (All subsequent rectors have held terms of about five or six years on average.) Sadly, however, Monsignor Kraus is not with us any longer, and so Cardinal Wuerl represents the greatest currently accessible treasury of memory about the institution. As the diocese celebrates this fiftieth anniversary year of priestly formation at St. Paul's, I am profoundly grateful to His Eminence for allowing me to access a portion of that treasury, which is of such great value to the Church of Pittsburgh and, indeed, the Church universal.

Endnotes:

¹ What was formerly a terrace on the fifth floor of the College was enclosed in the 1970s and transformed into suites for visiting prelates. Each bears the name of its benefactor, and Pittsburgh can pride itself on providing two of the apartments. The Cardinal Wright Suite, where Bishop Zubik usually stays when he is in Rome, is located in the College's new tower annex and houses many personal artifacts from the late Cardinal. The Cardinal Wuerl Suite has taken its former place along the fifth floor corridor.

² Seminary academic training consists of two distinct stages. The first stage, philosophical studies, takes place at a minor seminary and is handled over a collegiate track of four years (for men without a prior university degree), or a two-year pre-theology program (for men who already have a four-year degree). Major seminaries, also called theologates, handle the second stage, theological education. St. Paul Seminary, as a minor seminary, therefore handles only philosophical training, and is unique in that it educates only its own seminarians. In contrast, most minor seminaries (such as St. Mark Seminary in Erie), educate seminarians from outside dioceses as well.

³ "The Casa" is the original seat of the North American College. Located near the Trevi Fountain, it was formerly a Dominican and Visitation Sisters convent before being established as a national college for American seminarians by Pope Pius IX in 1859. When the new (and much larger) campus was dedicated on the Janiculum Hill near the Vatican in 1953, the original campus was renamed the *Casa Santa Maria* (translated, Saint Mary's House), and serves as a residence for priests pursuing graduate studies at various universities in Rome.

⁴ The degree to which these plans progressed and when exactly the diocese permanently moved on from the idea of founding a theologate is material for future research, but a May 12, 2012 *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* article indicates that the diocese still owned the property at that time. "The 45-acre property in Sewickley Hills Borough is on Magee Road and priced at \$750,000. Interstate 79 runs parallel to the land, which is adjacent to four private homes on Parkview Lane." The parcel was sold to the Allegheny Land Trust for a nominal \$10 on January 9, 2015.

⁵ Monsignor Donald W. Kraus (1927–2009) was ordained a priest in 1954. Aside from his more than fifteen years of service to St. Paul Seminary, he also served as pastor of St. Scholastica Parish in Aspinwall for thirteen years, from 1981 to 1994. Father George E. Saladna (1933–2011) was ordained in 1958, and after twelve years as vice-rector at St. Paul's, went on to serve as pastor of St. Gabriel the Archangel in the North Side for 15 years, followed by 18 years as pastor of St. Alphonsus in Springdale. He also served as director of the Diocesan Program for the Permanent Diaconate and oversaw the ordination of the first permanent deacons in 1974.