

“Catholic Studies in Catholic Colleges and Universities”

BY THOMAS LANDY

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When students on three Catholic university campuses returned to classes last fall, they found a new option, "Catholic Studies," among the curricular programs offered them. Three institutions--DePaul University in Chicago, Marquette University in Milwaukee and Saint Louis University--inaugurated new undergraduate programs this past semester, and Loyola University Chicago launched a master's program. These new programs bring to at least seven the total number of Catholic studies programs now in place, and may well signal the beginning of a trend in the way Catholic colleges and universities address their religious identity and pass along Catholic traditions to students.

While the programs often have different strengths and weaknesses, they all aspire to give students broad exposure to Catholic culture, imagination, heritage and traditions. Unlike programs that focus primarily on theology or pastoral ministry, Catholic studies programs cast their nets more broadly. They aim to introduce students both to Catholicism's place in the history of ideas and--more concretely and sacramentally--to manifestations of Catholic life in art, literature, music, and everyday culture.

The establishment of programs in Catholic studies might come as a bit of a surprise to people who presume that interest in Catholicity is on the wane on campus, or to others who think that what Catholic studies propose to do is not different from what Catholic colleges are already supposed to do. Even some of the faculty who have talked about Catholic studies for years seem surprised that the idea has really begun to be discussed more seriously. The number of new programs has grown for each of the past three years, and 1998 promises to be no different, with at least five more colleges in the advanced stages of developing undergraduate minors. Many more institutions are considering the possibility. Because of the



increasing interest, David O'Brien, a professor of history at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Mass., organized a conference held at the University of Saint Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., last November on the future of Catholic studies.

Faculty members who have worked to establish Catholic studies programs have encountered an array of responses on campus. On the one hand, some faculty members hesitate about adding a particularly Catholic academic program. On the other hand, Catholic teachers and administrators have sometimes been slow to embrace the concept out of fear that the programs would lead to increasing marginalization of Catholicism in the overall academic program. Establishment of Catholic studies, they suggest, may make Catholicism just another option in the curriculum alongside women's studies, race, and ethnic studies, environmental studies and the like. Proponents of Catholic studies, however, see the programs as a new opportunity for faculty and students to explore in depth topics that might otherwise get lost amid other curricular responsibilities.

Background

The idea behind Catholic studies is not entirely new. In the middle years of this century, many Catholic colleges and universities offered courses in Catholic literature and (more often) Catholic philosophy, as well as courses in religion. Christopher Dawson, a historian who was the first occupant of the chair in Catholic studies at Harvard, argues for the need to use Christian culture as the unifying theme for undergraduate education at Catholic colleges. Dawson's ideal was widely admired, but this program was institutionalized only at Saint Mary's College, Ind.

In the last 30 years, moreover, most institutions moved farther from emphasizing the specifically Catholic element of their mission and were more directly concerned with opening themselves up to the world and shedding the constraints of ghetto Catholicism. Institutions were much more likely to emphasize the charism of their founding community--Jesuit, Benedictine, Vincentian, LaSallian or Mercy--than their Catholic identity. Identification with the sponsoring religious community provided a special religious identity,



which was called upon as a way to make the institutions seem more open than exclusive. Paradoxically, "Catholic" often was taken to symbolize the opposite.

In most instances, it is probably fair to say, the effort to be Catholic was not really abandoned, but was more often either reinterpreted or taken for granted. A variety of programs and institutes founded in those years did in fact relate to issues of Catholic concern. Peace and justice institutes, in particular, have long flourished alongside campus ministry, service programs and theology and religious studies departments. A few Catholic institutions sponsored endowed chairs in Catholic studies (as did an equal number of secular institutions). In 1976, the University of San Francisco launched the Saint Ignatius Institute, a great books program intended to update the Jesuit *Ratio Studiorum*, emphasizing Christian philosophy, theology, and literature. Most significant, in terms of Catholic studies, was the University of Notre Dame's foundation of the Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism.

The newly emerging Catholic studies programs seem to have begun at a time when faculty and some administrators no longer felt able to take the Catholicity of institutions for granted. Faculty discussion groups, set up before or in tandem with Pope John Paul II's 1990 apostolic constitution on Catholic higher education, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, began to discuss the mission of Catholic colleges and universities. (*Ex Corde* dealt with the need to preserve and develop the Catholic mission Catholic colleges and universities.)

On the scholarly front, cultural studies like Paul Giles's *American Catholic Arts and Fictions* began to expand the intellectual basis for understanding Catholicism's coherence in diversity. The growing prominence of other areas of culture studies--including Jewish studies--led many faculty members to feel either remiss at the slowness of developing Catholic studies, or at least more confident about the legitimacy of trying to create such programs.

Programs Currently In Place

How these programs will continue to grow remains to be seen, especially since many are still on the drawing boards and most of the programs already in place are fairly small and still



inchoate. All of them are interdisciplinary, and thereby aim to explore the influence of Catholic culture, thought and institutions on a variety of aspects of human experience.

Structurally, these programs range from full-scale Catholic studies centers which offer majors (12 or 13 courses) and minors (6 to 8 courses) to smaller interdisciplinary setups that offer a minor or a concentration (6 or 7 courses). At the University of Dayton, Catholic studies have been integrated into the general education requirement of the curriculum. This obliges undergraduates to choose one of seven interdisciplinary themes that aim to unite the courses from core areas that make up the general education requirements. In addition to themes like ecology, globalism, and social justice, students have been able for three years now to focus on the Catholic intellectual tradition.

Most faculty members are drawn from existing programs in liberal arts departments, but at some institutions science faculty and faculty from schools of business and education have joined in as well. Though some of the efforts seem to have been hatched in administrative offices, most are the result of years of faculty gatherings leading to this initiative. Almost all the programs are lay led, and all of those now in place indicated that there are non-Catholic faculty members in the program.

There is some variation among programs in terms of "distance" from the subject matter. As would be the case in any cultural studies program, all want to give students a strong understanding of the lived experience of the subject. Some, such as DePaul's program, do so from a religious studies perspective that presumes no particular faith commitment, but only a desire to understand--and a willingness to criticize--the thought and institutions it studies. In Cleveland, Ohio, John Carroll University's proposed program is much more explicitly apologetic. At the University of Scranton in Pennsylvania, participants gather for liturgy, and the organizers hope that the program will spur students to constructive projects.

The course offerings are the places in which Catholic studies get most interesting. All the programs begin with one or two required introductory courses, which are usually team-taught, like Scranton's "Inside the Catholic Tradition" and "Christian Classics." Most require some additional philosophy and theology, but leave plenty of room for electives. All



the designs also require some sort of synthesizing "capstone" experience in the form of a seminar or thesis paper.

DePaul lists 85 courses in its program. In addition to a wide range of courses in theology and Scripture (students can cross-register at Chicago's Catholic Theological Union), courses include "Catholicism in Africa," "Catholic Faith and Musical Expression," "The Catholic Church in World Politics," "Economics and the Common Good," "Catholicism and Race," and "The Life and Times of St. Vincent DePaul." At Santa Clara University in California, the elective courses include "Dante," "Theology and Science," and "The Church in China." At LaSalle University in Philadelphia, the proposal includes possibilities from the fine arts department like "The Cult of the Virgin and the Saints: Art, Architecture, and Religion," and "Creation and Evolution." Loyola College in Baltimore hopes to include "Women in the Christian Tradition" and "Literature and the Catholic Imagination."

Two of the programs now on the drawing boards seek to specialize. John Carroll University's focus is largely historical--on pre-Vatican II Catholic thought and life, including "Origins of Western Monasticism," "Origins of the Liturgy" and "British Catholic Authors."

A faculty committee at the University of Notre Dame has proposed an interdisciplinary undergraduate concentration (12 credits) in the Catholic social tradition. This aims to examine the biblical, conciliar, and encyclical sources of the tradition, but also hopes to extend study to its manifestation in the work of social welfare pioneers like Msgr. John A. Ryan, activists like Dorothy Day and Daniel Berrigan, S.J., and public philosophers like John Courtney Murray, S.J., and Michael Novak. This program, the faculty suggests, represents an unusual opportunity to engage Catholic social teachings as a distinct, coherent and developing intellectual tradition within Catholicism, and to call upon students to examine how it is lived out in various social institutions and professions.

Possibilities and Pitfalls

Most of the programs currently established are small and enroll six to 16 students. Small



enrolments, however, are not unusual for minors and concentrations, and the figures do not include students who decide to take just one or a few of the Catholic studies courses. Moreover, most of the programs have not been around long enough to be well tested. Still, Georgetown's program, now five years old, has drawn successful enrollments in its core courses, which has led its faculty committee to propose upgrading it from a concentration to a minor. The developments at the University of Saint Thomas in Minnesota, which launched its Catholic Studies program four years ago, indicate even better the potential that well-organized Catholic studies programs have. Saint Thomas's program has developed into the largest and perhaps most successful of the programs now in place, and it is growing into a multifaceted center for Catholic studies. Founded and directed by Donald Briel, a professor in the university theology department, the program now offers an undergraduate major and hopes to expand into a graduate program as well. It attracts 50 majors and offers 25 courses. Many of these students have a double major, allowing the program to draw undergraduates with diverse interest like pre-med, pre-law, business, and the liberal arts.

Professor Briel has been busy seeing to it that the program influences the rest of the university and the surrounding community. A Catholic studies club on campus draws some 200 students, and a Catholic studies floor has attracted 18 undergraduate women. A similar men's floor is planned for the next academic year. The program even hopes to sponsor a Catholic Worker house. The university has developed outreach initiatives through the program to the archdiocese and the people of the Twin Cities. Perhaps, most ambitiously, program has launched a periodical, *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought and Culture*, which began publication this past summer.

Some of the most important efforts center on the faculty, which, Professor Briel suggests, is the key to success. Saint Thomas's plan grew out of series of faculty development initiatives and conversations, and still draws its intellectual vitality from these. The program became a reality because there were faculty members interested in making it come about, though not all were initially trained in, or up to date on, the subject matter of the courses they were interested in creating. The university, like several other colleges launching



programs, is trying to furnish faculty with the resources and support needed to develop these new courses, as well as to provide funding for faculty research in areas germane to Catholic studies.

While some institutions are backing up their programs with major fundraising initiatives (the University of Saint Thomas is seeking \$10 million), other faculty committees indicated that they had to justify their programs to administrations that were at best indifferent.

Occasionally the fear is voiced that Catholic studies is a restorationist project, bent on drawing colleges and universities back into a ghetto. This restorationist charge was certainly leveled against the Saint Ignatius Institute, which has been fueled by a rather traditionalist ecclesiological vision. Despite the considerable success of the Saint Ignatius Program in developing a coherent great books program and attracting a large number of students, none of the Catholic studies programs founded in the last several years appears to model itself on the Saint Ignatius Institute. (Nor, for that matter, does the Institute describe itself as a Catholic studies program.)

At the institutions that are launching Catholic studies programs, ghettoization of the university once again seems rather unlikely, simply because the institutions have already changed so much. Compared to the tighter sequencing at the Saint Ignatius Institute, most of the new programs seem decidedly more post-modern in structure, despite their integrative goals and capstone courses. Furthermore, since most of these programs are only available as minors, and all of them are optional, this fear of ghettoization seems unrealistic. The larger programs reported that they had attracted students from a variety of faiths. All the program directors suggested that the faculty committees were trying to avoid getting trapped by any single ideological bent. At other institutions where Catholic studies have not gotten off the ground, however, faculty members have suggested that the difficulty is precisely that the faculty does not want to confront contested notions of what constitutes the Catholic tradition. A Catholic studies program would require confronting these notions directly. Some faculty members have expressed fear that any explicit effort to define and develop Catholic identity and mission tempts ecclesiastical intervention or oversight, and hence



threatens the academic freedom integral to Catholic studies and the whole university.

Paradoxically, the second fear most often expressed concerns a different sort of ghettoization. By assigning the curricular responsibility for Catholic identity to a single, small program, these faculty and administrators fear that the institution may abandon its sacramental responsibility to infuse the whole curriculum with a Catholic vision. All of the Catholic studies program directors I have spoken with have heard this argument, and all counter it with the hope that their program will serve precisely the opposite function and will serve as leaven for the whole university community.

There is undoubtedly some danger that small, underfunded programs will end up ghettoizing Catholic identity. Yet Catholic studies programs can also be of great value when they spur faculty to engage in new and relevant areas of research and teaching. While some programs have not yet been able to move much beyond drawing existing courses into greater coherence, they are already spurring the development of an increasing number of promising new courses.

In terms of larger institutional identity, it is also true, I believe, that the presence of even small academic programs may help stir departments to think about hiring new faculty able to teach course areas germane to Catholic thought, life and mission. At present, graduate students who want to teach in these areas still find themselves facing rather limited opportunities. In addition to the implications for undergraduate students who take Catholic studies classes now, cultivation of the programs on Catholic campuses can help open up a whole new field and increase the scholarship on Catholic thought and culture and thereby encourage graduate students to take up this work.

Though several institutions have done so already, more might think about establishing endowed chairs in Catholic studies, which would spur senior scholars and give Catholic studies more permanence, weight, and profile. I'm told it is the common wisdom among fund-raising officers at Catholic colleges and universities that Catholic donors are not very interested in giving money to endow chairs. Brick-and-mortar, scholarships, and athletics are the gifts of choice, while academic programs and chaired professorships are a harder sell.



Notre Dame's experience at endowing well over a hundred chairs would seem to belie that opinion: but if it is true that Catholics are not so inclined, it is almost certainly to the detriment of Catholic colleges and universities. At a time when the presence of founding religious communities is waning, and will likely have to be discontinued on some campuses, we would do well to think about what kind of programs are left in place as a permanent legacy. Catholic studies can help build the kind of core faculty these institutions will need. Clearly, more administrative support and ambition will help Catholic studies programs develop to their real potential.

While a Catholic studies model is undoubtedly not the only way to develop an institution's Catholic identity, it can serve as an important means for developing catholic identity within the academic program. At Santa Clara, where the program aspires to expand to include art exhibits, concerts and theatrical productions, or at other institutions that have already begun such efforts, the impact can be significant on students and the whole community. As David O'Brien has noted repeatedly, Catholic studies programs increase the likelihood that Catholic colleges and universities can be places where the church can do its thinking and engage its own and other traditions. The next several years should prove a fruitful time for testing that possibility.

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