

# Daily Life at the Pontifical North American College

Rev. Michael P. Conway, S.T.L.



**Pope Francis visits Pontifical North American College on May 2, 2015.**

Source: NAC

The historical connections between the Diocese of Pittsburgh and the Pontifical North American College, America's Seminary in Rome, have been well documented. The importance of an institution like the North American College — known more informally as “the NAC” — has also been long-established. But what is life like behind the walls of *Via del Gianicolo, #14*? In this piece, my goal is to take you, my reader, through a typical day at the NAC.

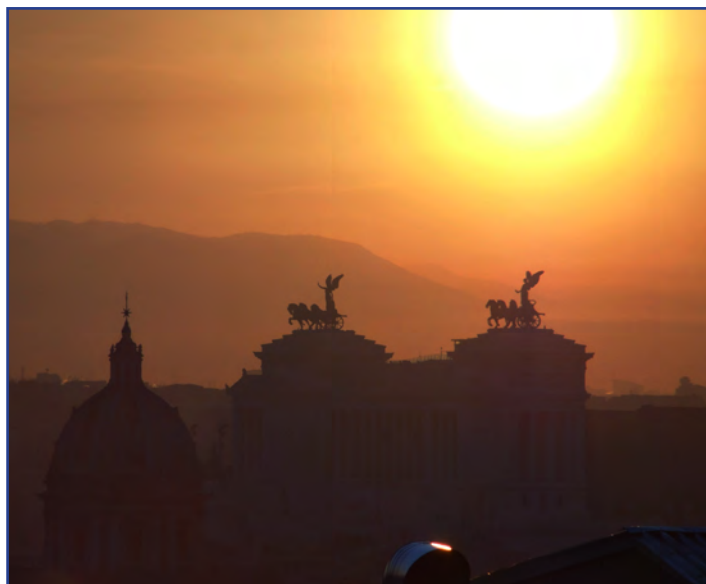
In a certain sense, I've already failed you, because there is no such thing as a typical day at the College. Sure, there are schedules, and plans, but due to the unique setting of the place, such things can quickly go awry. For example, there is nothing normal about daily life during a consistory, or when the bishops are on their *ad limina* visits, and certainly not during a conclave. Still, I'll do the best I can.

Most days, a seminarian's first scheduled activity is at 6:15 AM, when he is expected to be in the chapel for morning prayer. Theoretically, this means you can sleep as late as 6:10, provided you can dress quickly and have a room in the wing closest to the chapel, but those sitting next to you would probably have you get up earlier and shower. So realistically, the day starts much earlier. Morning prayer generally takes about 15 minutes, and is followed immediately by Mass. Most days, one of the faculty members presides and preaches at Mass, but there are days when students who are deacons will preach. Once a week, one of the student priests will preside and preach. Of course, when a bishop or cardinal is visiting the College, they are offered the opportunity to preside and preach. Most tend to avail themselves of it, but not all.

The chapel is more or less empty by quarter after seven, as the community moves towards breakfast. While there are some

that insist that breakfast is the most important meal of the day, this scribe begs to differ. An Italian breakfast is generally small; some sort of pastry, coffee, and juice. In some rare instances, you might see someone eating a bowl of cereal, but probably with yogurt instead of milk. The kitchen staff at the college tries to accommodate American breakfast tastes by making pancakes (which aren't bad) and French toast (which is bad) several times a week, as well as eggs — but I would estimate that at least half of the house tends to just give up and either skips breakfast altogether or eats elsewhere.

No matter which option a student chooses, he must be quick about it, because in all likelihood, he will soon be leaving for class. For the first three years a man is in Rome, he is engaged in what is called the “first cycle” of studies, which culminates in obtaining his STB degree — a Bachelor of Sacred Theology, or *Sacrae Theologiae Baccalaureus*. (Don't let the name fool you; it's actually a graduate-level degree.) At the NAC, all of the first cycle students attend either the Gregorian University, *Santa Croce*, or the *Angelicum*. This writer attended the Gregorian for first cycle, as most of the Pittsburgh seminarians do. The majority of guys walk there every day. It's really a beautiful walk through some of the historic areas of Rome, crossing through *Piazza Navona* and passing the Pantheon before arriving at the Greg, as it is (semi) affectionately known. It takes roughly 25 minutes on foot, so it's a nice stretch of the legs. Some prefer to drastically shorten their commute by riding a bike to school, but that adds a certain element of risk — sharing the road with Roman drivers is not for the faint of heart. Bike parking can also be at a premium. In inclement weather — and winter in Rome is generally rainy — some will take a bus, and in some extreme cases, guys have been known to call for taxis.



**Dawn: View of the dome of the Church of the Most Holy Name of Mary at the Trajan Forum and the Victor Emmanuel II Monument.**

Source: Rev. Michael P. Conway

## Daily Life at the Pontifical North American College (continued)

Once the man arrives at school, he is immediately confronted with the universality of the Church. This is especially true for the men studying at the Greg, which is the largest of the three universities. His classmates come from all corners of the globe, and all walks of life. In general, most are seminarians for various dioceses or religious orders, but there are also a goodly number of religious sisters from various orders. There are also a number of committed lay faithful who are there of their own volition to study theology. At both the Gregorian and at *Santa Croce*, classes are taught exclusively in Italian. Some, like this author, found this to be mentally draining, but others who are more gifted at languages seem to pick it up quickly. The Americans at the Greg have developed a note-taking system that benefits all who participate in it. Three or four students who are more proficient at Italian are assigned to take notes for a given class. They forward their notes to a team of redactors who condense those notes into one set, and then a final team of editors will compare those notes with the previous year's notes and supplement them with some additional research. At the end of the term, the notes are printed, bound, and distributed. Not only are they handy for studying for the exams, but they're quite useful in later ministry, too.

After four hours of class, it's time for the walk back home. The route might remain the same, but this trip is going to be a lot different than the morning commute. Rome has awakened by this point, and so have her tourists. On more than one occasion, large groups of seminarians have noticed tourists discreetly (or not) trying to snap a photo of them. And plenty of tourists stop seminarians to ask for directions – even those tourists who speak neither English nor Italian. (It's always fascinating when the American tourists seem so surprised to encounter other Americans abroad, too.) After arriving back at the college, the seminarians have a few minutes to freshen up before *pranzo*, the mid-day meal.

This is the main meal of the day, and is served family-style in the refectory. A deacon leads the community in prayer, and everyone is seated six to a table. A different group of seminarians serves each day. The first course is usually a pasta. The second course is the meat dish and a vegetable – although there is never meat served on Fridays, in keeping with tradition. For dessert, fresh fruit is usually served, although once or twice a week it is supplanted by *gelato* or something else sweet. The food is actually pretty good, considering that the kitchens are cooking for over 250 people at a time. Some of the pastas, especially, can rival anything you would get at a *trattoria* around Rome. It's a good thing that the walk to class and back is as long as it is.

The rest of the afternoon is a little more open, at least for the first-cycle students. Most days, they won't have afternoon class at all, which gives them a number of options on how to fill that time. Naturally, one must make time for prayer and study, but one also needs to take time for recreation. The NAC has a large sports field at its disposal, complete with a running track. There are also outdoor tennis and basketball courts. With a student population now in excess of 200 men, it's fairly easy to get a group together to play some kind of pick-up game. There is also a fitness center inside the building for those who want to lift. Some choose to eschew the NAC's facilities altogether and go for a run in the city. It's a great way to get to learn Rome and see a lot of history all at once. Those less-inclined towards physical pursuits might gravitate towards one of the common rooms. The main student lounge, in addition to having a bar area that sells various treats, also has a ping-pong table, a foosball table, and a pool table. There is also an extensive library of DVDs to peruse. Groups of guys tend to congregate in the smaller lounges throughout the building for regular showings of favorite programs. *M\*A\*S\*H*, *The West Wing*, and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* all had very loyal followings.



**Pontifical North American College atop the Janiculum Hill.**

Source: NAC



## Daily Life at the Pontifical North American College (continued)

As mentioned, afternoons are not all fun and games, however, as a seminarian is also responsible for an apostolic work. This may mean serving Rome's poor or homeless in one of the many shelters the Church administers, or it may mean doing evangelization work in St. Peter's Square, or doing chaplaincy work for American students studying abroad, or other activities. Additionally, a seminarian meets monthly with his formation advisor and meets every other week with his spiritual director. He is also responsible for his "house job", which is a certain responsibility he has to fulfill towards the community. Sometimes these can be handled in the afternoons, but not always — for instance, the sacristans have to arise well before the rest of the community in order to make sure that the chapel is set up for that day's Mass.

Those seminarians in the second-cycle of studies see things a bit differently. For them, the schedule is a bit inverted, because generally speaking, more of their classes will be in the afternoons. So they must use their mornings more wisely, as they will be away from the building the rest of the day.

Afternoon seems to last later in Rome than it does in the US, but at the NAC, it ends at a very definitive time — 6:45 PM. At this point, the entire community has reconvened in the chapel for evening prayer together. Most have already been there, as every evening the Blessed Sacrament is exposed for an hour of silent Adoration. Following the conclusion of evening prayer, dinner, or *cena*, is served. More often than not, the remaining pasta from lunch makes an appearance, but there are some other items available as well. It is intended to be a smaller meal, and is not the big production that Americans tend to think of when they think of the evening meal. This is served buffet-style, and guys are free to leave when they're done eating — not nearly as formal as *pranzo* was. When the exchange rate is favorable, guys will frequently skip this meal to go out and try some of the local restaurants.



**Donald Cardinal Wuerl with NAC seminarians from Pittsburgh. The author is on the cardinal's left.**

Source: Rev. Michael P. Conway

As the evening wears on, the seminary remains fairly abuzz with activity. The student lounge is open again, and many tend to congregate there. Some are back at work in the NAC's library, which is — unsurprisingly — the largest English-language library in Italy. Others, mindful of the time difference between Italy and the U.S., are using this chance to catch up with loved ones at home. Depending on the day of the week, seminarians might be gathering together based on geographic region to hang out for a while, have some refreshments, and just relax. (For example, Pittsburgh Night was always on a Tuesday. Illinois Night was always on a Thursday. Just two examples.) At 10 PM, "quiet hours" officially begin, so that the early risers can get their rest. Although one might think that most seminarians would be turning in at this point, there are always a few night owls who have lights on well into the wee hours of the morning. Regardless of when they do go to bed, however, the next morning will still start at 6:15 in the chapel.



**NAC rector and seminarians. The author is in last row, far right.**

Source: Rev. Michael P. Conway



**KEY:**  
 1. NAC  
 2. Gregorian  
 3. Angelicum

**Rome, showing NAC, the Angelicum, and the Gregorian University.**

Source: Rev. Michael P. Conway

## Daily Life at the Pontifical North American College (continued)

But like any good schedule, this is all subject to change!

### Suggested reading:

(1) *Stephen M. DiGiovanni, The Second Founder: Bishop Martin J. O'Connor and the Pontifical North American College* (Bloomington, IN: Trafford Publishing, 2013), (2) *The Pontifical North American College: Celebrating 150 Years of Priestly Formation in the Eternal City* (Cincinnati: Making Everlasting Memories, 2010), (3) Archbishop Philip M. Hannan, *Rome: Living Under the Axis – A Look Back at a Turbulent Time in History Through the Letters of a Young Seminarian and Future Archbishop 1936-1940* (McKees Rocks, PA: St. Andrew's Productions, 2003), (4) Brian Murphy, *The New Men: Inside the Vatican's Elite School for American Priests* (New York: Grosset/Putnam,

1997), (5) Aldo Cicinelli (Daniel P. Daley, trans.), *The Church of S. Maria dell'Umiltà and the Chapel of the North American College* (Rome: Marietti, 1970), (6) Robert F. McNamara, *The American College in Rome 1855-1955* (Rochester, NY: Christopher Press, 1956), (7) Francis A. Tournier, *The North American College: Historical Summary and Guide to the New Site on Janiculum Hill* (Catholic Records Press, 1953), (8) Martin W. Doherty, *The House on Humility Street: Memories of the North American College in Rome* (New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1943), (9) Henry A. Brann, *History of the North American College, Rome* (New York: Benziger Bros, 1910), and (10) *Ad Multos Annos: The Tribute – The Pontifical North American College* (CD).



**Pope Francis celebrates Mass in the Chapel of the Immaculate Conception at the NAC in honor Blessed Junipero Serra (May 2, 2015).**

Source: NAC