

# Catholic college in Saskatoon launches new academic centre

St. Thomas More College at the University of Saskatchewan has unveiled the creation of a new academic centre.

The Centre for Faith, Reason, Peace, and Justice is dedicated to fostering excellence in teaching, research, and community outreach in three of St. Thomas More (STM) College's interdisciplinary and distinctive program areas: Catholic studies, Critical Perspectives on Social Justice and the Common Good – exploring expressions of justice and solidarity across diverse cultures and contexts – and Peace Studies.

“The centre will truly succeed if it convenes discussions on critical issues that might not otherwise take place,” Carl Still, president of St. Thomas More College, said in opening remarks during the online launch of the academic centre on Jan. 28.

“At a time when many of us are more comfortable talking only to those who already think the way we do, the centre will practise the art of dialogue, which Pope Francis recommends most strongly.”

Still said the centre will further the ongoing dialogue between the Catholic Church and the wider society, “but also to welcome into that discussion many perspectives, from other Christian communities, from other communities of faith, and from any and all people of good will who are engaged in making our society a more equitable and peaceful place for all its members.”

He noted there is much to “talk about and to learn from one another,” particularly at this challenging time of a world-side pandemic.

Still said the creation of the new academic centre follows years of discussion that began with the establishment of a minor in Catholic studies at St. Thomas More College (the Catholic College at the University of Saskatchewan), and continued as another minor in Social Justice and the Common Good was launched at STM.

Because both of these new minors were multi-disciplinary, they had no obvious departmental home, Still explained.

“One way to house them was to create a centre which could oversee these programs, coordinate between them, and provide active community outreach to potential partners. As we launch the new centre today, STM has also proposed a new program in Peace Studies, which again has no parallel at the University of Saskatchewan,” Still said.

“The new centre will coordinate instruction in these three programs, and it will foster new inquiry into all kinds of topics associated with faith and reason, peace and justice,” he added. “In all those ways it will serve the students at St. Thomas More College and the University of Saskatchewan by creating opportunities for study that would not otherwise exist on our campus.”

However, creation of this centre goes beyond that academic benefit, Still stressed. It’s intended to reach beyond the university campus to engage community partners who share an interest in issues of our time that involve faith, peace and justice.

Reflecting that broader vision, the online launch of the new Centre for Faith, Reason, Peace and Justice included a panel discussion with representatives of Catholic health and education and the Diocese of Saskatoon. The discussion was moderated by academic centre director Dr. Chris Hrynkow.

Panel participants included Blake Sittler, executive director of the Catholic Health Association of Saskatchewan; Darcie Lich, coordinator of religious education for Greater Saskatoon Catholic Schools; and Myron Rogal, coordinator of justice and peace for the Diocese of Saskatoon.

The three members of the centre’s advisory committee reflected on the vision, potential and hope for the new Centre for Faith, Reason, Peace, and Justice, and how it might benefit their own work and build stronger connections in the wider community.

Sittler said the centre can enhance efforts to strengthen and articulate Catholic identity.

“I think that something like the centre gives us the chance to partner to have that conversation, to begin to articulate who we are and what we mean in this modern context.”

Sittler cited areas that have not traditionally been talked about in terms of health, but which have an impact, such as the environment, justice, reconciliation with First Nations, the common good, equity, immigration, affordable housing, racism and relationships with LGBTQ2 persons.

As advice for the new centre, Sittler said: “You need to be bold ... and you need to really offer something challenging and relevant and current.”

Lich said the centre will provide another resource for animating faith discussion and formation for teachers and students in the Catholic school system. “I see a lot of places where our work can intersect in terms of what we are doing together as people of faith,” she said.

Rogal pointed to the potential for greater collaboration and connections with many community partners, as a kind of “clearing house” for justice and peace efforts in the community through a lens of Catholic Social Teaching.

For instance, he pointed to the ongoing partnerships in “hosting events that are engaging and supporting the work of one another as something that I think the centre will really enhance,” said Rogal.

He noted two events that are already scheduled – a three-part online series looking at the Amazon Synod and challenges faced by the people of the Amazon region and similar challenges to Indigenous People in Canada (with the next session in the series to be held Feb. 16), and an upcoming online dialogue March 2 about the papal encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* and a just recovery from COVID-19.

During the panel discussion, Rogal challenged the new centre to “deliberately seek out those whom we disagree with,” to identify gaps in the community, and to use the medium of stories to foster dialogue and to hopefully “break down false dichotomies that divide us and paralyze us from accessing the truth.”

Goals identified for the Centre for Faith, Reason, Peace, and Justice include animating in students a passion for learning and service; sponsoring and partnering to deliver engaging conferences, lectures, and panels, hosting film nights and discussions; acting as a link between non-profit organizations and community groups; teaching, research, and outreach support community-based projects; recruiting students, managing, and delivering academic programs; celebrating the work and experiences of STM students; creating a core contact list of people and groups interested in the centre; and its activities and establishing a social media presence to promote the centre’s activities.

Other participants in the online event were St. Thomas More College dean Dr. Arul Kumaran and Gertrude Rompré, director of mission and ministry.