

The Big Interview: Shawn Flynn

Shawn Flynn, the new academic dean at St. Joseph's College at the University of Alberta, has big plans to make the Catholic institution much more visible and engaged in the community.

Originally from Prince George, B.C., Flynn, 38, was raised by Catholic parents in a home where faith had a large role. The family had priests over for dinner. He went to Bible camp. He spent time teaching in religious communities. And while studying for his PhD degree at the University of Toronto, Flynn took initial vows as a lay Dominican.



Shawn Flynn is the new academic dean at Joseph's College at the University of Alberta
Andrew Ehtkamp, Grandin Media

Since then, Flynn has worked in Vancouver, Dublin, Jerusalem, and Toronto. He is also the author of three books on theology and he's working on his fourth.

He is an expert on the political, religious, economic and military pressures experienced by ancient peoples.

For the past five years, Flynn served as director of theology programs and taught courses in religion and theology at St. Mark's College/Corpus Christi College at the University of British Columbia. He was very involved in the master's degree program as well as the diaconate formation.

Married with four kids aged 2 to 12, Flynn took up his position as academic dean at St. Joseph's College in July 2017. He spent the first while getting to know staff and faculty. Enrolment has grown steadily to 2,200 students in 40 courses this year, and one of his goals is to highlight those successes.

Shawn Flynn sat down with Grandin Media for an interview about his first few months in Edmonton, the role of faith and the Church in Canadian society, and future plans for St. Joseph's College.

What was your journey to St. Joseph's College?

It was an opportunity to take a leadership role and continue the work I was doing in many ways. Here I do a little less teaching. I probably teach one course a year. But I can still do my scholarship while growing as an administrator and serving faculty and students. It's a really interesting opportunity for me, and that's why I grabbed it.

When this job came up, it was the opportunity to do something broader at a place that had a longer history. It was an opportunity for a cheaper cost of living than Vancouver. Four kids in Vancouver is a little bit of a stretch.

What is the role of the college?

The role of St. Joseph's College is to be a location where the Catholic intellectual tradition can be discussed in a serious and respected way. To do that, we have to have really good faculty who are very good at what they do. They do their teaching well and they do their research well, and they are publishing at the same level as their colleagues across the street.

In order to first get heard, you have to actually be good at what you do and take it seriously. If you take your vocation seriously, I think that's a good first start.

St. Joseph's College is kind of the big tent model in which anyone can come and interact with us. An engineering student who takes one class in Bible because they're interested – that may be their only exposure to the Catholic intellectual tradition in their entire life.



At the same time, we have residents who live here who might take five, six, seven classes. They might do a Certificate of Catholic Education and go on to be a Catholic teacher. They'll have a broader formation here at the college. We are dealing with 17, 18 and 19-year-olds who are more amazing than I ever was when I was a student. They are young, intelligent, and savvy. They don't take

bullshit easily. They can smell lying a mile away, and they're smart and they work really hard.

The job of St. Joseph's College is to work with these students where they are and to invite them into a discussion, and it doesn't matter where they are in their relationship with God; they can be invited on an equal footing in that discussion.

What is the role of Catholic faith in our culture?

This is a really interesting question given where we are, because all our relationships are often with non-Catholics outside the college ... They're not antagonistic to what we do. I find people become antagonistic when we become defensive.

We don't have the same cultural cache that we used to have as Catholics, I understand that. At the same time, I think we need to understand that people want to see our faith first. They don't necessarily want to see a set of rules or something like this.

They are attracted to our faith if it is strong, not if it's a weak, rule-based faith but if it has a good, solid relationship with God.

If you're a professional, you're good at whatever career you're excelling at – and you happen to be a person of faith – I just don't see resistance to that. I see people very open to what we do. They might have good questions. They might have strong questions. But that doesn't mean they are attacking us.

When you refer to the cultural cache, by that you mean at one point the Catholic Church had a more prominent role?

In the global North we don't have that anymore, but I'm not saying that's necessarily a bad thing.

We've lost some important discussions in the political realm.

The abortion discussion, we've definitely lost that. I don't think we've succeeded. I think end-of-life care is going to be a very huge issue that we're going to have to deal with, and understand and defend the place of Catholic hospitals.

At the same time, it's not like the world is out to get Catholics. This type of perspective, which often comes from some sources of American Catholicism, is ultimately not helpful for the Gospel.

It's kind of like a Jonah moment; by that I mean in Chapter 4 when he's sitting there crying on the side of the mountain because he doesn't like the way God did His work.

I think we need to be open to the work of the Holy Spirit that happens even

beyond the church walls and, at the same time, work with people who aren't church-ed and meet them where they are. Just respect them as people first.

There's no way we could do our work here at the University of Alberta if we were going out there finger-wagging at people. We have to be experts. We have to be professionals. We have to be good researchers, good teachers. If we are those things, then students will come and listen.

Why is there a perception that the culture is antagonistic to Catholics?

I think it comes from some sense of loss in the culture, some sense of 'Why don't people just listen to us? Why don't the media listen to us?'

We have some sins we need to open up to. We can't get just move on, get over it. We have to engage these issues we've failed on. I think the culture is waiting for us to do that.

There's very strong public reaction to Pope Francis. Why? Because he's living the Gospel.

I think we just need to have a strong relationship with Christ. Move forward in our work wherever we find ourselves. And find holiness in the regular work that we do, then people will be attracted to us.

If we start with 'Listen to me, listen to me, I have something to say. I'm right and you're wrong,' that doesn't work.

Do you think readers will be surprised that there are more than 2,000 young people studying at St. Joseph's College?

One has to realize that when someone is 17 to 22 years old, they have to make faith their own and that involves an intellectual discussion. It involves life experience. A lot of these people return to the Church when they engage in the sacraments.



I don't know if people will be surprised, but at the same time I don't see – at least in this context – evidence of strong antagonism or the need to build up the defensive walls of the Catholic Church.

I would prefer to go out and make dialogue our encounter with people, and respect people where they are in their pilgrimage walk and to realize we don't have everything figured out either. We have to figure this out together. Once people realize that's what you're up to, they're not as resistant as you might think to listen to what you believe as long as you listen to what they believe too.

When you have a Catholic college that's living and breathing in a public context, that is the type of thing that people can hear the most. It's not about getting students to memorize the answers to the Catechism. It's about what's in the footnotes and how did we get there and where are we going.

What can an individual Catholic do to strengthen the faith?

Rather than asking the question 'How can we solve the cultural problem?' or 'How can we get back what our power was?' or something like this, it should be something more along the lines of 'Strengthen your relationship with Christ.' Strengthen your personal relationship with Jesus Christ, then encounter the world on the world's terms.

Be unapologetically Catholic. But that doesn't mean we can't interact with other people who have wildly different views than us.

This is exactly something that a St. Joe's class has to teach its students, because in that class you will have a Muslim, an atheist, a Jew, an LGBTQ positive person, someone who is anti-abortion, someone who is pro-abortion – all in the same class, studying the theology of marriage from a Catholic perspective.

The saddest thing for me is if someone goes through an entire undergraduate career without ever having thought about the things that are most deeply important to them. Faith. Love. Our relationship with God. Our relationship with family and others. But these are things that philosophy, theology, biblical studies can raise questions about.

What are the goals and challenges for you as academic dean?

I don't know yet if Edmonton and the surrounding districts know about what's going on at St. Joe's College. I don't think they realize how much the St. Joseph's experience can be a benefit for students.



A student can come to the University of Alberta, which is one of the top research universities in Canada. They can study any discipline they want and they can take courses in the Catholic theological tradition while getting credit for them at a major university.

They can live in a student residence, have pastoral support through the Basilian Fathers, attend Mass freely whenever they feel called to attend Mass. That's a pretty good thing. If my kids were 17, I would be really interested in having them here. Would this be a place that I would want my kids to go? The answer is yes. How do I get that message out there more broadly? It's about trumpeting the St. Joseph's experience.

What drew you to Bible scholarship?

My first degree was in English literature.

The study of how stories are told was one aspect. But as I got a little further on, I recognized how influential the Bible was to the poets and writers I was studying, from Milton to Blake to Wordsworth to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*.

There's all this Bible imagery in the back because they lived and breathed it.

I had biblical questions I would ask my pastors and the Church, and no one could answer them. So there is a deep desire to figure out 'Why can't these questions be answered?'

What do you like to do outside of work?

I love to be in the bush. I like to hike. I like to take my kids camping. I like to go backpacking. That's the thing that gives me a lot of joy. When you go out and your cellphone says 'out of service,' you know you've succeeded in life!