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### One Hundred Years of *Providence*: A Brief Note on the History of Providence College

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**ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF PROVIDENCE:  
A BRIEF NOTE ON THE HISTORY OF PROVIDENCE  
COLLEGE**

**Richard Grace**  
Providence College

Eight centuries ago, on 22 December 1216, a new religious order was approved by Pope Honorius III. Its founder, St. Dominic de Guzmán, a Spanish priest, had given direction to the Order of Preachers, as it was to be called, in response to heretical challenges to the Catholic faith in the region of southern France where he was living. The mission of his order of itinerant mendicant friars would be to counteract, by their preaching, the influence of the Albigensians.

Seven hundred years later, the Order of Preachers would be authorized by Pope Benedict XV to establish a college for young men in Providence, Rhode Island, in the northeastern region of the United States. The intention this time was not to combat heresy but to create an educational environment that would encourage the intellectual growth of the local Catholic community. The legislature of Rhode Island would grant the college a charter on 14 February 1917, and two years later the first class of students would begin their studies under the guidance of nine Dominican friars who constituted the earliest faculty of the college.

Formidable obstacles had to be overcome before the college could become a reality. The Dominicans in the eastern United States had been receptive to the invitation of Bishop Matthew Harkins of Providence in 1910, but they were not quite ready to take up such a big task immediately. By 1915, the Dominicans of the Province of St. Joseph were ready to move forward and approved the bishop's proposal. Although they forwarded the minutes of their action to Rome, the Master General of the Dominican order was apparently not enthusiastic about the idea and never gave it his explicit approval. Nor did he seek the Beneplacitum approval of the Pope.

However, the Dominican provincial in Washington simply assumed that the Master's assent to the recent Acts of the provincial chapter meeting meant that the project could proceed. Even then, the document carrying the Master's general assent to the provincial chapter's Acts never reached the U.S., for the Italian liner *Ancona*, carrying the mail with the notice of assent, was torpedoed by an Austrian submarine in November 1915, and the document sank to the floor of the Mediterranean. A new copy was issued, but it still did not contain an explicit approval by the Master General to the proposal for a college. However, a new Master General took office in the summer of 1916 and he was favorably disposed toward his order's founding of a college in Providence.

Convinced that the proposal was now authorized to go forward, Bishop Harkins placed the matter before the Rhode Island General Assembly, which voted its approval of the charter. Governor Robert L. Beeckman signed the measure into law on 14 February 1917. Ten days later the request for papal approval was granted, in the form of a *Beneplicitum Apostolicum*, by Pope Benedict XV; and four days later the Master General, Fr. Thiessling, attached his formal approval to the papal document.

While the bishop's motivation was explicitly for Catholic education within the diocese of Providence, the college was from its very beginnings open to people of all faiths. The next-to-last section of the charter reads: "No person shall be refused admission to said college as a student, nor shall any person be denied any of the privileges, honors or degrees of said college on account of the religious opinions he may entertain." And that openness helps to account for the significant number of Jewish students who enrolled at Providence College as classmates of the many Catholic immigrants and their children -- Irish, Italian, Portuguese, and French Canadian -- (to name the largest ethnic groups) in the early years of the college.

Less than two months after the civil and ecclesial authorization of Providence College, the United States declared war on Germany and the small U.S. Army was rapidly enlarged through a conscription program which sent young men into the armed forces rather than seeing them off to college. Local draft boards tended to be more inclined to induct men of the lower social classes; thus, many of the men whom the new college was intended to serve -- immigrants from lower income levels -- were the very ones being inducted. So it seemed that Providence might have a new college but not a very substantial enrollment.

Nevertheless, the project proceeded. The bishop granted the college 18 acres plus 10,000 dollars for scholarships. The Dominicans pledged to provide a faculty plus 25,000 dollars to start the building. The total of 35,000 thousand dollars was a miniscule sum with which to start a

college. So Bishop Harkins established a goal of 200,000 dollars and began to receive contributions from some wealthy local Catholics; but much of the heavy fund-raising had to be done by the parishes in the diocese. Here again, the immigrant population was at the center of the story – holding rummage sales and bake sales to raise money for the new college, a few hundred dollars at a time.

Ground was broken for the first building in June 1917, and as of May 1918, the fund had received 156,000 dollars. Harkins Hall was dedicated on May 25, 1919. When it was completed, the initial stage of Harkins Hall (what is now the front section, the iconic face of the college) had cost 331,000 dollars -- about 6.2 million in today's money.

Within six months of that dedication, the war came to an end and some units of the Army began demobilizing in the late fall of 1918. But just as the war was ending, the global pandemic of influenza reached Providence and took nearly a thousand lives in the city. The worst was over by the end of the year, as construction was moving ahead at the new college and plans were on course for it to open for the next academic year. Even before the formal opening of the college in September of 1919, Dominican faculty were offering credit-bearing courses for women in religious orders, which began the continuing education program (known colloquially as "night school" for many years) which eventually came to be designated the School of Continuing Education, whose tradition since 1918 makes it the oldest division of the college.

In the most historic photograph in the history of Providence College, seventy-one young men in suit jackets and ties are arranged around the first Dominican faculty of nine friars who are seated on either side of Bishop Harkins. The date was September 18, 1919. This was the first class of PC students, who had made it to their opening session, having prevailed over a Master General's resistance, an Austrian torpedo, the shortage of money, the war and conscription, and the influenza epidemic. On that day, Providence College came to life.

The physical size of the college was just eighteen acres when it opened in 1919. Over the course of the next thirty years, the college acquired more land and had reached forty-five acres by mid-century. By the mid-nineteen seventies, the size of PC was 105 acres, after the college had obtained in 1955 the neighboring property which had belonged to the Sisters of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd; and, in 1974, it secured the large property across Huxley Avenue, which had been the site of the city's Charles V. Chapin Hospital. To this day the size of the college continues to be 105 acres. However, the number of buildings has grown by leaps and bounds since the 1990s. Having had just one building, Harkins Hall, in 1919, the college now has a total of forty-four buildings (not counting outdoor athletic facilities). For its first twenty

years, Providence College had no residential facilities for students, but Aquinas Hall was opened in 1939, which enabled a portion of the student body (still all male) to live on campus.

Perhaps the most famous gift in the early history of the college came from a young actress who sold autographs at a theater in downtown Providence in 1938, to raise money for the building fund for Aquinas Hall. Her name was Judy Garland, and a year later she rose to a new level of stardom as a girl named Dorothy, wearing red shoes in "The Wizard of Oz."

The earliest curriculum of Providence College was based on the Dominican tradition of Aristotelian-Thomistic learning. The influence of St. Thomas Aquinas was central to the program of studies. Courses in philosophy, usually beginning in the sophomore year were required; and theology was mandated for all eight semesters of a student's four years at the college. Jewish and Protestant students were not obliged to take courses in Catholic doctrine for credit; but they were expected to sit in as auditors or to take an additional course in philosophy.

Up until the 1950s, student transcripts recorded their religious affiliation. On the basis of that evidence, it is known that almost 400 Jewish students had attended Providence College in its first three decades. Otherwise, students enrolling at the college came largely from local Catholic high schools, with the largest numbers coming from La Salle Academy, less than a mile west of the college. In the early years of the Great Depression, the Jewish proportion of the incoming classes rose to as high as 16% of the class (1931). In that year, the entering class totaled 240 freshmen, and the college population remained relatively stable through the 1930s. But the coming of World War II caused a calamitous drop in enrollment, with just 66 new students entering in 1943.

The college survived the war years in part because of the Army Specialized Training Program of 1943-44 which prepared soldiers for leadership roles. The army's students took classes in various disciplines and lived in Aquinas Hall. Over a hundred colleges across the nation hosted student-soldiers, but the program had to be curtailed in 1944 when the need for troops overseas became greater on the eve of the Allied invasion of Normandy in June 1944. Of the large number of PC students serving the armed forces during World War II, sixty-nine were mortal casualties. In the aftermath of the war, the G.I. Bill which included education benefits led to a surge of enrollments at PC by returning veterans.

To address the academic, residential, and athletic needs of the student enrollments of midcentury, a surge of new construction occurred in the 1950s, including the science complex named for the great medieval Dominicanscholar Albertus Magnus, the Alumni Hall Gymnasium where

PC basketball would be launched on its way to national prominence, and the Raymond Hall residence building and dining center, all of which were built in the decade when the college acquired the Good Shepherd property that added two dormitories.

Long before Alumni Hall resounded with fanatical basketball fans, the PC basketball team began playing its games, in the 1920s, in the auditorium of Harkins Hall, which was the all-purpose space for assemblies, dances, plays, student orientations, and large examinations. Equally important as a sporting site was Hendricken Field, close enough to Harkins that the crack of the bat could be heard during afternoon classes. In 1924, the college's baseball team, then in just its second year of existence, gained national attention for its victory over cross-town rival Brown University, in a game which took four hours and seventeen minutes to play. After twenty innings, PC won by a score of 1 to 0, and the two starting pitchers got to rest their arms after both had pitched the complete game.

As a Dominican pre-ecclesiastic student, Vincent Dore was a member of the college's earliest baseball team. Having entered with the first class of students in 1919, he spent two years studying philosophy (1922-24) at Dominican houses in Kentucky and Washington, D.C. and eventually received his bachelor's degree from PC in 1925. Six years later he returned to the college as a faculty member (sociology), and over the course of the next fifty-three years he served in many capacities, including athletic director, treasurer, dean of studies, academic vice president, superior of the Dominican community, and seventh president of the college (1961-65). He was in many respects the "grand old man" of PC by the time of his death in 1984, by which time nearly every college and university in Rhode Island had awarded him an honorary degree. After his retirement from the presidency "Cy" Dore (formally Rev. Vincent Cyril Dore, O.P.) was appointed to be the first chancellor of the college, in which role he was a highly respected consultant and advisor both at the college and within the local community.

At the time of the centennial, Providence College is being led by its twelfth president, Brian J. Shanley, O.P. All twelve of the presidents have been Dominican friars. As the college had grown in its first three decades, so had the size of the Dominican community, from nine friars in 1919 to eighty-six by mid-century. At that stage of the life of their community, not all of them could be accommodated on the fourth floor of Harkins Hall, where the Dominicans' priory life was centered, with their chapel, on the fifth floor, and their dining and recreation spaces as well as the private rooms for many of them. Many of the Dominicans lived in residential halls, some serving as dorm prefects and others simply in residence. Over the years, numerous Dominicans served as the college's chaplains or assistant chaplains.



By the 1960s, the number of Dominicans on campus was diminishing, with the consequence that by the middle of that decade lay people outnumbered Dominicans on the faculty of the college. In this centennial year, there are 40 Dominican friars on campus, nine of whom are retired, while 27 are actively engaged in the educational mission as teachers or administrators. Their presence in the residence halls is no longer as visible as it once was, because most of the friars now live in the Priory of St. Thomas Aquinas (1984) on campus. As of the beginning of 2017, three Dominicans and one Franciscan friar were living in the residence halls. In addition, two Dominican sisters are engaged in teaching and chaplaincy.

The decade of the sixties was filled with different types of dynamics for the college. On one hand, the student unrest associated with resistance to the Vietnam War led to the suspension of classes (with exams optional) at the end of the spring semester 1970 after the deaths of student demonstrators at Kent State University in Ohio. While that unrest was occurring through the second half of that decade, the college was building a new library, holding a sweeping curriculum review, and debating the proposal to admit women to the undergraduate student body.

The decision to admit women was taken for intellectual and financial reasons -- to enrich the academic caliber of the student body and to address the national trend of declining enrollment in all-male colleges. The first female undergraduate students arrived in September 1971, and by the end of that decade women outnumbered men in the freshman class of 1979. Six years after the first young women moved into Aquinas Hall, a terrible fire in that building claimed the lives of ten female students. It occurred on December 13, 1977, in the hours after a gentle snowstorm had blanketed the campus in the evening. Students trying to dry their clothes after a friendly snowball fight inadvertently caused a fire to start on the fourth floor of the dorm. By morning, the chapel on the ground floor of Aquinas was serving as a morgue. The president of the college Thomas R. Peterson, O.P. moved into Aquinas Hall when classes resumed in January, and he led the community in seeing itself as a family which had suffered severe losses. To this day, the members of the college regularly refer to themselves as a family.

In that autumn of 1971, when the first women undergraduates arrived, the college introduced a new core curriculum. Many colleges and universities were at that time headed in the direction of open curricula, with less emphasis on general degree requirements. PC chose to buck the trend and revised its curriculum so as to emphasize the broad spectrum of the liberal arts. The anchor of the new curriculum was a four semester interdisciplinary sequence of courses on The Development of Western Civilization, which would be required of all students. Because philosophy

and theology were incorporated, along with history and literature, in the new program, the previous requirements of eighteen credits in Philosophy and eighteen in Theology were reduced to six in each field, and the standing requirements of six credits in history and six in English were dropped. In addition, the program of studies mandated courses in social science, mathematics, and physical science. A one semester course in the fine arts was added subsequently.

The 1971 curriculum was reviewed and debated extensively in the following decades, but it remained in place until 2010 when the faculty senate voted to revise the core curriculum. The flagship program in Western Civilization remained in place but it was reconfigured in several ways, with more emphasis on seminar work; and the idea of competencies which could be addressed in a number of ways was adopted (e.g., writing). This ambitious renovation of the core curriculum was linked to a set of mission-related learning goals that emphasize the Dominican pedagogical tradition and the compatibility of faith and reason.

Changes in pedagogical style and the expansion of classroom technology have affected the ways in which courses are taught. A quarter of a century ago, the prevailing method of instruction at PC was the lecture format. It is still alive and still very useful, but not as nearly universal as it was then. A shift in the direction of more discussion based classes has been reflected in the more recent architectural plans for classrooms and the renovation of existing classrooms. In the new Ruane Center (2013), which is home to The Development of Western Civilization Program, the Liberal Arts Honors Program, and the History and English Departments the building is virtually split down the middle, with lecture rooms on one side and seminar rooms across the hall.

At the start of the twenty-first century, the fast-moving changes in informational technology influenced the way that classrooms were equipped at PC. Although the changes were to be expensive, the college committed itself to the installation of new academic media in classrooms across the campus. The computer replaced many other kinds of media, and ipads, as well as video and audio playback resources, meant that illustrating a lecture or promoting a discussion could be achieved in two taps or clicks of a keyboard.

Unquestionably, much of the excitement of being at Providence College, for generations of students, has been the success of its intercollegiate sports teams. In the early 1960s PC basketball teams, usually given underdog status in the big tournaments, won two championships (1961 and 1963) in the National Invitation Tournament at Madison Square Garden in New York. Since then, the basketball team has been a major ongoing story in the local press and on national television. The other sport which has gained extensive press coverage over the years has been



hockey, both the men's and the women's teams. The honors of winning the college's first NCAA championship belonged to the women's cross country team in 1995. The PC women runners won the NCAA title again in the fall of 2013, at which point they were the only PC team with NCAA championship honors. The men's hockey team added another NCAA national championship to the college trophy case in 2015 in Boston, defeating Boston University 4 to 3 in a thriller.

The college had fielded baseball teams since 1922, but that long history came to an end in 1999 when the sport was discontinued because of the need to conform to Title IX (an amendment to the 1965 Civil Rights Act). The college was not in compliance because its student ratio was 41% male to 59% female, while it was devoting 53% of its athletic budget to men's sports. The decision to drop baseball was agonizing for many people at the college and among the alumni, but the last team went out in a blaze of glory, playing deep into the NCAA tournament and winning a school record of 49 victories against 14 losses.

Since the economic crisis of 2008, American higher education has had to address the expectations of its students and families that a bachelor's degree should open doors to economic security. PC could not escape this national trend, so its humanities departments have felt the market pressures, while its pre-professional majors have experienced a surge of growth in enrollments. Providence College continues to be a liberal arts college, and all students retain the elements of liberal education, which reinforce the traditional meaning of a PC degree. However, the number of students majoring in traditional humanities concentrations had declined somewhat in the most recent decade, while the number of students electing to major in one of the business fields has risen markedly. The School of Business, which was formally established in 2008, received accreditation in 2012 and took up residence in its sparkling new home, the Arthur and Patricia Ryan Center in January 2017.

The building surge of the early twenty-first century included the Ruane Center, The Ryan Center, the Smith Center for the Arts, and St. Dominic Chapel. The college's first free-standing chapel, which replaced the small but much-loved chapel in Aquinas Hall, was dedicated on February 2, 2001, in the presence of five bishops. The octagonal chapel, whose steeple is now the highest point on campus, is a hub of activity on campus, both for liturgies in the chapel itself and for the twenty-four organizations, engaging nearly two thousand students, which operate under the umbrella of the chaplaincy.

In the space formerly occupied by Aquinas Chapel, the Center for Catholic and Dominican Studies, established in 2006, soon became a focal point of intellectual activity outside the classroom, sponsoring lectures, reading circles for faculty and staff, ecumenical dialogue,

luncheon presentations, and social gatherings to bring together diverse segments of the college community and to promote the Catholic identity of the college.

Clarifying the mission of the college became a major issue in the academic year 2011. An eleven member committee, appointed by the current president of the college, Fr. Shanley, worked for nearly two years, with open dialogue sessions that allowed constituencies throughout the college to comment. The committee eventually produced a version which sought to make clear the religious identity of the college, but without demanding theological conformity. As approved by the trustees of the college in 2013, the mission statement identifies PC as “a Catholic, Dominican, liberal arts institution of higher education” which maintains that “the pursuit of truth has intrinsic value, that faith and reason are compatible and complementary means to its discovery.” In recognizing the importance of other cultures and diverse traditions, the revised mission statement affirms that PC “welcomes qualified men and women of every background and affirms the God-given dignity, freedom, and equality of each person.”

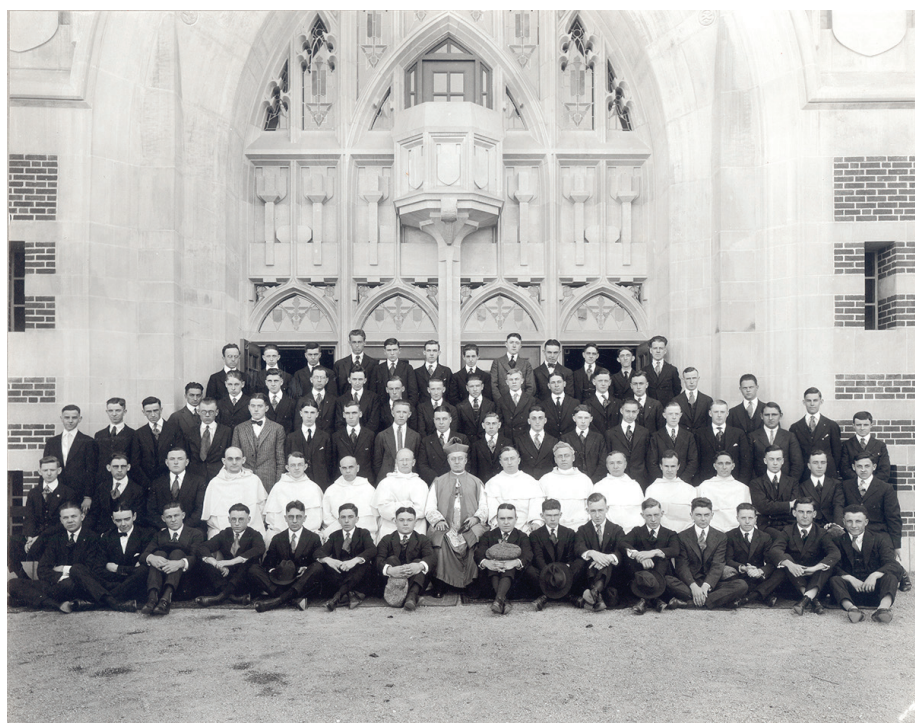
Issues of ethnic diversity, gender equality, and sexual identity have, in recent years, been lively aspects of the college’s reflections on who it is and who it wants to be. The fastest growing minority population on campus is Hispanic (288 students in fall 2014, up from 91 ten years earlier). The African-American undergraduate total has grown from 58 in 2005 to 154 in 2014. There are 97 international students among the undergraduates.

In 2007, the college reviewed its approach to diversity, with the result that the Office of Institutional Diversity was created that year. In 2010 a college-wide Committee on Diversity Initiatives, composed of students, faculty, and administrators delivered its report, which included a draft statement on diversity which was adopted. In March 2016 Father Shanley created a Diversity and Inclusion Implementation Committee — comprised of three faculty members, three administrators, and three students. A chief charge of the committee, which is represented on the College’s Strategic Planning Committee, is the development of a new Strategic Plan for Diversity.

Having started classes in 1919 with nine faculty and students, the college, at its centennial, has an undergraduate population just shy of 4,400 and a faculty (full-time) of 318. The alumni of the college number more than 55,000.

On the afternoon of 14 February 2017 in the State Room of the Rhode Island State House, the Providence College community, along with Governor Raimondo and the leaders of the House and Senate, celebrated the one hundredth anniversary of the college’s charter. Under the watchful

eyes of George Washington (in Gilbert Stuart's famous portrait), the governor acknowledged how much PC has meant to the state over the course of a century. Alumni who serve in the legislature were on hand to add their praises, and the elegant room echoed with members of the PC family cheering the word "Forever!" when the critical sentence of the founding document ended by authorizing the establishment of a corporation retaining the name of Providence College *forever*. Moments later the college's premier chorale, I Cantori, with its members wearing varsity sweaters sporting the letter "P," in 1920s style, delivered a beautifully gentle performance of the college's *alma mater*. Within a short time, the festive assemblage was drifting out toward the State House rotunda to enjoy pastries in black and white (the college colors) in the first hour of Providence College's second century.



In front of Harkins Hall, the first seventy-one students at Providence College are gathered around the nine Dominicans who were the first faculty members. In the center is Bishop Matthew Harkins who initiated the process of establishing Providence College. September 18, 1919.