

After completing the Integrated Humanities Program, two students from KU and others went to Fontgombault Abbey in France where the seeds of Clear Creek Abbey were planted. From left, back row; Stew Ashton, who has left the order; Philip Anderson, Abbot of Clear Creek; Brother Joseph-Marie now is in charge of farming operations at Clear Creek; Steve Goodman, who has left the order; Matthew Shapiro; Lawrence Brown; and Rick Bales. From left, front row; Father Francis Bethel, now Prior of Clear Creek; and Brother Martin Markey, now a monk at Clear Creek.



Let them be born in wonder

Catholic legacy from humanities program at University of Kansas endures

By Mason Beecroft; photos and archive images courtesy of Abbot Philip Anderson

It was 1970, the height of the cultural revolution spawned in the 60s, when three professors at the University of Kansas initiated a pilot program called the Pearson Integrated Humanities Program (IHP, or Pearson Program). It was an unlikely time and place for an academic program that focused on the classical tradition of the West.

Yet the program eventually resulted in the conversion of more than 200 students to Catholicism without any overt proselytizing. Dozens of students from the IHP now serve the Church as priests, bishops, nuns, monks and teachers and the influence of the converts from this program on their family, friends, the

Church and the culture is incalculable.

Father James Jackson, FSSP, who served the Parish of St. Peter in the Diocese of Tulsa from 1995-2000, once stated, "If one were to count the conversions that came out of IHP, all the waves and ripples, they might number in the thousands."

Along with Father Jackson, the Pearson Program has contributed extensively to the Church's ministry here in Oklahoma. Abbot Philip Anderson and several monks who eventually established Clear Creek Abbey converted through the program. Archbishop Paul S. Coakley of Oklahoma City and Bishop James D. Conley of Lincoln, Neb., who now sits on the board of the *Te Deum Institute* for the Diocese of Tulsa, also participated in the program and entered the Church.

While the continued success of the IHP for the Church cannot be denied, its inception at a public university campus during that

turbulent period in American history was highly unlikely. The University of Kansas was, like many universities during that time, a place of rebellion and upheaval. There were violent protests against the Vietnam War. The psychedelic drug culture thrived. It was the heyday of hippies, peace and free love. The status quo was always questioned and often rejected.

Moreover, the philosophies of cultural relativism and secular humanism dominated both the academy and the culture. Cultural relativism denies that there is objective truth. Instead, truth is relative to each person and/or culture. Therefore, any claim for a truth that applies to all people and cultures is rejected outright. Secular humanism is a philosophy that judges all religious dogma or creed to be false superstition. Secular humanism instead opts for human reason, ethics, and science as the criteria for truth and moral behavior.

So it was in this radical milieu of cultural and philosophical upheaval that three professors started the program. John Senior, a classics professor, and two English professors, Dennis Quinn and Franklyn Nelick, designed a program based on the classic literature of Western civilization so that their disoriented students would be exposed to the enduring transcendentals of Truth, Beauty and Goodness and engaged in the Great Conversation found in those texts.

“They knew that our civilization had not been based on relativism,” stated Abbot Anderson of Our Lady of Clear Creek Monastery. “They firmly believed that there are things that can be known by the human person that we can access and know objective truth.”

A brochure designed for the program clearly stated its philosophy. “We say there is one truth, that it can be identified and that it can be taught. That is the essence of the Pearson Integrated Humanities Program.”

John Senior, reflecting on the program in a 1996 article by John Bloch, said, “In the classroom we taught tradition; that is, the real. We really believed the real was real. When we taught the beauty of a poem or Homer’s ‘Odyssey,’ we were not faking it, or trying to imbue the text with some phony Catholic gloss. The truth is always the truth, and if it is really true, it will lead you to the transcendent truth.”

As one might imagine, the philosophical approach of the IHP

became rather controversial for students, faculty and the university. At a time when everyone was rebelling against the received tradition and culture, the argument that there was an objective truth that could be grasped through exploring the classics of Western civilization was perhaps the most rebellious act of all.

Abbot Anderson entered the program as a freshman in 1971. It was the second year of the program and, like most its students, Anderson’s life was changed forever.

Abbot Anderson grew up in a liberal family, attending Unitarian churches. He joked that he never became an official member of the Unitarian Church, however, as it had too much organization and too many constrictions. When he began thinking about college, he wanted to find a “great books program.” He visited a couple colleges and decided on the University of Kansas. After an interview, he was accepted into the IHP.

“I entered into the program with no spiritual direction about anything in life,” he said. “My personal life was out of hand. We really believed that the cultural leaders of the time, like Bob Dylan, had something.”

The decisive moment for him came in the first lecture he attended. There were 150 students in the lecture hall and the three professors were sitting on stools in front of the class. The professors told the students that they were forbidden to take notes because they needed to listen to the discussion.

In preparation for that first lecture, the students were required to read Homer’s “Odyssey.” At the beginning of that first class, John Senior asked, “Where is Ulysses going in this story?” After the three professors discussed the story, one of the students responded, “He is going home.”

John Senior then addressed the class, “Where are you people going?”

Abbot Anderson said that this was rather offensive for most of the students. In their youthful arrogance, most of them believed they were enlightened. They had experimented with drugs. They had considered Eastern religions. They had liberated themselves from the constraints of Christian morality through the sexual revolution. Of course they knew where they were going!

The question was a shocking challenge to the students, an indictment on their knowledge and education. “Back in the dorm, we were discussing the lecture. I could not believe (the professors) had the audacity to say these things, but they caught our attention and we were totally surprised,” reflected Abbot Anderson.

John Senior, who had delved deeply into the various philosophies and religions of the age, while also possessing a remarkable grasp of the corpus of Western literature, also told the students that it was useless to study Hinduism or Buddhism until you learn and under-



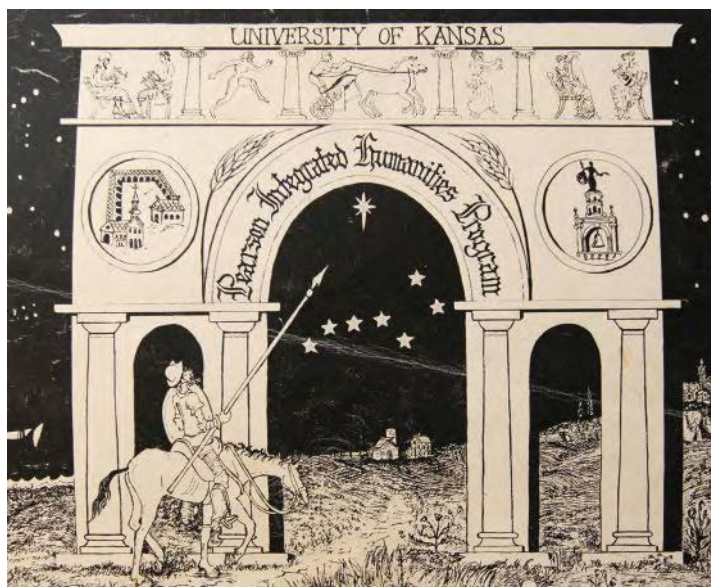
John Senior



Dennis Quinn



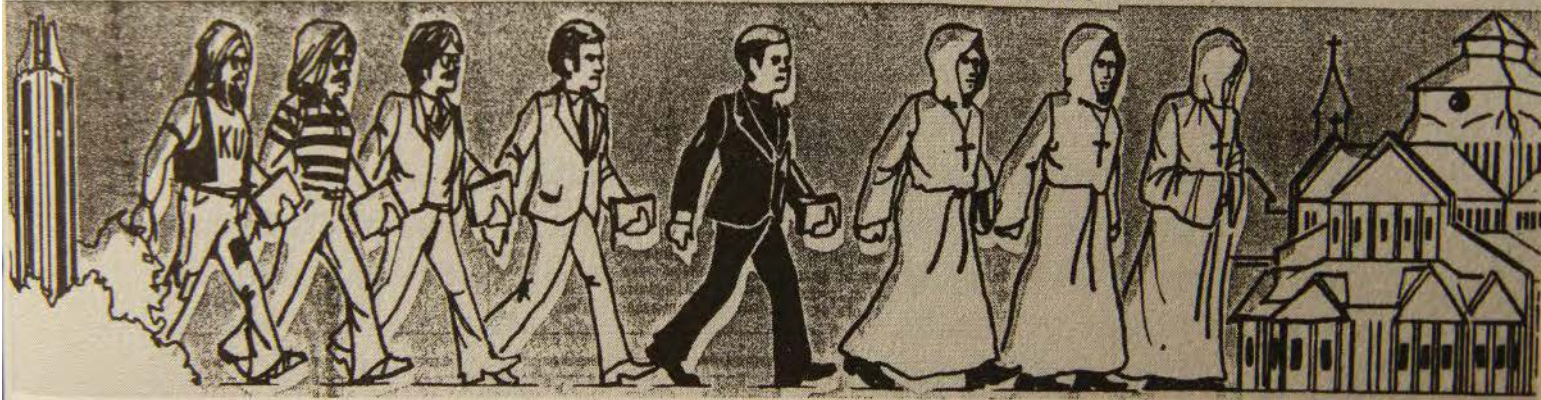
Franklyn Nelick



After university officials refused to allow on-campus promotion of the Integrated Humanities Program, students designed and produced their course catalog.

The Kansas City Times

KANSAS CITY, THURSDAY MORNING, MARCH 31, 1977 — 96 PAGES



To accompany a news story appropriately titled "What price truth," the Kansas City Times published this editorial cartoon that chronicled the "evolution" of monks from the Integrated Humanities Program in March 1977.

stand your own culture.

"He told us, 'You don't even know your own home or culture or Christian civilization,'" he said. "You don't know how to dress or walk."

Father Francis Bethel, a graduate of the program and now a monk at Clear Creek, said each of the professors was uniquely gifted as a teacher and mentor. Commenting on John Senior, Father Bethel said, "He had such a gift for lifting us up into his vision during a lecture. We were lost to everything else when he talked."

In addition to the stimulating lectures, the professors required the students to engage in a variety of unorthodox activities. The motto of the program was "Let Them Be Born in Wonder" (*Nascantor in Admirazione*). The professors wanted their students to explore the wonders of humanity and the universe through exposure not only to classic literature, but also through experience.

One way the professors accomplished this was requiring the students to go stargazing. While looking at the constellations, the professors would teach Greek mythology.

"We would say, 'This is stupid. What is this all about?'" said Abbot Anderson. "Of course they were trying to get us out of the dorm and away from the television with all of those artificial lights. They wanted us to see something real. So they took a poetic approach with the creation and beauty of the universe. In doing this, they emphasized poetic knowledge, not scientific, which was radical."

Participants in the program also were expected to memorize a certain number of poems by authors such as Tennyson and Wordsworth. During the two-year program, the students were required to learn some 40 poems.

Later, the professors added the waltz to the curriculum. They believed that the students needed to learn how to dance and so they took dance lessons in the KU Ballroom. At a 2005 reunion, some 150 alumni from the program gathered in formal attire and waltzed.

Abbot Philip said that the truly radical approach of the program was life-changing. "They were so good as teachers that they won people over. I felt like someone who had been in a shipwreck who now found a plank to survive."

The first year of the two-year curriculum introduced the students first to Greek classics and then to Latin classics. In the first semester of the second year, they read excerpts from Scripture, Augustine and medieval literature. In the final semester, they explored Enlightenment and modern thought. Through this curriculum, built around the Great Conversation in the West, the professors intentionally exposed their pupils to the Truth.

This exposure to the Truth began to result in conversions to the Catholic Church. These conversions created quite a controversy for many families, which then spread throughout the KU campus and the entire community. As students came home and engaged their parents and siblings with what they had learned in the program and how they were pursuing Catholicism after growing up atheists, agnostics, Jews or liberal Protestants, the fallout was inevitable.

"We were not running around converting students," Dennis Quinn told Scott Bloch. "In fact, I remember going home and telling my wife that some of the students who were running around talking about conversion to the Church were going to bring controversy down on us."

Disgruntled families and faculty accused the professors of proselytizing their students. Some even went so far as to claim they were brainwashing the students into some sort of cult. Major donors sent letters, local papers wrote editorials. The professors then found themselves on the defensive with the university administration.

"These students made up their own minds to do what they did," John Senior told Scott Bloch. "They were adults. We treated them as adults. As for the accusation of mixing church and state, they allow every kind of Marxist, Buddhist, atheist, feminist and relativist point of view to be represented at the university — but a Catholic viewpoint (not a dogmatic presentation of Catholic doctrine, but just the point of view of history without apology) is absolutely unacceptable."

"They never preached Catholicism in class, but they were accessible after class. The students wanted to know more about them and they were transparent with us about their faith. They thought we deserved an answer. They told us that Christianity is the best

thing,” said Abbot Anderson.

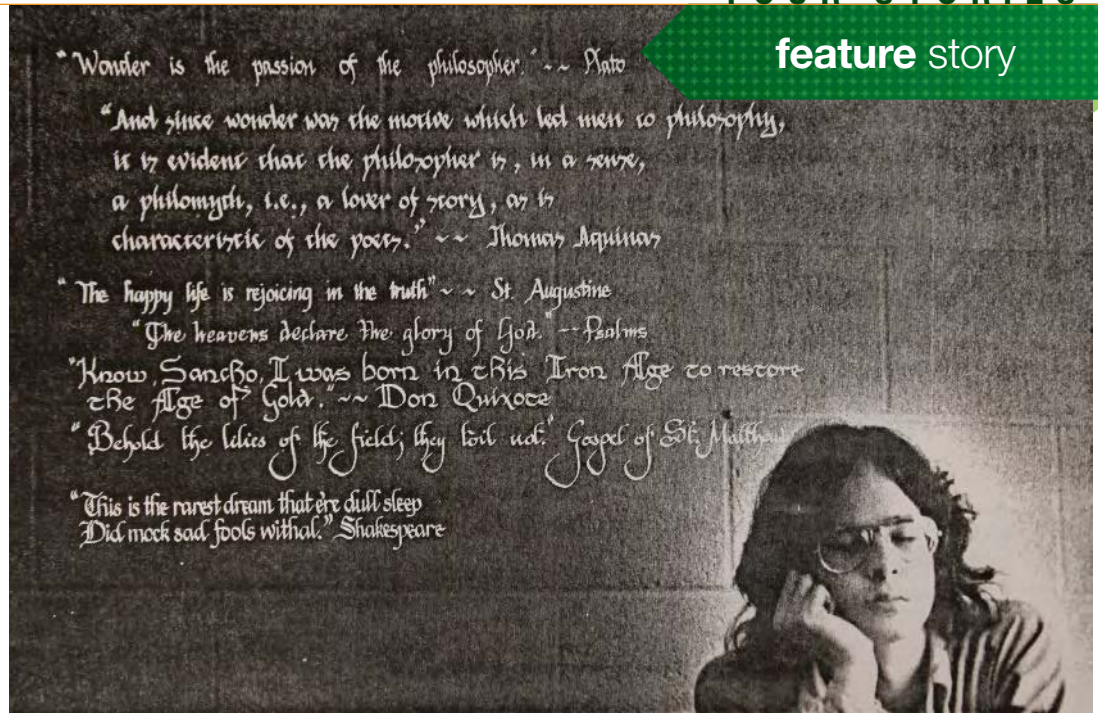
During his time in the program, from 1971-1973, Abbot Anderson became convinced of the truth of the Catholic Church and converted. He then joined two other students and a group of six others to travel to Fontgombault Abbey in France, a highly traditional Benedictine monastery. Such conversion stories and vocation decisions remained at the root of the controversy over the program.

As pressure increased from administrators, faculty, family and alumni, the students in the IHP came to view themselves as modern Don Quixotes. Their Quixotic quest, however, was not against windmills. Rather, they were fighting against the emptiness and banality of modern philosophy and culture through their studies.

“We were Quixotic,” Quinn explained to Scott Bloch, “and like Don Quixote himself, we saw the Good, the True and the Beautiful when our fellows did not. We tilted at the windmills of the university, or the modern world.”

Still, three professors and a handful of students in a large, public university had little hope to prevail against the intolerance of modern academia and its stifling bureaucracy. Then, tragedy struck.

An instrumental part of the program was taking students on trips to Italy, Greece, France and Ireland. In these places, the students



A photograph of a young Philip Anderson was featured on this page of the student-produced Integrated Humanities Program course catalog.

were able to explore and experience the beauty of Western culture.

In 1976, the program went to Ireland, where students would spend a semester on a small island. Tragically, two students drowned while swimming off the island of Innishboffin in Galway Bay near the west coast of Ireland. It was then that several students converted to the Catholic faith and some went to Fontgombault Abbey.

The backlash from the University of Kansas and the families of many students was predictable. The program was accused of being out of control and the administration began to dismantle it in a bureaucratic fashion. Credits from the program were limited. On-campus promotion was not allowed and students enrolled in the program were almost forced into other programs. Finally, in 1979, the IHP was officially closed, although the professors each continued to teach in the university for several more years.

Although the IHP program lasted only 10 years, its influence on the Church has been remarkable. The converts that came through the program continue to lead the Church as both religious and laypeople. Even more, the enduring Catholic belief that Truth is both objective and accessible was victorious in the most difficult circumstances.

Bishop Conley, then a priest, told Scott Bloch, “Through IHP, I discovered objective truth along with the other two transcendents of beauty and goodness. This discovery and abiding conviction has allowed me to steer through the malaise of modern relativism and materialism with mirth and hope.”

If you are interested in learning more about the Pearson Integrated Humanites Program, Robert K. Carlson wrote a book about the program, “Truth on Trial.” Also, Scott Bloch’s article on the program, “Prairie Fire,” can be found in the Winter 1996 issue of *Sursum Corda*. Finally, John Senior published several books, including “The Death of Christian Culture” and “The Restoration of Christian Culture.” These can be purchased through the bookstore at Our Lady of Clear Creek Monastery.



Abbot Philip Anderson and Father Francis Bethel today at Clear Creek Abbey.