

Students Present Research Papers at European Congress

Four seniors and one junior philosophy majors present papers to their international counterparts as they examine the future of Western Civilization.

WHEELING, WV, May 23, 2008 - Five Wheeling Jesuit University students took their research to Europe recently as they presented papers to the annual Congress on the Future of Western Civilization, in the medieval city of Lublin, Poland.

Four seniors and one junior were in the group, accompanied by philosophy professor Dr. Tom Michaud, of Wheeling. The major international conference was held at the Catholic University of Lublin (KUL), Lublin, Poland. It drew participants from a number of different European and African countries, bringing in approximately 200 scholars this year. The theme this year was "Justice."

Shown at left, first row: Melissa Atkinson, Rev. Tadeusz Rydzyk, CSsR (President, College of Media and Culture, Tournon, Poland), Yvette Michaud, Prof. Thomas Michaud. Second row: Prof. Curtis Hancock (Rockhurst Univ., USA), Prof. Peter Redpath (St. John's Univ., USA), Shawn Stottlemeyer, Tadeusz Borat (driver), Rev. Kris Bielinski, CSsR (College Rector). Back row: Ryan Johnston and Justin Brandt.

KUL itself is a very large university with about 19,000 students. Of that, approximately 900 students are undergraduates or graduate students in KUL's various schools of philosophy. Founded in 1918, KUL is the oldest university in Lublin and one of the oldest in Poland. Today Lublin is the biggest academic center in Eastern Poland, with 5 institutions of higher education. During the years of the Cold War (1945-1989) and imposed communist governments, the Catholic University of Lublin remained the only private institution of higher education in the whole Eastern bloc.

Students who attended the conference include: senior Political and Economic Philosophy (PEP) major Melissa Atkinson of New Cumberland, W.Va.; junior Philosophy-Theology major Justin Brandt of Pittsburgh, Pa., senior Philosophy major Ryan Johnston of Wheeling; senior PEP major Yvette Michaud of Wheeling and senior PEP major Shawn Stottlemeyer of Shadyside, Ohio. This was the first time that Wheeling Jesuit students participated in the international conference and they were impressed with what they learned and saw.

Wheeling resident Yvette Michaud presented a paper entitled, "Just Capitalism: A Study of Centesimus Annus." The daughter of WJU philosophy professor Tom Michaud and his wife Kim, this was her first trip to Poland, though her father has traveled there three times for research conferences and university lecturing.

Yvette was accepted into Duquesne University School of Law, where she will continue her education this fall. Her paper looked closely at the encyclical written by Pope John Paul II in 1991, which dealt with Catholic social teaching in the area of human dignity, work and justice.

“My paper was a study of the encyclical; I critiqued it carefully. The pope's words can be misinterpreted,” she said. “He supports free market capitalism ... but his words can be turned in ways he probably didn't want. He thought we all had a duty to help others, give what we have to them, but I think it's misinterpreting him to say that the government should be doing the taking from us to help others.”

Michaud's paper was very well accepted at the conference and she learned a lot from the experience. It was heard by a collection of Polish students, numbering about 40 or so. She referred to the conference itself as an education.

“It was an eye opening experience especially, to see the globalization of education. That the Polish students could write and present a philosophy paper in English, really impressed me,” she said. “These students were about our age and they were so globally educated that they could compose a complex philosophical paper in a second language.”

Fellow student Ryan Johnston, who has been accepted into Catholic University's doctorate of philosophy program, would agree with Michaud. He was most impressed with “the amount of students whose concentrations were philosophy. Instead of just a handful of students, there were hundreds. The students really understood the importance of philosophy in their lives.”

Melissa Atkinson was also impressed with her Polish counterparts' language skills. Melissa is entering Duquesne's law school this fall along with Yvette, and both recent graduates are working locally at the Steptoe and Johnson legal firm's Wheeling office this summer. The other WJU graduate on the trip, Shawn Stottlemeyer, was accepted into Penn State's Dickinson School of Law where he will complete his education.

Photo above, front: Agnus Zietek (KUL philosophy student), Joanna Kieres (KUL student), Yvette Michaud, Melissa Atkinson, Prof. Thomas Michaud. Back row: Ryan Johnston, Shawn Stottlemeyer, Prof. Curtis Hancock, Justin Brandt.

Though the Wheeling Jesuit students were in Poland for an educational conference, they were there for a week, which allowed time for site seeing. They explored the cities of Krakow, Touron and Warsaw, touring old marketplaces, the salt mine museum, and the Majdanek concentration camp. Some of the most historic old town sections in the Western world are located in Poland, especially in Lublin and Krakow, complete with castles, cathedrals and examples of both Western and Byzantine cultures.

“The week went by so fast, I have never had so much fun and learned so much in such a short time,” said Stottlemeyer.

Mixing education with entertainment is a great way to learn and Dr. Michaud is pleased that the students were able to participate in such a prestigious philosophical conference.

He also presented a research paper while there, entitled: "Critiquing 'Politically Correct' Justice." The paper explained some of the current social and economic

problems that arise when justice is defined according to a specific political ideology and not according to genuine principles of ethics.

Professors who presented spoke before a large public audience and the event was broadcast over public television. The Polish people definitely have an abiding interest in philosophy and debate, according to Dr. Michaud. In fact, it was in the Philosophy Department at KUL that John Paul II, at the time Professor Fr. Karol Wojtyla, and some of his colleagues developed the philosophical foundations of the Solidarity Movement. Solidarity was a workers' movement that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet empire. The Poles continue to recognize and respect the importance of philosophy since it has had such a major influence on the recent history of their nation, Michaud said.

Michaud plans to maintain his association with KUL, and in the future he hopes to bring other students with him to Poland. "This sort of international academic experience is a tremendously valuable aspect of the kind of education we emphasize at WJU," he said.

The trip was made possible with support from Wheeling Jesuit's Institute for the Study of Capitalism and Morality, the WJU Student Research Committee and the International Etienne Gilson Society.

Wheeling Jesuit University is the youngest of 28 Jesuit colleges and universities in the nation. It prepares students to live out their education with critical minds and compassionate hearts.