The Master of Theological Studies Program

Description and Purpose of the Program

The M.T.S. provides students with diverse backgrounds, interests, and goals the opportunity to pursue a first degree in theology, one that exposes them to the various disciplines of theology. The program holds in balance two important purposes: 1) to enable students to develop a general theological literacy and competency by providing them with a basic background in the constituent areas of Catholic theology; 2) to afford students as much flexibility as possible to explore theological topics of interest to them.

The M.T.S. is a 48-credit-hour program of theological study. Students take sixteen courses overall: eight of them fulfill distribution requirements in the fields of biblical studies, historical-systematic-practical theology, moral theology and church history (two in each of these four fields); eight electives allow students to focus on topics of particular interest to them.

Many students pursue the M.T.S. as part of their preparation for applying to PhD programs in religion or theology. Others may elect the degree out of intellectual curiosity, or to enrich their work lives by drawing connections between theology and the professions they already practice or know well (such as law, medicine, business, journalism, public policy, the arts, and the social or physical sciences). Still others may pursue this degree to prepare them for work with religious or other non-profit organizations, social justice agencies, educational and community-based organizations.

While the M.T.S. program has served as a gateway to many endeavors, potential applicants should be aware that the M.T.S. is not intended as preparation for pastoral ministry. Boston College has several programs specifically designed either for those who wish to enter professional ecclesial or pastoral ministry (the Master of Divinity and the Master of Arts in Theology and Ministry) or for those who seek to become religious educators with an appropriate credential (the Master of Education with concentrations in high school religion teaching or Catholic school leadership). Careful consultation with the staff of the Admissions Office of the STM is essential for potential students seeking to identify the program that best matches their interests and goals.

Boston College’s School of Theology and Ministry offers the M.T.S. program in an environment shaped by faith and shared worship, school-wide social activities, and opportunities for interaction between students and faculty. Because the M.T.S. does not prepare students for pastoral ministry, it does not require participation in pastoral and spiritual formation programs. However, M.T.S. students are fully eligible and warmly invited to participate in the variety of spiritual formation activities (e.g., retreats, days of reflection, faith-sharing and prayer groups) offered by the school. To take advantage of such offerings, students may consult with the Associate Dean for Student Affairs or the Associate Director for Spiritual Formation.

Degree Requirements

To be eligible for the degree, students must complete forty-eight hours of course work, including these distribution requirements:

- Six credit hours in biblical studies
Six credit hours in historical-systematic-practical theology
Six credit hours in moral theology
Six credit hours of church history
Twenty-four credit hours of electives

(Please see the “Course Selection Guidelines” section of this document for details of course selection and options)

Closure project: in addition to the courses (typically, four per semester for four semesters), all students must complete a closure writing project. This project is a 10-page reflection paper on a set of five questions addressing the student’s experience of theological education. Students must register for this non-credit project (TM 629-01) in their final semester. One member of the faculty (chosen by the student) will meet with the student to review this reflection paper and engage in a colloquy about the student’s growth in theological understanding and overall personal learning experience in the M.T.S. program.

Program Policies
Students should consult the Academic Policies and Procedures section of the STM website (http://www.bc.edu/content/bc/schools/stm/acadprog/stmserv/acadpol.html) for much valuable information. The following are some areas worth highlighting:

A - Administration

1. Admissions: Applicants for the M.T.S. degree should follow the admissions procedures outlined on the STM website at www.bc.edu/stm. The successful applicant will have completed a bachelor’s degree with above-average grades from an accredited college. At least one-third of the courses taken for this bachelor’s degree must have been in the liberal arts. All applicants are required to submit GRE scores. Applicants may be asked to participate in an interview prior to admission.

2. Transfer credits: Up to six credits of graduate theology courses taken at other institutions (but never applied to any other degree) may be applied to the M.T.S. degree. Students seeking to transfer credits should follow closely the steps described in the Academic Policies and Procedures section of the STM website.

3. Good standing: To remain in good standing, students must maintain a Grade Point Average of 3.0 or above.

4. Part-time students: Although students normally complete the M.T.S. in four semesters, averaging four courses per semester, it is possible to complete the requirements for the degree on a part-time basis. The maximum length of time for the completion of the M.T.S. degree is eight semesters from the time of matriculation. See the M.T.S. Program Director or Associate Dean of Academic Affairs for further information about the timing of degree completion, including questions about policies regarding leaves of absence.

5. Changing programs: Students sometimes change their academic programs after matriculating at the STM. On occasion, an M.T.S. student will discern a desire to engage
in religious education or pastoral ministry (such as in parish work, campus ministry, hospital chaplaincy, spiritual direction, etc.) and request to transfer into another graduate program (such as the M.Div., M.A. in Theology and Ministry or the M.Ed. with concentrations in high school religion teaching or in Catholic school leadership) offered at Boston College. Such changes in programs can often be accommodated, especially if the student requests them in the first year of study, leaving time for different degree requirements to be completed. It is important to note that the more heavily structured requirements of some other degree programs may present challenges to students seeking to change programs without the forfeiture of any credits already earned toward the M.T.S. Students seeking a change of academic program should discuss the matter first with their advisor, then with the Assistant Dean for Admissions.

B - Options

i. **Thesis elective:** as one of their electives, students have the option of choosing to write a 30- to 50-page research thesis. Students choosing this option will select a faculty advisor and a second reader for their thesis and, upon approval from these faculty members, may register for the course TM 880-01. The thesis and its oral defense are evaluated on a pass/fail basis for three credits in total.

ii. **Language courses:** The M.T.S. allows students to apply to their degree credit requirements up to nine credits in ancient or modern languages. These courses may be at the intermediate or beginner level, and may be taken at Boston College, other B.T.I. schools, or at other institutions, subject to the approval of the academic advisor and M.T.S. Program Director. Ancient languages include Hebrew, Greek and Latin; modern languages helpful for theology include German, French, Italian and Spanish. Languages other than those named in the previous sentence may be taken toward the degree, but only with the explicit permission of the student’s academic advisor and the M.T.S. program director. Students should be advised that most language courses run for a full year, that is, a fall and spring semester sequence for six credits. Great care should be taken to match a student’s genuine academic needs to these course selections. Students who plan to apply to doctoral programs in theology may be well served by language study relevant to their fields of particular interest (e.g., biblical studies, European or Latin American theologians), as proficiency in languages strengthens doctoral applications considerably.

iii. **Directed readings:** M.T.S. students are eligible to take directed readings courses with members of the faculty who agree to work with them. Ordinarily, such readings courses are most appropriate for students in more advanced programs (Th.M., S.T.L., S.T.D. and Ph.D.), but M.T.S. students with a particular interest not covered in the course curriculum may approach a faculty member with a proposal for directed study. Such requests are best made well in advance of the start of the particular semester in which students seek to undertake a reading course. Reading courses are not recommended for M.T.S. students in their first two semesters. Reading courses count as electives; they do not fulfill area requirements for the M.T.S. degree.
iv. **Courses outside of theology:** On rare occasions, the M.T.S. program director will approve a student’s request to count for the M.T.S. degree graduate courses that are not explicitly in the theological disciplines – for example, philosophy, literature, and history. A maximum of two courses will be allowed in this category. A student who chooses this option will graduate with at least fourteen courses in theology and at most two courses that demonstrably advance the student’s theological education through study of ancillary disciplines. Such courses will count toward a student’s electives, rather than fulfilling an area requirement. Before enrolling in such courses, students must request permission from the Program Director, who will review each request.

v. **Summer courses:** For M.T.S. students, courses offered in semester-length mode must be taken in that mode. Summer courses cannot be used to satisfy area requirements for this degree. Where appropriate, courses taken in the summer can be applied as electives. The student should consult the program director to determine such suitability before registering for any summer courses, either at Boston College or elsewhere. Two-credit courses taken in the summer must be taken as such; no provision will be made to convert these courses to three credits. A maximum of six credits from summer courses can be applied to an M.T.S. degree. See further treatment of this topic at [http://www.bc.edu/content/bc/schools/stm/acadprog/stmserv/acadpol.html#summer](http://www.bc.edu/content/bc/schools/stm/acadprog/stmserv/acadpol.html#summer).

**Course Selection Principles**

a) **Importance of advising**—Upon matriculation into the M.T.S. program, every student is assigned an academic advisor. The student and this professor are to meet during the registration period that precedes each semester to discern the optimal selection of courses. The relationship between a student and his or her advisor is of great importance, especially in such a flexible program as the M.T.S. Experience shows that the quality of the mentoring a student receives from his or her advisor is integral to successful outcomes in the M.T.S. program. There is no substitute for the investment of time and effort in course selection on the part of both students and advisors. Students are also invited to seek out wider faculty mentoring relationships beyond their assigned academic advisor. If there are reasons for students to request a change of advisors, they should consult the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs. Every student should make it a priority at least once each semester to meet with his or her advisor to review course selection and academic goals, and to ensure that the requirements of the program are being met.

b) **Fulfilling course distribution requirements**—In order to determine which courses fulfill the four categories (i.e., biblical studies, historical-systematic-practical theology, moral theology, and church history) for distribution requirements, students should consult their advisors as well as the “Course and Degree Requirements” document published every semester by the STM’s Associate Dean of Academic Affairs. The M.T.S. Program Director will adjudicate any questionable cases that arise (e.g., determining the appropriate category for transfer courses and courses taken through cross-registration in Boston Theological Institute schools).
c) **Pre-doctoral students**: Those planning to apply for doctoral work in theology after completing the M.T.S. will naturally seek out the program of study that will make their academic profile most appealing to Ph.D. admissions offices. Experience shows that the most attractive student transcripts are those demonstrating that the student has been exposed to a wide range of theological sub-disciplines, including successful study of foundational courses across the areas of theology, as well as adequate concentration in the field of study chosen for future specialization (e.g., moral theology, biblical studies, etc.). After an appropriate range of foundational courses has been completed, pre-doctoral students in their final semesters of the M.T.S. might consider participation in advanced seminars in their area of academic interest, as this will expose them to the methods typically employed in doctoral work, such as producing research essays.

d) **Course selection options**—Between STM offerings, graduate courses in the Boston College Department of Theology, and in the other member schools of the Boston Theological Institute, literally hundreds of course options face M.T.S. students each semester. Students sometimes describe themselves as being elated as “kids in a candy store,” or, alternatively, as being bewildered by this “embarrassment of riches.” Faculty advisors will supply much-needed guidance for students eager to make the best course selections as they seek to fulfill their course requirements and fill out their M.T.S. degree work with the electives most fitting for their personal goals. A noted above, the distribution requirements for the degree are deliberately unspecified, allowing any number of different courses to fulfill the area requirements. No single course is compulsory for M.T.S. students, although some courses (see the recommendations below within the several areas of theology) will clearly be more beneficial for a majority of students. The open-ended nature of these requirements places even greater emphasis on the advising relationship. Below are a series of considerations that may guide M.T.S. students and their faculty advisors through the maze of course selection.

**Subject Areas: Selection Guidelines**

- **Biblical studies**: Six credits in biblical studies are required, and it is highly recommended that M.T.S. students take at least one course in Old Testament and one in New Testament. The STM annually offers excellent entry-level courses to the Old Testament (TM 515 or TM 826) and the New Testament (TM 540). Most M.T.S. students are well advised to take these courses, which provide overviews of the books of these respective parts of the bible as well as grounding in the methodologies of exegesis and responsible hermeneutics. Previous work at the undergraduate level in these fields is helpful, but seldom substitutes for these graduate courses. Students should consult with their advisors as well as members of the faculty with expertise in scripture to identify the courses most appropriate for them. Most M.T.S. students take more than the two courses in biblical studies specified by the distribution requirements for the degree. Most often, they build upon the introductory courses by selecting further courses in the prophets, psalms or wisdom literature (in Old Testament) or in the Gospels, writings of Paul, Johannine literature or other parts or features of the New Testament. More specialized courses (such
as “Dead Sea Scrolls” or “Apocalyptic Literature” or “Social Justice and the Bible”) build upon the work done in the basic courses.

- **Historical-systematic-practical theology:** Six credits in this broad category of theological study are required. Each fall semester, the STM offers a course in Fundamental Theology (TM 506) which serves as an important gateway to further study of systematic theology at the graduate level. Important courses in topics such as Christology, eucharistic theology, ecclesiology, the Trinity, the doctrine of God, grace, salvation, creation and eschatology build upon the foundations supplied by this highly recommended course. In addition to this array of courses, students should seriously consider work in historical theology, such as on the Patristic era and on the thought of important figures in Christian theology, from Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas to Johann Baptist Metz and Karl Rahner. As with every field, students should work with their advisors to ensure that courses are taken in the proper sequence, so that courses treating foundational concepts precede the more advanced study that must build upon earlier work.

- **Moral theology:** Students have considerable flexibility in fulfilling their six required credits in the field of moral theology (also known as theological ethics). At least once every year, the STM offers Fundamental Moral Theology (TM 510). This is the most appropriate option for a first graduate course in moral theology, and is highly recommended for all M.T.S. students. Students are then prepared to take further courses in such areas as medical ethics, virtue ethics, social ethics, professional ethics, ethics within the life of the church, etc. Within social ethics, the most appropriate first course is TM 505 (“Introduction to Catholic Social Ethics”), but it is not strictly a prerequisite for further work in the field.

- **Church history:** By completing at least six credits in church history, M.T.S. students will come to appreciate the evolution of Christian institutions, practices and spirituality in light of social and political factors that gave rise to Christianity as we know it today. It is impossible to understand contemporary realities of church life without the perspective afforded by careful study of history. Highly recommended are the survey courses the STM offers in church history (such as TM 550 and TM 551) as well as courses that focus on the history of ministry, church leadership and spirituality.

- **Other fields of theology:** The M.T.S. program does not require work in the following important fields of theology, but students are strongly encouraged to take advantage of the considerable resources of the STM faculty in the following areas. Elective courses may be chosen in any of these areas:

  a) **The academic study of spirituality**—The tradition of Ignatian spirituality informs all Jesuit-sponsored institutions, including Boston College. Several STM faculty offer courses and expertise in a wide range of additional spiritual traditions.

  b) **Liturgical theology and practice**—The STM offers a wide range of courses that allow students to explore the history and dynamics of Christian worship as well as the relationship between theology and the arts.
c) **Religious education**—Faculty members in the STM’s Department of Religious Education and Pastoral Ministry are prominent leaders in their respective fields. Students who are considering teaching as a component of their future work experiences are especially encouraged to take courses that will expand their understanding of pedagogical theory and practice. It is recommended that they take a three-credit contextual education course and seminar to prepare for successful theological education and catechesis. Interested students should consult the Directors of Contextual Education.

d) **Pastoral theology**—Although the degree is not intended as a preparation for pastoral ministry, many courses offered at the STM in the fields of pastoral studies may be of great interest to M.T.S. students. Offerings in youth ministry, Hispanic ministry, and various aspects of pastoral care are particularly recommended for students interested in those fields.

e) **Comparative theology and inter-religious dialogue**—Studies in this field of growing importance will help M.T.S. students develop their awareness and skills for future work in a society featuring ever-greater religious pluralism. This area is a particular strength of the Boston College Department of Theology, as well as several schools within the B.T.I.

f) **Supervised experiential learning**—M.T.S. students have the option of taking a three-credit directed reading course that integrates academic study with supervised experiential learning. For example, students may propose a one-semester directed reading course in which they integrate some aspect of research in social ethics with related supervised experience in a faith-based non-profit organization. Students should discuss their interest in such a course with their advisor and the Directors of Contextual Education.