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An academic life

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Quad 136



An Academic Life

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An Academic Life

It began in a different era. It was the early 1960s. Higher education enrollment was growing quickly as the need for post-secondary education became more apparent in an increasingly white collar economy and baby boomers were starting to make their impact on many institution.

Saint John's at the time was a typical, small, liberal arts college with a significant number of residential students, but its central Minnesota location also meant that many of the Catholic boys were "dayhops," non-residential students who lived at home in St. Cloud or Avon or Melrose.

One thing Saint John's did not emphasize was a personalized mentoring education. The economics of that just did not work. While monks were relatively inexpensive compared to lay faculty, the small town and rural Catholic families who sent their boys to be first-generation Johnnies had lots of mouths to feed. Many a young man told Fr. Don LeMay, who was the admissions and financial aid office rolled into one, "I'd love to come to Saint John's, but my family can't afford it." To which he invariably replied, "Come to Saint John's. We'll figure it out." Young monks were part of the solution.

The monastery, in those early Vatican II days still had over 300 monks. Yet even as undergraduate enrollments grew, many monks were not interested or prepared to teach, or were otherwise engaged. So young monks were asked (strongly encouraged?) to step in. Their individual disciplinary interests were not an overriding concern. A monk might love math but be expected to teach physics. Sometimes the stretch was even further—a humanist might be called to become a social scientist. The little matter of degrees was also somewhat flexible—a bachelor's degree was required, naturally, but maybe that was enough for the moment. There

were Catholic boys that needed teaching and their parents cared more about the Catholic part than for some academic niceties. The constraints (tyranny?) of credentials, assessment and accreditation were still mostly in the future.

Fr. Rene McGraw was 27 in the fall of 1962. He had a Saint John's bachelor's degree, earned with honors, and a strong interest in both English and philosophy. He had been ordained that summer, and this probably tipped the scale in the Abbot's mind toward philosophy. Plus the common curriculum at a Catholic university in the early 1960s would have been heavily weighted toward philosophy and theology—a lost golden era for humanist lovers of the liberal arts.

Those first philosophy classes were a challenge. There was no graduate training to rely on, only undergraduate class notes and his own close reading. Furthermore, there was little opportunity to engage Socratically with students. Classroom enrollments were in the high double digits, sometimes topping 100. The largest Fr. Rene recalls was 120. Pedagogy was largely limited to lecturing, and there was little opportunity to ask for written assignments. The grading would have been insurmountable. Tests were short answers and even grading those was no easy task.

But the intellectual engagement was powerful and the interactions with students, as challenging as they were in a class of 80 or 90, were a deep joy. The Abbot decided an investment in graduate school might be worthwhile. So Rene went off to Duquesne University in Pittsburgh for a master's degree, working part-time as a parish priest during these years. Then shortly thereafter, off to the University of Paris for a brief three year Ph.D. in a second language—something most academics “stuck” in Paris surely would have stretched to five or six years.

And then back to the Saint John's classroom and his students.

There have been sabbaticals, one to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and another to Oxford. There have been other Abbey responsibilities that occasionally required course releases. There was also the lifelong personal commitment to social justice and peace that led, with the help of others, to the development of the Peace Studies Department and major. Rene then taught in both programs, bringing a philosophical rigor to his peace studies course exploring aesthetics and technology.

And throughout, there has been the other side of the commitment to teaching Johnnies: nearly 40 years as a faculty resident to callow freshmen that he helped to nurture, eventually, into men,

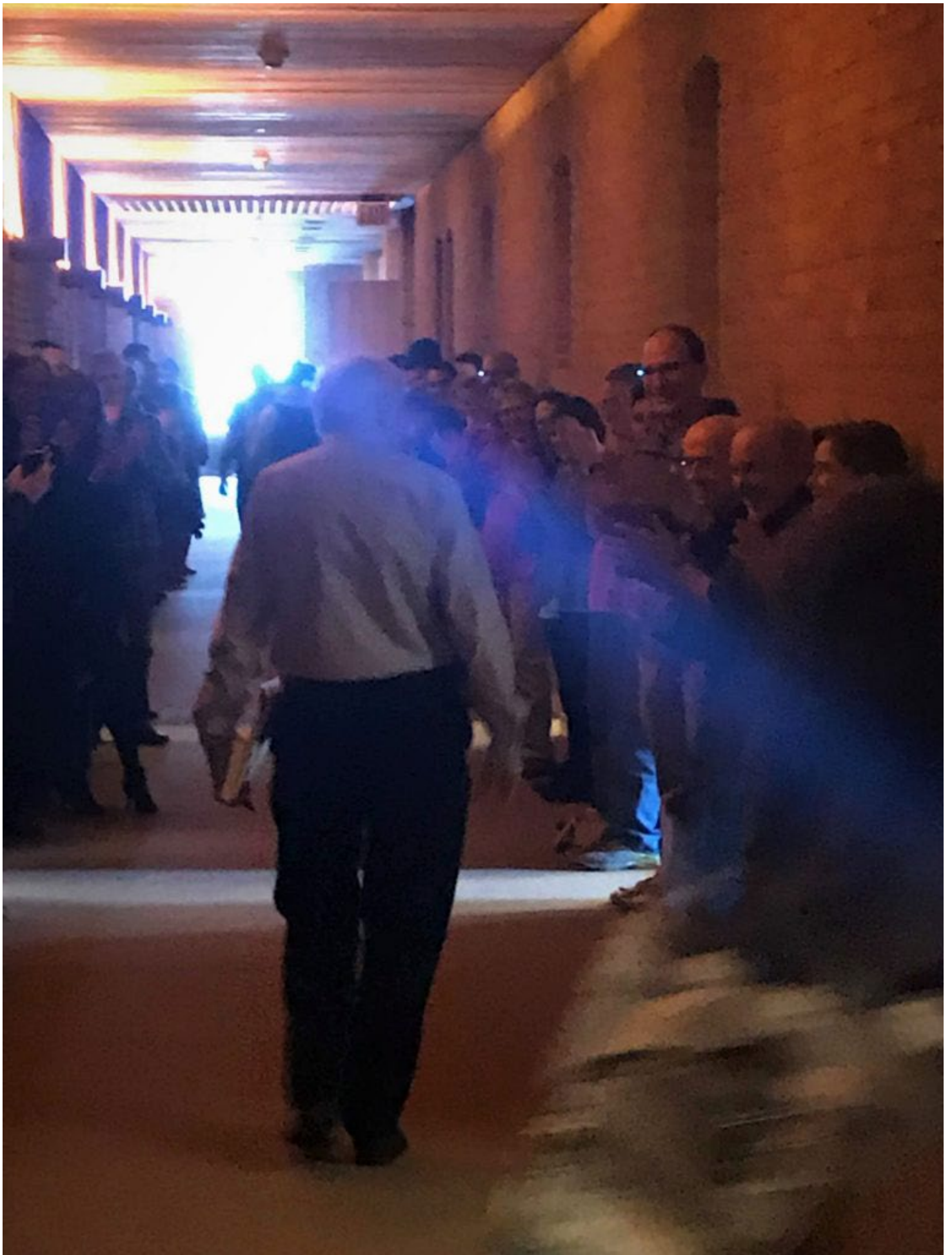
many of whom were lucky and blessed enough to become lifelong friends.

Between teaching and mentoring young men, Fr. Rene has surely touched as many lives as any individual in Saint John's long history.

The one constant for Rene is that "teaching philosophy...has never become routine for me. A phrase of Heidegger, an insight from Aristotle, an apothegm from Nietzsche, an ethical demand from Camus or Levinas startles me as much now as it did when I first started teaching in 1962. Teaching philosophy has never ceased to excite me."

This academic life comes to a bittersweet end for Rene this week, at age 83, after 52 years in the classroom. "I could not think of a better way to spend a life than in the classroom with a text of Heidegger or Levinas in my hand."

Every faculty member, of course, has his or her own personal and meaningful version of an academic life, but Saint John's will be a lesser place for no longer having Rene in its classrooms, and thousands of Johnnies and Bennies are the better for having had that gift.



Fr. Rene McGraw is celebrated by students, friends and colleagues as he makes his way back to the Philosophy Department after his last class on Friday 3, 2019, after 52 years in Saint John's classrooms.

By [Michael Hemesath](#) | May 9th, 2019 | Categories: [Alumni](#), [Higher Education](#), [History](#), [Kudos](#), [Uncategorized](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).