Linking scholarship to faith at Northwestern Sheil Center promotes thought through Christ the Teacher Institute
By Daniel P. Smith
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At a university where the intellect is celebrated and renowned academic programs in business and engineering, the arts and media capture widespread attention, the Sheil Catholic Center at Northwestern University looks to uphold that scholastic tradition while simultaneously building Catholic leaders with its Christ the Teacher Institute.

An outgrowth of the 73-yearold Sheil Catholic Center on the Evanston campus, the CTI seeks to form Catholic leaders for the church and the world through the integration of scholarship, prayer, service and leadership.

“We see this as a way for Catholic students at a secular institution to see how faith and work lives intersect,” said Mary Deeley, CTI program director and pastoral associate at the Sheil Catholic Center since 1997.

The CTI taps into the rich intellectual tradition of both the Catholic Church and Northwestern. By providing students an experience to deepen their Catholic faith and explore the church’s role in art, history, literature and more, the CTI invites its participants to think with a Catholic lens about issues as diverse as economics and ecology.

“We’re delving into real study about how a Catholic might look at real-world issues,” Deeley said, noting that Northwestern claims about 2,300 on-campus Catholics.

Scholarship and faith

A longtime dream of Sheil Center staff, the CTI launched in January 2010.

The Institute offers three unique opportunities — the Sheil Seminars, Catholic Scholars Program and Catholic Fellows in Church Leadership — for learners of all ages to deepen their spirituality and incorporate faith into their daily lives.

Each academic quarter, a series of seminars are offered on various aspects of Catholic teaching, such as Scripture, ecclesiology and church history, and morality and social justice. The seminars, taught by the institute’s resident and guest instructors, are open to students, staff and the public.

This month, for instance, Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Perry presented a seminar on the life of Father Augustus Tolton, the nation’s first diocesan priest of African descent. In April, New York University president John Sexton will join Northwestern president Morton Shapiro to discuss the juxtaposition of faith and academic life.

For Northwestern students, the Catholic Scholars program integrates seminars, theological reflection, prayer, service and leadership for three to six academic quarters. Currently, 10 full-
time scholars are being groomed to play active roles in Catholic life, such as serving in parish councils, teaching CCD or leading social justice efforts.

“The idea is to ground scholars in the faith so they can bring their faith to other areas of their life,” said Deeley, who has worked and ministered on college campuses since 1978. “We hope our scholars see how leadership, faith and academics all intersect and how God is at the core of all things.”

Catholic Fellows, meanwhile, are student interns who focus on a specific area of church leadership, such as cantor, peer minister or retreat coordinator. Under the guidance of a staff mentor, fellows learn to function in that specific role and receive a stipend for their efforts.

Insights on faith

One of the CTI’s five inaugural scholars in the 2010-11 academic year, Joe Paolelli of northwest suburban Park Ridge says he was attracted to the CTI’s curriculum that offered foundational material he had not received in his previous schooling. Covering topics such as divine revelation, Catholic morality and early church liturgy, Paolelli said, exposed him to deeper sides of the faith that may have remained elusive.

“Because of the scholars program, I’m a more informed Catholic and I’ve deepened my faith,” said Paolelli, who captured the CTI’s 2011 Simpson Essay Prize, a $1,000 award granted to the Northwestern student who best details the influence of Catholic thought in his or her discipline of study.

Furthermore, Paolelli, who aims to be a religion teacher, said the CTI programs answered a number of lingering questions he held about his faith.

As Paolelli now pursues his masters degree in theology at Loyola University after earning his religious studies degree from Northwestern last spring, he said he has an even stronger foundation on which to build his future academic and professional life.

“Catholicism is a religion of intellect as well as the body and spirit,” said Paolelli, a member of Our Lady of Ransom in Niles. “The Sheil Center and the Christ the Teacher Institute stand there as a pair of sterling examples showing that academics can complement faith life.”