

# MONSIGNOR JAMES F. CHECCHIO

RECTOR OF THE PONTIFICAL NORTH AMERICAN COLLEGE

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

**M**onsignor James Checchio was ordained a priest of the diocese of Camden, New Jersey, on June 20, 1992. He received degrees in theology and canon law (an S.T.B. in 1991, a J.C.L. in 1993, and a J.C.D. in 1998) from the University of St. Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum) in Rome. He returned to Rome as vice rector of his *alma mater*, the Pontifical North American College (PNAC), in 2003. He's been rector since 2006. In this wide-ranging interview, he discusses his work at the most important seminary in the world for the training of American priests.

**May I ask, Monsignor, when you first sensed your vocation?**

MONSIGNOR JAMES CHECCHIO: In grammar school, but I ignored it until after my first year in college.

**Are you unique in your family?**

CHECCHIO: My Mom's sister is a Dominican sister, the "extern" at a cloistered monastery in Syracuse, New York. I also have a cousin who's a priest in Philadelphia.

**Did a special mentor help you discern your vocation?**

CHECCHIO: Monsignor Tracy, like me an alumnus of PNAC, who's still a parish priest in the diocese of Camden. I served with him during a summer while I was studying here in Rome. After your second and third year at PNAC, you go home summers and serve in parishes.

**What other inspirations or influences moved you?**

CHECCHIO: My two childhood parish priests in Collingswood. Seeing them living the life that I was aspiring to helped me to focus. They set me the example of how to be a parish priest.

On a bigger scene, John Paul II, who became Pope when I was twelve. His outreach to people, his charisma, his being a joyful sign of hope inspired me. I served Masses for him.

Another is Mother Teresa. I worked at her soup kitchens at San Gregorio and in the Vatican. She always had time for us seminarians on her visits.

Not to mention that Pope Benedict's writings speak clearly about how priests should model their lives on Christ's and what that means. They're fundamental to my work here as rector. John Paul II's *Pastores Dabo Vobis* also established the four pillars of formation that we focus on with our students: their spiritual, pastoral, intellectual, and human development. It helped set the framework of how we run the seminary here and how every seminary is run throughout the world. Since last year, our US bishops also give us a program that's geared towards our country. Then, PNAC's board of governors — 14 American bishops — have a specific formation program just for PNAC. We customize those four pillars into what

we hope each seminarian will accomplish in each of his four years here.

**Why did you become a priest?**

CHECCHIO: Becoming a priest has always been an answer to a call; so it doesn't start with us, but with God. The Lord says: "It's not you who chose me, but I chose you." Hearing that call is the motivation; it's the only reason to answer the call. I can't imagine doing anything else with my own life, but you give up a lot when you lay down your life for others. It's similar to marriage, putting



Here, Msgr. Checchio in front of St. Peter's dome, during an audience with Pope Benedict XVI, and in front of the main building of the North American College in Rome

your spouse and children first, except that our bride is the Church.

The priesthood is a response, not a choice. Because of today's materialistic values it's more difficult than in my day to hear that call and to respond to it.

**When I interviewed Monsignor Kelly, the superior at Casa Santa Maria, the graduate house of the Pontifical North American College in downtown Rome, he told me that this school year here on the hill you started with 208 seminarians, the highest enrollment since the 1960s. Is this an unusual "bubble," or the start of a trend?**

CHECCHIO: Good question. For the past three years, our enrollment has significantly increased each year. We're anticipating a net increase of 20 students again this year, but it's too early to call it a pattern.

**What is your sense of Catholicism in relation to US culture today?**

CHECCHIO: The culture is certainly not as supportive as 50 years ago.

**What would you say is your biggest challenge as rector here?**

CHECCHIO: To help the seminarians take on the mind of Christ, to be quiet and listen to what the Lord is asking of them. That's our



overall agenda. They've heard the call and have responded generously, but then what does it mean to become another Christ in the service of His bride the Church? If we listen, the Lord tells us what to do. He tells us through his own example.

**Many US bishops have studied and/or taught at the Pontifical North American College. Is it considered the "Harvard" of US seminaries? Why would you come here to study, rather than remain in the States?**

CHECCHIO: The vast majority of the men who come here are sent by their bishops who think that this experience will help make them stronger priests. Is it the best seminary in the world? Of course, I think so, but I'm biased. PNAC's experience abroad makes our students, in a sense, immigrants. Many American Catholics today are recent immigrants, and their number is growing, so our seminarians learn sensitivity to this reality. Our graduates are also particularly dedicated to the Holy Father because of his proximity. The first

an area of theology. For example, moral theology, sacramental theology, canon law. They're deacons at the beginning of their fourth year and ordained priests at home at the end of their fourth year when they start serving in their home diocese.

**How large a faculty do you have?**

CHECCHIO: Twenty priests, all Americans.

**Do many drop out of the program?**

CHECCHIO: It varies; there's not a consistent rate across the board. The last two years it's been very low. Of this year's 61 first-year students, only one has left. Of our 58 second-year students, only two have left, but the rate's been higher in the past.

**What are the most common reasons for dropping out?**

CHECCHIO: Generally the seminarian discerns that he can't make the necessary sacrifices this life asks of us; that a life in the priesthood is not what God is calling him to. Our job is to help him discern that. Listening to see if he still hears that call is crucial.



week of seminary, our students go to see him at Castel Gandolfo so the Holy Father becomes their mentor.

**You studied for the priesthood in Rome, but at the Angelicum. Why not here?**

CHECCHIO: I studied here, but in the morning seminarians here go downtown to one of the Catholic universities: the Gregorian, the Angelicum, or Santa Croce, for theology classes. The intellectual pillar is downtown. At PNAC, we help to integrate it into the seminarians' lives, which is the harder task. It's one thing to learn from a textbook, but what does that mean to a life's response and what will it mean for service in the pastoral sphere? The seminarian's bishop at home chooses which of the three universities he attends. My bishop had attended the Angelicum, so I did too.

**What is your academic specialty?**

CHECCHIO: Church law. My thesis was on the sacrament of penance.

**Do the seminarians here have a set curriculum?**

CHECCHIO: The first three years they do an S.T.B., a bachelor of sacred theology. It's similar to a masters at home and gives them an overall view of the Church's theology with an introduction to Latin and ancient Greek. Their fourth year they begin a specialization in

**You finished studying here a year before Archbishop Timothy Dolan, now of New York, became rector, and you returned here as vice rector two years after he left; what impact did he have on the North American College?**

CHECCHIO: Huge. He published *Priests for the Third Millennium*, his "rector's conferences," used in seminaries all over the English-speaking world as a tool for formation. He is such a hospitable, friendly and outgoing person. It rubs off. He's a happy, joyful, committed priest, who loves his work and is always available to others. He makes sacrifices look joyful. I was at *Casa Maria* for two years when he was rector. When I was appointed here, I went out to Milwaukee to learn from him what being a rector means.

**I interviewed Archbishop Wuerl, who is on PNAC's board of governors, here on campus last year. He told me that this is "a period of time in the life of the Church when teaching the faith is the priority." Do you agree?**

CHECCHIO: For sure, because it's such a challenge right now to come up with new ways to evangelize. Wuerl is solicitous and supportive of the College. He loves PNAC deeply. His dioceses, first Pittsburgh and now Washington, send the most students. ○