



MAGDALEN COLLEGE

OF THE LIBERAL ARTS



Newsletter
September 2021



President's Spotlight: Dr. Ryan Messmore

Seeing a Deeper Order of Things

It's encouraging to share the fruit of this special college with others.

Earlier this month, James Matthew Wilson, professor from the University of St. Thomas, visited Magdalen College to lecture on Dante's epic poem, *The Divine Comedy*. Wilson wondered if the meaning of this masterpiece depicting a journey through hell, purgatory, and heaven still resonates in a culture such as ours. "At a time when less than half [of] Americans attend a church and fewer still fear the punishments of hell, perhaps Dante's extended journey through the world beyond this one no longer can compel the reader," Wilson noted.

Then he met our students.

Not only did they prove a deep understanding of the text, but, according to Wilson, "they articulated just those qualities in Dante that I had perceived but never could have put into words."

Wilson penned reflections on his visit to Magdalen [in an article](#) published in *The Catholic World Report*. What did he hear our students articulate about Dante?

Most significantly, the epic poem's ability to point to a deeper order of things in the universe.

One Magdalen student noted Dante's careful use of numbers in the poem and described how it produces perfect symmetry and balance of cantos. Like the builders of medieval gothic cathedrals, Dante "took delight in the way mathematical structures give us a clue to the order of creation." Through careful numeric organization of syllables, lines, stanzas, and cantos, the *Comedy* reveals something about the harmonious order of the universe God has made.

Another Magdalen student reflected on how the poem reveals truths about human nature and morality. Dante "studied the mythology, history, philosophy, and theology of his ancestors and contemporaries, and he found a place for it all on the cosmic canvas of his poem."

A third student witnessed how Dante moved beyond a love that was interior to himself and began to recognize a deeper order of love: namely, "the order of God's love that causes all things to be and to move toward their true destiny."

Dante's *Comedy* is great, in part, because it provides a "first hint or gleaming of that order." Sadly, too many individuals in our culture today are blind to such a deeper, transcendent order. They are unable—or unwilling—to observe what Dante's guides (Virgil, Beatrice, and St. Bernard) helped him to see. They are unable to be stirred by the revelation that so moved Dante.

What enabled our students not only to see this order of things, but to articulate it in a profound way? They too have been led by trustworthy guides over a long journey. Our faculty have been walking with them for over a year—a period we've referred to as "A Year with Dante"—reading him together, slowly and carefully. Likewise, our students have studied the mythology, history, philosophy, and theology of Dante's ancestors and contemporaries. Magdalen College professor Anthony Esolen even wrote the translation for the *Divine Comedy*!

Most of all, Magdalen students have learned to approach the *Divine Comedy* with more than reason alone. They enter it through their imagination and embrace it with their heart. Magdalen is a learning community that invites students not only to understand the truth of this poem, but to love it—to delight in it—and to have their desires moved by "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars."

We look forward to sharing the fruits of this special college with alum, parents of current students, and prospective students during our [upcoming Welcome Weekend](#). I invite you to join us at the college on October 9-10!



Friday Night Lectures: Dr. Erik van Versendaal

This past month, Magdalen College hosted its first Friday Night Lecture of the academic year: James Matthew Wilson's "Saving Virgil: Dante and the Unity of the West." An award-winning scholar and renowned poet, Wilson is Professor of Humanities and the Founding Director of the Master of Fine Arts program in Creative Writing at the University of St. Thomas. This program is unique in America because it pairs a study of poetic form and practice with a deep encounter of the masterworks of the Catholic imagination.

Wilson expressed his artistic sensibilities and critical acumen, inquiring what critics might learn from the figure of Virgil in the context of the *Divine Comedy*. Virgil serves an essential role as guide to the pilgrim Dante, but curiously his place of eternal rest is Limbo, the first circle of hell. Students were captivated by Wilson's presentation and came well-prepared for discourse. Their study of Dante has been in-depth, punctuated by the study of the full text of Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dante's *Divine Comedy* in their core humanities classes. Extracurricular "Anno di Dante" events hosted at regular intervals during this 700th anniversary year of Dante's death enrich our young scholars beyond the classroom.

Friday Night Lectures are vital to collegiate life at Magdalen. As formal opportunities to gather the entire learning community, they give rise to perspectives that cast fresh light on the works we study. Our

interactions with guest lecturers lead to conversations among students and remain a touchstone for weeks and months to come. Upcoming Friday Night Lectures this semester include Robert Royal's "Does Dante's Paradise Exist?" as well as presentations by Matthew McGowan of Fordham University and Magdalen's own Anthony Esolen.

Magdalen College Welcome Weekend



OCTOBER 9–10, 2021
JUST 2 WEEKS AWAY!

Calling all alum, prospective students, & parents of current students: join us for two jam-packed days of activities during the peak of fall foliage in the New Hampshire mountains

Reserve Your Spot Today!

Career Pathways Spotlight: Dr. Eric M. Buck

Introducing Career Pathways

Career Pathways is more than a conduit to jobs: our program is designed to lead students to the pursuit of happiness following graduation. All students are called by God to specific walks of life, and it is the mission of Career Pathways to help them discern that call as they prepare for life after graduation. Our approach consistently leads directly to jobs, graduate education, and even travel abroad.

On a day-to-day basis, we mentor and train students to write compelling resumes, choose fields of employment or study, and apply to jobs or graduate programs. In addition to this direct assistance, we sponsor a slate of programs. Here are some highlights:

- **Grad School Panel.** Dr. Mary Mumbach, Dr. Erik van Versendaal, Dr. Jordan Almanzar and I hosted our annual grad school panel for upperclassmen at the beginning of the semester. Following the event, we distributed a grad program application timeline to this year's seniors.
- **Career Conversations.** In the first of a series of live interviews with a student audience, I welcomed Cindy Coughlin '17 back to her alma mater. Cindy is a bi-lingual, licensed clinical mental health counselor with Catholic Charities New Hampshire. During the interview, she reflected on how her experience at Magdalen helped prepare her for a career in mental health. While completing a master's program in mental health counseling, Cindy used her theology degree and Apostolic Catechetical Diploma from Magdalen to serve a parish in adult

ministry. This past year, she passed a licensing exam, which authorizes her to open a private practice if she wishes. Cindy spoke with infectious joy about her varied life and work and answered student questions candidly. She remembers her time at Magdalen with great fondness.

- **Teacher Preparation.** To help prepare students for future careers in teaching, Dr. Almanzar will discuss his experiences with online teaching on October 5th. A couple weeks later, on October 19th, Dr. van Versendaal will talk to students about "what to expect in teaching."
- **Alumni Panel.** On October 9th, during our Welcome Weekend, I will host a "Life After Magdalen" conversation with a panel of Magdalen alumni. These graduates will share with current and prospective students insights on how their time at Magdalen prepared them to pursue various careers paths and advice on how to flourish after college.
- **Visit from the Busch School of Business.** On October 28th, representatives of Catholic University of America's Busch School of Business will visit campus to share about their graduate school offerings.
- **Teaching Institute.** Early in November, Mr. Derek Tremblay, headmaster of Mount Royal Academy, will visit Magdalen to introduce the annual Cardinal Newman Teaching Institute, which next occurs in May 2022.

If your organization or business would like to recruit at Magdalen College, or if you are an alumnus/a willing to help Magdalen students prepare for working life (interview practice, mentoring, internship opportunities, job skills webinar, leading a Career Conversation, etc.), please contact me at ebuck@magdalen.edu.





Student Life Spotlight: Sophia Harne

Student Contributor

A new academic year has begun: “*Gaudeamus igitur!*” “*Therefore, let us rejoice!*” So goes the classic melody of youthful enthusiasm that students traditionally sing at Convocation as incoming freshmen are initiated into Magdalen’s collegiate community. This year, the song is in everyone’s heads; in the Dining Room, a senior waiting in line for lunch hums it half-unconsciously, while a group of sophomores, laughing and talking on their way back to the women’s residence, joyfully begin to sing the familiar tune. It echoes throughout campus, and we are all reminded: this year is good - let us rejoice!

This joy, which permeates our life at Magdalen, is apparent in the number of enduring traditions that take place at the start of the academic year. The first weekend of the semester, students drive a few minutes up the road to Rollins State Park, where they hike the short but challenging trail to the top of Mount Kearsarge. Here freshmen become acquainted with the larger mountain upon which they will live and study, and at the summit they encounter a fitting introduction to the striking beauty of New England.

Though the hike was uncharacteristically cloudy this year, it was nonetheless joyful and successful in the solidarity it forged. It seemed almost an all-too-apt symbol of the intellectual and spiritual heights we face as students in our pursuit of wisdom and holiness. Beauty is often shrouded in mystery, and while still on earth we are limited in our vision, seeing as of yet “still in a mirror dimly.” Nonetheless, we are called to pursue what is true and good with love, hope, joy, and real devotion, learning from and encouraging one

another on the way. Just as we trust that the sun will ultimately pierce through the clouds, so too do we trust that we will ultimately come to know, love, and behold that which we seek.

That same weekend, on a much lovelier day, students “set out into the deep” and went canoeing! The river was calm and the weather beautiful. In no time, the water was animated by ambition and friendly competition. Some canoes immediately began racing to pass those in front of them, while others maintained the more modest goal of avoiding paddling in circles, which they – more or less – successfully achieved. The students canoed for two and a half miles and then enjoyed a picnic lunch and a swim at a familiar beach.

Later that evening, the juniors hosted the traditional “Freshmen Welcome Dance.” After a delicious dinner outside on the bricks, freshmen were introduced to some simple swing steps and the basics of dance etiquette. As upperclassmen “got back into the swing of things,” freshmen learned not only swing but also the foundations of waltz and the steps for many line dances. The event continued late into the evening, and as it came to a close, the Virginia Reel was deemed the clear favorite.

Students also went apple picking, bringing back bags of rosy red apples for the community to enjoy. Most recently, the ladies of St. Mary’s Residence and the gentlemen of St. Joseph’s Residence each went on a weekend camping trip - the ladies to a lake-side cabin and the gentlemen to Father Boucher’s farm for their traditional “Boonabash.”

Clearly, the year is off to a wonderful start, and there is still so much more to come! As we persevere in wisdom and in love, let us remember always to let gratitude animate our hearts. We have been given much; “*Gaudeamus igitur*” - “*Therefore, let us rejoice!*”



In *The Merchant of Venice*, Shakespeare portrays due reverence in a vision of Paradise and redemption:

*Look how the floor of heaven
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold:
There's not the smallest orb which thou behold'st
But in his motion like an angel sings,
Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins;
Such harmony is in immortal souls;
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.*



Faith Spotlight: Rev. Fr. Roger Boucher, Chaplain

During a recent walk back to the rectory from the Chaplain's office, the moon was full and the stars were brilliant. The day had been warm and sunny, but the evening air had a slight Fall chill. Leaves had begun to change color. What an enchanted time on campus. It reminds me of my early college days, when I would be so inspired that I would break into song. As a youth, I sang Broadway tunes, but these days I'm more likely to sing a hymn that brings to mind the high value of creation and human life. We are blessed!

At Magdalen, we have study groups that explore the works of great truth tellers like G.K. Chesterton, J.R.R. Tolkien, and C.S. Lewis. Can you think of a more fitting space in which to read aloud their prose and poetry than this spectacular mountain? Here learning is enchanted, indeed! As Gerard Manley Hopkins reminds us, "the world is charged with the grandeur of God," and there is no escaping His powerful omnipresence. If creation speaks loudly of His presence, isn't it a fitting blessing to study authors who convey that presence in story? Joseph Pearce is correct when he says, "If the essential ingredients of reality, of life, are not physical but metaphysical, it follows that true stories must reflect these metaphysical realities." The work of Tolkien, Lewis, Dante, and Shakespeare do just that, for these writers share the knowledge that it is Love that moves the seasons, the sun, and all the stars, and that the cosmos is the first and greatest Love Song.

At Magdalen, we love to sing at Holy Mass--it's part of the enchanted world. We should remind ourselves that the word *cantare*, 'to sing,' as in Gregorian Chant, is the root of the word *enchanted*. Are we like the people in Plato's cave, chained to the shadows of our minds, which we call 'reality?' Perhaps a glorious fall season is what is needed to break us out into the open, so that we can sing of creation as St. Francis did. This is one reason why it's wonderful that our students recently went on retreat in the New Hampshire hills, climbing, playing music around a bonfire with a Dominican friar, sleeping under the stars, and singing to the Prime Mover and Great Composer of all creation. Thank God for enchanting the world through authors like Tolkien, Lewis, and Chesterton, who remind us that we can trust the supernatural world in which we live and move and have our being. What a beautiful time in which to be living!





Academic Spotlight: Dante Presentations - Dr. Erik van Versendaal

Seven Centuries of the Sacred Poem

For the past year, Magdalen College has been engaged in a reception and celebration of Dante's *Divine Comedy* in preparation for the 700th anniversary of his death on September 13/14, 2021. This event has been commemorated around the world. Magdalen's *Anno di Dante* began last November when students staged performances of cantos from the *Inferno*, including an especially vivid interpretation of Count Ugolino's tragedy. Throughout the rest of the academic year, the Humanities faculty delivered a series of presentations (among them a Friday Night Lecture by our own Anthony Esolen), and students recited lyric poems from Tasso and Shakespeare, to Hopkins and Eliot, to Calderón (in Spanish!) and Goethe (in German), and, finally, performed scenes from the *Purgatorio*.

This month, two Friday Night Lectures explored the great poem, the first by James Matthew Wilson and the second by Robert Royal. On the day after Wilson's lecture, three Magdalen students delivered their own papers on the *Comedy*, and the whole community joined together for a celebratory Italian feast. Professor Wilson was able to attend that student panel, and he recently offered his reflections on the event in an article for [The Catholic World Report](#).

Two events remain: in early October, one of our students will offer a staged recitation of the *whole* of T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (a poem in deep conversation with Dante), and at the end of the month we offer performances of cantos from *Paradiso*, replete with choral and orchestral accompaniment.

The purpose of these many events has been for our community to acknowledge and appreciate the greatness of this work and its place in the tradition.

We also desire our students to see that the poem is rightly among *the* central and characteristic works of the Magdalen curriculum, as it unites within itself all the disciplines studied at the college and offers a principled and inspiring foundation from which to pursue those disciplines well. Moreover, as the overwhelming majority of the student body actively contributed to the *Anno di Dante*, our celebration also brought to the fore how our common study and enjoyment of the best authors enriches and is in turn enriched by the bonds of fellowship among us. At Magdalen, life in and outside the classroom are deeply integrated; both contexts are designed to help us come into contact with reality and learn to offer praise, as Dante did, to the divine Love for the sake of which the whole world has its being.

*Did you catch the latest episodes
of our podcast?*



On September 16, we released an interview with Academic Dean Brian FitzGerald discussing the timely topic of "Solidarity".

On September 28, President Ryan Messmore spoke about the academic mission of the College and why it's important to see the world as being created by the Logos who is Love.

Check out all of the episodes in our "From the Summit" archives, and stay tuned for several upcoming interviews with Prof. Anthony Esolen."

Listen to past episodes or subscribe