At the University’s 10-year-old Rome Center, students experience la dolce vita, immersing themselves in Italian arts, food, culture, language, and spirituality.

In September brand-new teacher Christian Grochowski, B.A. 2014, introduced himself to his freshman English class at Archbishop Carney High School in Baltimore. Projecting pictures of himself on the wall, he talked about his life and the steps along the way that led him to the Catholic school for boys. Pointing to a photo of Pope Francis, he told the wide-eyed teenagers that he was in St. Peter’s Square when the Argentine cardinal was elected to the papacy in March 2013.

It was an experience — along with countless others that spring — that Grochowski said he’ll never forget. In his classroom, he used it as a teachable moment, telling his students that they too could go to Rome one day. Study hard, do well in high school, and they could spend a college semester exploring the Coliseum and visiting the Vatican as he had done.

Grochowski, a history major who minored in theology and philosophy, spent the spring of the papal transition studying at the Catholic University Rome Center. The “crown jewel” of the University’s many education abroad programs around the world, the center offers an experience that blends the academic, cultural, and spiritual aspects of living in a city that shares a special relationship with CUA, noted Mario Orttig, associate provost for international affairs and associate professor of Spanish.

This fall, the center wrapped up the celebration of its 10th anniversary with an agreement on a new building that will house classrooms and residential space for students. The center also launched an honors track that enables high-achieving sophomores to take two honors courses as part of their class schedule. Starting in 2015, the center will offer a summer program that caps off the CUA academic experience for first-year students.

Integral to the center’s mission is “immersing our students in the life of Rome,” said David Dawson Vasquez, Ph.D. 2001, center director and instructor of theology and religious studies. “They learn Italian at their own pace and participate in the life of the Church as significant events unfold at the Vatican. We introduce students to Italian life on so many different levels — the food, the arts, the culture, the spirituality. They tell us they are changed forever.”

When in Rome
Grochowski, a gregarious 22-year-old, recalled that going to bed at night in Rome, “I couldn’t wait to get up the next morning.” He would start his day by stopping at Piccolo Diavolo, a coffee bar near the center, for a cappuccino and a croissant with Nutella. His classes met either at the center, which is currently located in Rome’s Prati neighborhood north of the Vatican, or at a historic site in the city. In the afternoon, he would go for a run along the Tiber River, getting to know a security guard who would shout out Grochowski’s name as he passed by. Afterward he would pick up dinner and a bottle of Italian beer and sit at the Piazza dei Quirini fountain with its statues of the mythological twins Castor and Pollux — people-watching and marveling at his good fortune.

That spring, as the papal transition unfolded, the center rearranged class times and provided tickets to special Vatican events for students and faculty. “As a pontifical university of the Catholic Church in the U.S., we have a very special connection to Rome,” said Dawson Vasquez. “We try to structure the program so our students experience that connection.”

On the rainy night that the College of Cardinals cast their ballots for a new pope, Grochowski was in St. Peter’s Square with his classmates, getting ready to go to the center’s annual spring dinner for students and their families. Earlier, Monsignor Kevin Irwin, the Monsignor Walter J. Schmitz, S.S., Professor of Liturgical Studies — who was teaching in Rome that semester — had alluded to rumors that the world would soon have a new Pope. Sure enough, white smoke soon drifted from the Sistine Chapel chimney.

But, for Grochowski, seeing Pope Francis at St. Peter’s Square on Easter Sunday that spring was even better. It was his 21st birthday. Grochowski was standing in front of the square’s red granite obelisk when the Holy Father got out of the Popemobile to kiss a baby. “I was maybe two feet away,” Grochowski said. “He looked me straight in the eye. I was completely overwhelmed with emotion. To think that I saw this man who’s doing so much for the Church. It’s definitely influenced me.”

Prior to the resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Donald Wuerl, archbishop of Washington and University chancellor, had planned to meet Associate Professor of Architecture Vytenis Gureckas and his students to review their design proposal for the piazza in front of the cardinal’s titular church, San Pietro in Vincoli. But when the Pope resigned, Cardinal Wuerl joined the papal conclave to elect the Holy Father’s successor and was unable to meet the class.

In March this year, Cardinal Wuerl was available to join students and their families at the center’s annual dinner. James Brennan, then provost, joked that CUA “can’t promise a papal election each year, but we have the next best thing” — the cardinal, who blessed those in attendance and posed for pictures with students.

Getting Outside One’s Comfort Zone
Originally from Gonzales, La., Susan Dawson Vasquez was working on his doctoral dissertation when he moved to Rome in 1998 with his wife, Susan Dawson Vasquez, B.A. 1994, so she could pursue a graduate degree in philosophy. When CUA started the program with a pilot semester in fall 2002, he was hired to teach theology and to do some administrative work for the seven students who came that first year. By the time the program was up and officially running in fall 2005, he had been hired as director.

For David and his wife, a substitute English translator for the Vatican Information Service who teaches philosophy for different college programs in Rome, living and raising their 8-year-old daughter Magdalena in the Eternal City “combines the best of all worlds.”

He said that he has the chance to work closely with people “at the heart of the Church” and to collaborate with the staff from other study abroad programs in Rome. On weekends, there are trips to other parts of Italy with the students. In September they visited Venice and a buffalo farm that makes, as Dawson Vasquez noted, “the only true mozzarella — buffalo.” October found them in Tuscany one weekend and Assisi

Changing Lives:
A Semester in the Eternal City

By Catherine Lee

Photos by Catino Foto/Rome, Italy
another. They wrapped up their fall travels with trips in November to Naples and Florence.

Under his direction, the center’s enrollment has grown from eight in spring 2004 to 50 this past spring. Annually the center hosts 200 to 210 students, including about 30 to 40 from Loyola University Maryland.

The center offers semester-long programs, primarily for students enrolled in the schools of arts and sciences, music, and architecture. It also offers a month-long Summer Experience Abroad for architecture majors and short courses in law, canon law, business and economics, and theology and religious studies.

Learning to speak Italian is a critical piece of the Rome Center experience. Tori McAllister, B.A. 2014, noted that learning Italian boosted her confidence and nudged her out of her comfort zone. Following a class at a site outside the center, she and her friends would often catch “la mette” back to Prati for a cappuccino or a bite to eat. One evening she ordered dinner in Italian, gave directions to a stranger in Spanish, and chatted with her friends in English on their way home. “How amazing,” she says. “I was speaking three languages without even thinking about it.”

Students who spend a semester in Rome also travel to other parts of Europe as part of their studies. Mary D’Enrico, B.S.Arch. 2010, M.Arch. and M.S. Sustainable Design 2013, recalled visiting a spa built over the thermal baths in Vale, Switzerland, where she was a junior. Exploring the spa located in the Swiss Alps, D’Enrico says she was able “to experience the space and how it was designed. It was all about the senses and being one with the architecture, the water, the mountains, and the snow.” D’Enrico said her trip helped her “understand the relationship between architecture, culture, and people” in a way that textbooks could not.

Sarah Brown Ferrario, associate professor of Greek and Latin who taught in Rome in fall 2012 along with her husband, Andrew Simpson, professor of music, noted that as a faculty member, “you’re not just teaching about Rome, you’re teaching Rome itself.” Ferrario and Simpson co-taught a course called Roman History and Opera that explored the intersection of history, politics, and the arts. As part of the class, Ferrario would discuss readings with the students about Julius Caesar and Simpson would tackle the themes of George Frideric Handel’s Giulio Cesare. An early opera by Richard Wagner — Rienzi, the Last of the Tribunes — served as a lesson on the life of Cola di Rienzo, an Italian medieval politician who was murdered by a mob in 1354.

Via Cola di Rienzo — a street named for the one-time hero — is about two blocks from the center. A little more than a mile from there is Caffè Greco on Via dei Condotti. The café, which dates back to 1760, counts among its patrons artists, writers, and musicians who have included poet John Keats and composers Franz Liszt and Felix Mendelssohn.

“It’s hard to think of another city historically as important as Rome in terms of the arts,” Simpson noted. “In Italy there’s a seamless connection between the arts and everyday life. It’s just accepted that the arts are another part of life, like good food and wine. They’re not considered a luxury. It’s important for our students to see that.”

Finding Her Life’s Work

Maggie Tonn was a junior classics major when she boarded a plane bound for Rome in fall 2012. “Filled to the brim with both excitement and apprehension,” she looked forward to exploring Roman ruins, learning a new language, eating “copious amounts of Italian food,” and growing stronger in her faith, she wrote in a reflection about her experience. At the Catholic University campus in Washington, D.C., she used to serve as a eucharistic minister at Mass and participate in Gratia Plena, a women’s group that explores Saint John Paul II’s Theology of the Body. She also played flute in the pep band and was a member of the Equestrian Team and the Classics Club.

As a teenager, she wondered if she might be drawn to religious life, so she participated in a Nun Run sponsored by her high school in Unisondale, N.Y., hanging out with the sisters at the New York City area communities that she and her classmates visited. But, at the time, she thought, “No way, I would never do that.” However, just before Advent of her freshman year at Catholic University, she started seriously considering a vocation.

In Rome, she studied Italian and took courses in Roman history, Roman art and architecture, Christology in Rome, and advanced Greek. She saw Pope Benedict XVI three times and prayed in many churches. In early November of that year, she and some of her classmates attended Mass at the Basilica of Santa Sabina — the mother church of the Order of Preachers (the Dominicans) on the Aventine Hill in Rome. She wrote that at the consecration of the Eucharist, “I felt deep in my heart that God was calling me to be a religious.”

Now Sister Regina Ann Tonn and a novice with the Dominican Sisters of Saint Cecilia in Nashville, Tenn., wrote that she left the basilica feeling “inexpressibly happy.” That joy, she added, “remains with me to the present day. I am extremely thankful for my time in Rome.”

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