

Mundelein seminary creates simulation lab through *Pathways for Tomorrow* Initiative

BY ANDREW M. HOLMES

The University of Saint Mary of the Lake (USML) Mundelein Seminary, through the *Pathways for Tomorrow* Phase 3 grant from Lilly Endowment Inc., recently opened its innovative Cor luxta Meum Simulation Center.

The Cor luxta Meum Project

The fundamental motivation behind the *Cor luxta Meum Simulation Center* is the realization of true integral formation in seminary education, synthesizing the human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral dimensions through encounter-based formation. The initiative's name comes from Pope Saint John Paul II's influential exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Latin for "I will give you shepherds." *Cor iuxta meum*, the second half of Jeremiah 3:15, concludes the verse with, "after my own heart."

The simulated encounters are carefully designed to contribute to the seminarian's growth in affective maturity through *awareness of emotion in the self and other, appreciation and acceptance of emotion in the self and other, and the ability to appropriately control emotion in the self.* These *affective maturity indicators* were developed after careful study of the *Program of Priestly Formation*, which defines affective maturity as "the ability to live a true and responsible love," demonstrated through "prudence, vigilance over body and spirit, compassion and care for others, ability to express and acknowledge emotions, and a capacity to esteem and respect interpersonal



relationships between men and women." Based on this understanding, a foundational element of simulation at Mundelein is the consideration of three unique perspectives: (1) the learner, (2) the formation advisor, and (3) the *Standardized Parishioner* (SP). The SP is a highly trained professional simulation actor hired and trained to standardize moments with the goal of generating *empathic resonance*. By triangulating these three perspectives, the **seminarian begins to form a picture of his growth in affective maturity. Formation advisors then have valuable insights on which to base ongoing formation opportunities.**

State-of-the-art technology/data collection

The newly constructed simulation lab at USML, designed to be a vital component of the *Cor luxta Meum Project*, boasts three distinct simulation rooms with unique environments that might be found in a typical parish—a large conference room, a pastor's office, and a small meeting room. Large-screen monitors, webcams, and a *Microsoft Teams* conference system add the ability to simulate virtual meetings, reflecting the hybrid spaces



A simulation room designed to resemble a pastor's office at the *Cor luxta Meum Simulation Center*.

used in today's post-COVID world. Each room is fully configurable and outfitted with cameras, microphones, and one-way mirrors, while sophisticated *SimCapture* software automatically records multiple camera angles, audio, and data for every simulated encounter.

The simulation process

A typical simulated encounter begins well before the day of the simulation. Seminarians study core texts supporting the theme of compassion. Arriving at the simulation lab on the day of the assigned encounter, learners are oriented to the equipment. They agree to respect phenomenal realism and psychological safety considerations such as how to exit a simulation if they feel uncomfortable, who will be observing, and who will have access to the video recordings and for how long.

Learners complete a pre-encounter self-assessment that sets a baseline for their awareness and understanding of their own balanced, compassionate care. After reading the door notes detailing the specifics needed to engage with the parishioner, they proceed into the simulation by pressing "start" on the student kiosk that initiates the *SimCapture* software, begins the recording, and starts a timer on the connected in-room PC. As the learner enters the room, the formation advisor observes through a one-way mirror. They are assisted by a simulation operator who monitors and adjusts the camera angles in real-time.

When the encounter ends, after about 20 minutes, the seminarians complete a post-encounter survey and proceed to one of three designated debrief rooms outfitted with PCs and large monitors. There, they meet with the formation advisors in a process called *Debriefing with Good Judgment* to guide learners in reflection and post-encounter compassion reset and recovery. Formation faculty additionally record their perceptions using a rubric while the SPs complete the *Parishioner Perception*

Survey. Quantitative and qualitative data are gathered through rubrics, surveys, transcription, reflections, and annotations.

How the concept developed

The idea first arose when Father John Kartje, USML rector and president, began exploring the curriculum innovations implemented at several of the nation's top medical schools. He recognized striking points of connection between the challenges posed by seeking to form caring, competent doctors and similarly qualified priests and lay ministers. The benefits of simulation in medical education were immediately evident.

Marie Pitt-Payne began her tenure as academic dean at Mundelein Seminary in 2019, when she and Kartje further examined the 50-year tradition of medical simulation and its potential use in the seminary. Pitt-Payne collected evidence in her dissertation, *With Due Respect for Humanity: Engaging Affectivity Through Simulation in Catholic Seminary Formation*. She found that "the simulation method cultivated new levels of emotional self-awareness, introduced a new kind of holistic learning grounded in reality, provided a space to work through fear and self-doubt, and enabled a surprising shift in focus from content delivery to a more fully human personal encounter."

The method continues to evolve in consultation with Jim Carlson, vice president for interprofessional education and simulation at Rosalind Franklin University, and Dominic Vachon, based at the Hillebrand Center for Compassionate Care in Medicine at the University of Notre Dame, whose novel research in biology, neuroscience, and psychology frames the field of compassion science. With pastoral vocations experiencing challenges like those of the healthcare professions, Mundelein has modified Vachon's *Clinical Compassion Mental State Process* for use in encounter-based simulation scenarios at the seminary.

Present use and future expansion

Seminarians at USML have already begun to experience pastoral encounters in a safe and supportive simulated environment. These scenarios mirror those that parish priests engage with daily, such as marital issues, spiritual direction, struggles with Church teaching, or challenges with parish council and staff meetings. They complement

seminarians' real-world engagements in their teaching parishes, internships, and vocational synthesis, providing an opportunity for constructive and thoughtful debriefing and feedback from seminary faculty before any potential feelings of isolation experienced by newly ordained priests. The hope is that seminarians engaging in simulation encounters will acquire the self-knowledge that provides the foundation for compassion and pastoral insight.

Through the *Pathways* grant, USML collaborates with the Seminary Formation Council and five additional Catholic seminaries. Beginning this summer, the goal is to expand the methodological reach by identifying non-Catholic institutions that are interested in simulation. If your institution is interested in conducting a simulation through the *Cor luxta Meum Simulation Center* at USML, or if you are interested in learning more, contact Andrew Holmes, director of the *Cor luxta Meum Simulation Center*, at aholmes@usml.edu.



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