

## Open Letter to University of Portland Students, Faculty, Staff and Alumni

### Theology and the Core Curriculum

Interest in the study of theology, as evidenced from several responses to an article in the November 15, 2012 (Vol. 114, Issue 11) edition of the *Beacon*, appears alive and well at the University of Portland. It was greatly encouraging to read so many letters and emails from students and alumni who weighed in on the conversation. These letters articulated a deep understanding of the important role that theology plays in an increasingly complex and diverse world. They also indicated a great appreciation for the unique place that theology holds in the University Core Curriculum. And while it may have seemed easier (as some people thought) to respond immediately to the November *Beacon* article, the fact that the assessment process for members of the Theology Department was not completed until late December required a more thoughtful and comprehensive response to the University of Portland community. This letter is an attempt to explain in as full and transparent way as possible the recently completed departmental revision of Theology 101 and Theology 205.

The last stage of the process was multi-faceted. Dean Andrews met with the Theology Department on September 14, 2012, following the final reports from the External Core Review. At that meeting, Dr. Baasten was asked to coordinate the work of two subcommittees, one for THE 101 and the other for THE 205, in order to implement key recommendations from the reviews. The subcommittees met continuously throughout the Fall semester. Dean Andrews requested that a final draft of the department's Theology Proposal be submitted to him by December 15, 2012. After its submission, Dean Andrews and Dr. Baasten provided an overview of the Proposal to President Fr. Beauchamp, Interim Provost Dr. Greene, and the Deans. With this letter, we now want to share with the entire University community the Theology Department Proposal concerning a revision of the Theology core.

Let us be clear from the start: First, a critical and academically-oriented engagement with "world religions" will continue to serve as an important and essential experience in an undergraduate's theological development here at the University of Portland. Second, the study of "world religions" is not being replaced by a mandatory course in "Christian doctrine." Students at the University of Portland need to be introduced to the study of theology if they are going to take several courses in it; and they need to be introduced to the theological tools necessary to engage a critical study of Christianity and its relationship to world religions.

1. The revision of the University of Portland's three-course Theology core sequence is a carefully constructed response to an exhaustive, two year departmental study, review, conversation, and reflection process coming out of two different reviews of the Theology core sequence: one as part of a regular, comprehensive, periodic review of the department (2008-09), the other as part of a review of the Core Curriculum (2011-12). Concluded in summer 2012, the External Core Review offered several academic and curricular recommendations, including tying Course Goals for THE 101 and THE 205 directly to the Core Questions that animate the University Core Curriculum. In this way, Course Goals will be linked thematically to Core Questions, such that Core Questions will be able to more effectively assess Course Outcomes. This means Core Questions — for example, Who or what is God?, How can I relate to God?, Who am I?, Who am I becoming?, Why am I here? — will link THE 101, THE 205, and all upper division THE courses.
2. The study of Theology as a discipline is different from "Religious Studies," Campus Ministry, and Catholic Studies. This is reflected in the three-course Theology sequence that animates and informs every aspect of the University of Portland's unique University Core Curriculum. Theology is a disciplinary science. It has a particular methodology that seeks to investigate the contents of belief by means of reason enlightened by faith. As with every science, Theology introduces students to its proper subject matter, interpretive developments, critical examination of various methodologies, evaluation of sources, disciplinary limitations, and goals. Unlike "religious studies" courses, which focus on a study of religions apart from any particular faith perspective, Theology introduces students to the methods needed to examine reality through a "theological lens." Through the three course Theology sequence, students will be introduced, gradually and systematically, to the tools and resources of scripture, liturgy, behavioral practices, stories, religious experience, traditions, historical-critical methodology, etc. The first course in the three-course core Theology sequence is THE 105: Introduction to Theology; the second course in the sequence is THE 205: The Bible, Past and Present.
3. Deeply cognizant of the complexities of the modern world, a "Study of World Religions" will be offered as an upper division elective Theology course and focus on inter-religious dialogue between Christianity and world religions. This builds upon the work begun in THE 105's treatment of how Christianity understands and interacts with other religions. Respect for diversity of faiths of the global human community is a sign of great hope and promise. The University's Holy Cross mission prepares young men and women to become ethical leaders in the world. A need for inter-religious understanding and dialogue is more important than ever, particularly here in the Pacific Northwest. The revised three-course Theology sequence will better prepare University of Portland graduates to (a) engage world religions critically and discerningly; (b) use a "theological lens" to complement other disciplinary lenses in the humanities, arts, and sciences; (c) engage a more transparent approach towards understanding and evaluating other disciplines in the Arts and Sciences and in each of the Professional Schools; and (d) effectively engage THEP and other interdisciplinary courses with a rigorous appreciation of Theology's foundational methodology, inspiration, and goals.
4. Theology remains an integral component of the unique University Core Curriculum at the University of Portland. It reflects both the intent and the spirit of Basil Moreau, CSC, the founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross, who saw in Catholic education an invitation to "see in all things the image of God imprinted within." Through the continued hopes and aspirations of the Second Vatican Council, a proper theological lens will assist our students and alumni to learn to read "the signs of the times" in order to better discern God's presence in and amongst the peoples and cultures of the Earth. Respect for diversity is essential to the University's mission. Through the critical study of Theology, we honor faith and reason as ways of knowing, promote ethical reflection, and prepare people who respond to the needs of the world and its human family. A comprehensive theological understanding of religious diversity is essential to this mission. The goal of the three-course Theology core at the University of Portland is not so much to prepare students to become professional theologians as to inspire women and men to seek God in and through the world and their experience of it. Such experience of "faith seeking understanding" characterizes Theology as a disciplinary lens in the Catholic tradition.

As men and women of many faith traditions, we are invited to explore the question, "Who or What is God?" through human experience and our encounter with each other, with nature, with society, with all that is Mystery. It is always within a particular historical context that we hear God's call and choose whether, and how, to respond. The study of Theology is imperative to this response; it reflects the needs and longings of our age, our fears, our hopes, indeed, our very selves. A "theological lens" speaks eloquently and convincingly of an education of the "head, heart, and hands," one that contextualizes the core mission of the University of Portland. By critically engaging the challenges and diversity of our twenty-first century global village, we — all of us: students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni — remain very hopeful that the newest revisions proposed by the Theology department will continue to help strengthen our capacity as a Holy Cross community to act justly, to seek mercy, and to walk humbly with our God.

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