

California school aims to change culture through new-media Catholic grads

By Dexter Duggan

Published in the Feb. 22, 2007, *Wanderer*

SAN DIEGO – The idea of a new Catholic university here focusing on entrepreneurial business and media wouldn't have worked a few decades ago because there were gatekeepers who controlled access in the entertainment industry, says the university's president.

But that was before an individual could post something on the Internet that goes around the world overnight, says Derry Connolly, Ph.D., president of the new John Paul the Great Catholic University.

Now "the landscape in the media has totally changed... Now the door is blown wide open" with access to distribution in the media, he told *The Wanderer*.

Twenty to 30 years ago, "It would have been ridiculous to have a university like this," Connolly said during a late January interview in his second-floor office at the fledgling, eucalyptus-ringed school.

Back then, he said, "We grew up [with] an industry that was dominated by big movies – six or seven companies in Los Angeles controlled everything we saw."

Connolly and like-minded co-founders of John Paul the Great U. saw a need not simply for another Catholic higher-education facility in a Southern California where the Catholic population has surged, but also where new opportunities begged for fulfillment to reach the culture through faith-inspired business enterprises.

"The single thing that impacts culture more is the whole media industry... Our philosophy is, let's start building businesses within that industry... We want to prepare students who will create businesses in media," Connolly said.

The aim isn't to send graduates out looking for entry-level jobs.

Opening last September with 30 students occupying half of the second floor of a business-park building in the Scripps Ranch area of northern San

Diego, the school plans to expand to the entire floor in its second academic year with 90 students. A permanent campus is to come later to accommodate 1,600 students.

The school started by offering two majors, a B.S. in communications media with a concentration in entertainment media, and a B.S. in business with concentration in entrepreneurial business.

The mission statement of the media degree calls for offering preparation for careers “as writers, directors, producers, business owners and investors in film, television, video gaming, animation, interactive media, and the stage. JP Catholic will provide an academic, artistic and practical environment for individuals who feel they are called to influence culture with Christian values.”

The stated mission of the business degree is “to shape creators and innovators, leaders and entrepreneurs at the intersections of communications media, technology and business, guided by the spiritual, moral and social teachings of Jesus Christ. The curriculum will prepare students to create, lead, manage, sustain and grow entrepreneurial product and service companies.”

Alan Lane, the school’s chief operating officer and chief financial officer, told *The Wanderer*, “The goal if they graduate here is they’ll not only have a degree but they’ll have a business... The one thing I tell the students is it amazes me the variety of ways” to make money.

Lane, with a background of 26 years in banking, said, “I absolutely love business,” but now “I get to go to Mass every day,” which had been hard in the business world, while he teaches math at the school.

Lidy Connolly, the school’s chief of administration and wife of the president, said, “There is no other Catholic university focusing on business and media and doing it in the way we’re doing... That’s why we’re unique.”

She asked how many orthodox Catholic big-business leaders come to mind and suggested that Domino’s Pizza founder Tom Monaghan may be the only one.

A few shelves of books serve as the library at John Paul the Great Catholic University – the thinking is that the Internet can supply about anything in the way of literature and research at this new-media school. But the irreplaceable presence of the Blessed Sacrament is provided in the school’s small four-pew-deep chapel, where daily Eucharistic adoration is on the schedule.

Next to the library shelves is a banner with the words of St. Padre Pio, “Pray, hope, and don’t worry.”

The school's Web site (www.jpatholic.com) says: "New media, which is evolving and maturing daily, is poised to radically change the landscape of the media industry. An orthodox Catholic university can be a critical centerpiece to the resurgence. San Diego is a hub for innovation in new media enabling technology and is geographically very close to the creative center of the industry in Los Angeles."

Illustrating the benefits of proximity to Los Angeles, the site announced that screenwriter Chris Riley, a veteran of the Warner Bros. script department, will teach two film courses in the spring quarter.

Daily classes begin at 10 a.m., allowing time for students to ride the bus from morning Mass at local Good Shepherd Church. Students live in an apartment complex about halfway between the school and church and are discouraged from having all their own personal cars to crowd the apartment lot.

Nightly rosary is said at the apartments.

Good Shepherd Church "has as good priests as you'll find in San Diego," school president Connolly said, with a second-career priest there, Fr. Richard Huston, a widower, also assigned by San Diego Bishop Robert Brom to serve as university chaplain.

Connolly said the school ended up at its location after "[w]e spent eight months looking for a place 20 miles north of here. We kept hitting our head on the wall. Total frustration."

Finding the site near Good Shepherd is another example of God's providence, Connolly said. "The miracles the Lord has worked for this school are mind-boggling. God made all the decisions and we just had to follow along..."

"God has blessed us. Bishop Brom has been wonderful to us... Fr. Huston is a gift from God, delightful man," Connolly said, adding that the bishop said, "As long as you stay orthodox, you're welcome in this diocese."

COO Lane said Brom says, "You are where you are so Jesus can be there." Lane added, "We want our students to be prepared to boldly proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ."

The Irish-accented President Connolly said he came from Cork to attend graduate school at the California Institute of Technology in 1977, earning his Ph.D. in five years. He said his first name, Derry, is a nickname where he comes from in Ireland for Jeremiah. "The prophet," he added.

After employment with IBM in Tucson, he arrived in San Diego in 1988 to work for Kodak on computer data storage. After nine years, he joined the University of California-San Diego (UCSD), going on to become director of

the Center for the Commercialization of Advanced Technology mentoring programs there.

Visiting the Franciscan University of Steubenville in 2000 because his daughter wanted to attend the Ohio school, Connolly was amazed at the faith of its students. “That day changed my life... I have never in my life seen so many kids on fire for the Lord.”

Adoring before the Blessed Sacrament there, Connolly said, he heard the Lord telling him, “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if you could build another university with the spirituality of a Franciscan but having a different academic focus?”

Connolly dismissed the thought. “Building a university is a huge task. I wasn’t interested in doing that.”

About a year later, treading in the footsteps of St. Francis during a visit to Assisi, Italy, Connolly was reminded of the inspiration he had in Steubenville to start a school. He buried the thought again.

Then, in 2003, he was asked to teach a UCSD class on entrepreneurship.

“I spent a whole quarter telling kids, you should do something entrepreneurial,” which, Connolly told *The Wanderer*, he realized he himself wouldn’t do. Hey, Connolly told himself, “How about doing a Catholic university?”

John Paul the Great Catholic U. saves money on salaries when staff can rely on outside income. Connolly said he still works part-time for UCSD, while school COO Lane consults for a bank.

“Our salary costs [at JP] are bare-bone... probably less than \$100,000,” and the monthly rent for the school’s 4,400-square-foot space is about \$8 thousand, he said.

Asked about the first year’s operating expenses, Connolly replied, “About \$600K and we’re cash-flow positive... I don’t think we’re going to go bankrupt any time soon.”

Tuition is \$18,000 for a nine-month school year, with financial assistance available.

Outside Good Shepherd after a daily morning Mass, a few students told *The Wanderer* what they like about John Paul the Great Catholic University.

Mollie O’Hare, from Ignacio, Colo., said she was excited about the idea of a vocational Catholic university. “Trying to take back the culture” through the media is very appealing, she said.

Andrea Lynch, of Poway, Calif., cited the uniqueness of the business and media curriculum trying to reach the world with Christ’s message.

Katelyn Lane, of Temecula, Calif., mentioned the classes being scheduled around practice of a spiritual life including Mass and Eucharistic adoration.

The school is at 10174 Old Grove Rd., Suite 200, San Diego 92131, phone 858 653-6740.

President Connolly said: “Our passions are absolutely here. It’s the Lord saying, ‘Trust in Me. Risk a little bit and I’ll take care of you.’...”

“The top lesson I have from all this is trust in God – much easier said than done. We would all be better off with trust in God... This is the first time in my life I’ve throw prudence to the wind,” Connolly said.

In early December vandals attacked a statue of the Good Shepherd outside Good Shepherd Church, covering the statue of Christ holding a lamb with swastikas, obscenities and demonic pentagrams, easily visible at the intersection of Gold Coast Drive and Camino Ruiz.

It seemed a parable for the defilement of American society by the cultural revolution. John Paul the Great Catholic University may help provide the societal cleanser.

