Catholic Theological Union and the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas both find their inspiration in the renewal brought about by the Second Vatican Council, particularly within three key developments: (1) a new appreciation of the vocation and mission of the laity, (2) the irrevocable commitment of the Church to work towards full visible unity among Christians, and (3) a new openness to interreligious dialogue. Both Catholic Theological Union and the Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas have invested time, talent, and treasure to promote these three areas of growth in the Church. The alliance formed between these two institutions will surely promote an even greater commitment to bring to fruition the full impact of the Council's teaching.

The Lay Centre was founded in the heart of historic Rome in 1986 and is rooted in the ecumenical hospitality offered by the Ladies of Bethany, a Dutch religious order that hosted many of the non-Catholic observers during the Second Vatican Council. Significant gatherings of theologians and Council Fathers took place at Foyer Unitas during those exciting years of renewal. Some insights from these informal gatherings, which often took place over a meal, even found their way into Council documents.

When Foyer Unitas closed its guesthouse in 1986, this charism of hospitality and dialogue was carried forward by the Lay Centre through the founding of a residential college in that same space for lay students studying at pontifical universities. Roman colleges and residences for seminarians, priests, and religious women and men abound, but there was no specific place dedicated to the growing number of young and talented lay men and women from every part of the world who also were pursuing studies at these universities. The Lay Centre has filled this gap for the last twenty-five years, first at Piazza Navona, then on the grounds of the Pontifical Irish College, and now at the Passionist Monastery of Saints John and Paul.

In its present home, which is truly an oasis in the city, the Lay Centre provides a unique niche in the clerical city of Rome. It not only offers hospitality and sustenance, especially to lay women and men who study at the pontifical universities, it also promotes a dialogue of life among the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim students and professors who choose to reside at this centre during their Roman academic sojourn. Hospitality and dialogue are also hallmarks for both the local and numerous international study programs that take place year-round at the Lay Centre.

A few years ago, a Jewish-American Professor visited the Lay Centre. Before that evening, she knew very little about the mission of this institute, but in a thank you note sent the next day, she wrote that “the Midrash teaches
that the reason Abraham sat at the entrance to his tent was so he could spot any strangers and welcome them and provide them with friendship and sustenance.” She continued, “And so it was for me at your tent, the Lay Centre.”¹

The “tent” has expanded over the years to welcome at the same time residents representing cultural or historical “enemies”: men and women from Israel and Egypt; Indonesia and the Netherlands; or Serbia, Bosnia, and Croatia. Just this year, a woman from Indonesia introduced a Dutchman as “my enemy—because his grandfather was at war with mine—who has become my best friend now in Rome.”² Through a daily dialogue of life at the Lay Centre, barriers have been broken and bridges of peace and reconciliation have been built.

During 2011, the Lay Centre marked its twenty-fifth anniversary by planning several events throughout the year to highlight our commitment to the lay vocation and to ecumenical and interreligious dialogue. First, to draw attention to the commitment of the Lay Centre to promote Christian unity, Cardinal Walter Kasper, President emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, was invited to speak on the topic “Why I Am a Man of Hope.” Some are tempted to say that today we are living through an “ecumenical winter,” that little is going on in comparison to the period after the Second Vatican Council. The initial enthusiasm has died down and what we have now is fallow ground. Cardinal Kasper acknowledges that “(t)he ecumenical scene today is changing rapidly. The original enthusiasm has given way to a new sobriety; questions about the ecumenical methods and the achievements of past decades, and doubts about the future, are being expressed.” Yet if you look carefully, he says, you will see that “a new generation of ecumenically minded and motivated Christians, especially among the laity, is taking up the torch of the ecumenical movement….³ This is a time to live in hope, to persevere. Cardinal Kasper has shown through his writings, through his words, and through his example this great perseverance.

Another significant moment to mark the 25th anniversary of the Lay Centre was a three day session in May 2011 dedicated to Interreligious and Intercultural Dialogue. This event included the showing of the documentary film The Traces of the Argonauts, produced by doctoral candidate Theodosios Kyriakidis, who lived at the Lay Centre from 2008-2010. The widely-acclaimed documentary recalls the destruction of the Christian communities of the Ottoman Empire/Turkey. After the viewing of the film, Mustafa Cenap Aydin, Ph.D. candidate and former Lay Centre resident, entered into dialogue with Theodosios and others about the film. These two friends, one Greek Orthodox and the other a Turkish Muslim, discussed painful memories of the past and demonstrated in action the impact of a dialogue of life for promoting reconciliation and peace. The weekend also included an exchange between Archbishop Michael Fitzgerald, Papal Nuncio to Egypt, and Dr. Lejla Demiri on “The Hospitality of Abraham: Judeo-Christian and Muslim Perspectives.” Lejla, who lived at the Lay Centre from 2002-2004 and was a recipient of a Nostra Aetate scholarship awarded by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, completed a Licentiate in Interreligious Studies at the Gregorian University. Now with a doctorate from Cambridge, she will begin teaching Islamic Theology at Tübingen University.

A third event from July 3-8, 2011 gathered former Lay Centre residents from different parts of the world for a reunion and seminar on “The Lay Vocation in the Church and in the World.” This seminar, preceded by a retreat day, allowed participants the possibility to reflect on how they are integrating professional service, family life, and spirituality. The seminar itself consisted of papers and dialogue on how participants’ current research and practical work experience impacted their understanding of vocation of the laity in the Church and in the world. Dr. Aurelie Hagstrom, dean of the theology department at Providence College and author of The Emerging Laity: Vocation, Mission and Spirituality (Paulist Press, 2010), led the seminar. Three of the papers from this seminar are included in this issue of New Theology Review. First, Robert White, Assistant Director of the Lay Centre, adjunct professor

¹ Dr. Deborah L. Lipstadt, personal letter, March 2006.
² Gayatri Wedotami, conversation with author, December 2011.
of St. John’s University, and doctoral candidate at the Gregorian University, reflects on the lay vocation fifty years after the Second Vatican Council. His study raises the question, have the full implications of the Council’s teaching on the laity been received? Second, Dr. Susan Timoney, Executive Director of Evangelization and Family Life of the Archdiocese of Washington, offers a study entitled “Echoes of Euaggelistes: Forming the Laity for the New Evangelization.” She considers the call, the challenge, and the commitment necessary to involve laity in this fundamental dimension of their mission in the Church and the world. Finally Rev. Lisa Buratti, a pastor in the Church of Sweden, reflects on the vocation of the laity in a Swedish-Lutheran context. These three papers are a sampling of the lively discussion that took place during that memorable gathering.

The 25th anniversary year concluded on December 1, 2011 with an international colloquium on “The Role of Women in International Peacebuilding.” This event also marked the beginning of an alliance between the Lay Centre and Catholic Theological Union. An overflowing crowd, including a delegation from CTU, welcomed three distinguished speakers: Dr. Sarah Bernstein, Prof. Aida Abadzic Hodzic, and Rev. Dr. Ruth Paterson, OBE.

Hailing from Israel, Dr. Sarah Bernstein, peace activist and researcher at the Interreligious Coordinating Council, combined theory and practice as she considered the role of women as networkers. Prof. Aida Abadzic Hodzic, senior lecturer, the chair for the History of Art, Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, offered an Islamic perspective on the role of women in international peacebuilding. Particularly moving were her reflections on what women have done and are doing now in Bosnia and Herzegovina to promote peace and reconciliation, especially after such a period of atrocious suffering and war. Finally, Rev. Dr. Ruth Patterson, OBE, Director of Restoration Ministries in Belfast, Northern Ireland, shared the wisdom of more than thirty years of working for peace during “the Troubles” by offering some practical pathways for peace. With Fr. Donald Senior, C.P., as moderator and Sr. Barbara Reid, O.P., giving the response to this symposium, this event was a visible sign of the alliance of the Lay Centre with Catholic Theological Union, and surely a good omen, of things to come.

The Lay Centre at Foyer Unitas not only theorizes about peacebuilding but also provides an atmosphere where reconciliation and peacebuilding happen on a daily basis among young lay women and men at a grassroots level. These international students are a sign of hope for future peace. When two “enemies” break bread together at meals and share common tasks, barriers are broken and bridges are built for the future. Hospitality at the Lay Centre in the heart of historic Rome also has its contribution to make to peacebuilding and reconciliation.