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The Courses Were Taught in Latin

Philosophy Studies in Jesuit Formation, Universities Before and After the Second Vatican Council

By Stephen Rowntree, S.J.

St. Ignatius' originally wrote Part 4 of Constitutions to formulate a program of studies for Jesuit seminarians. Soon, however, at the request of prominent lay persons, lay students were also accepted. Thus Jesuit education has had a dual focus, academic formation of its members, and academic formation of lay persons. Today students in Jesuit colleges and universities are almost all lay persons, though some schools continue to educate the relatively small number of Jesuit seminarians. However, for most of the Society's history the philosophy studies for lay students were a condensed version of the philosophy studies by Jesuit seminarians.

Prior to changes inspired by the Second Vatican Council, all Jesuit seminarians studied philosophy for three full-years before

they began their four-year theology studies. Furthermore all lay students in US Jesuit universities and colleges typically were required to take 16 (8 two credit courses) to 18 hours (6 three credit courses) of philosophy. All courses were prescribed and taken in a standard sequence: logic, epistemology, rational psychology, cosmology, general metaphysics, special metaphysics (natural theology), and general and special ethics. Each course explained and defended a number of truths or theses which students learned to prove and on which they were examined. Philosophers who denied these truths were treated cursorily as "adversaries," and succinctly refuted.

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ed. Texts, lectures, oral examinations of Jesuit seminarians were conducted in Latin. The philosophy taught in Jesuit colleges and universities was a simplified English version of the philosophy taught to Jesuit seminarians. It was largely taught by Jesuit priests who having completed their own philosophy program were considered qualified to teach philosophy. Dating from Ignatius's time, the criterion for successful completion of philosophy was the mastery necessary to teach it.

Neither was the privileged place of philosophy unique to Jesuit formation and Jesuit higher education. Rather, philosophy was prescribed by the Roman Catholic Church for its special place in protecting the faithful and the church against its many enemies. The role of philosophy as an antidote to modern errors was spelled out in Pope Leo XIII's 1878 letter, *Aeterni Patris*: On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy.

The nineteenth century popes had seen the church and especially their own authority attacked on every side by social and political revolutionaries. Writing toward the end of the century, Pope Leo XIII subtitled his first encyclical, "On the Evils of Society" (*Inscrutabili Dei Consilio*, April 21, 1878).

Thinking wrong thoughts

The source of these deadly symptoms was intellectual. Leo argued that people were acting perversely because their thinking had gone wrong. And the intellectual errors were not primarily theological, but philosophical. Philosophy defends truths divinely delivered against the enemies who attack them with weapons borrowed from the arguments of philosophers: According to Leo XIII, The philosophy above all that supported the truths of faith and refuted contemporary philosophical errors was that of St. Thomas of Aquinas.

The Second Vatican Council marked a sharp break with the Roman Catholic Church's attitude to modern thought characteristic of *Inscrutabili, Aeterni Patris*, and numerous other policy statements. Views that had been explicitly condemned in the 19th century, for example, the desirability of separating church and state, were openly affirmed. Rather than a cesspool of errors, modern thought was acknowledged as a source of truths important for faith. Vatican II was the antithesis of those attitudes and strategies that had shaped philosophical education through the late 19th and early 20th centuries. More than anything explicit that it said about philosophy, it was Vatican II's general spirit that was to reshape philosophy in Jesuit higher education.

In particular, the council's appreciation of the historical and culturally conditioned character of all expressions

of God's revelation implied the value of many philosophies. As The Church and the Modern World #44 stated: "Thanks to the experience of past ages, the progress of the sciences, and the treasures hidden in the various forms of human culture, the nature of man himself is more clearly revealed and new roads to the truth opened. These benefits profit the Church."

Dialogue with men of their time

The Vatican Council explicitly spoke of seminary philosophy studies in its Decree on Priestly Formation #15. The decree clearly made a bow to the past in saying that students were to "base themselves on a philosophic heritage that is perennially valid." However, the decree continued: their philosophy studies should take "into account the philosophical investigations of later ages. This is especially true of those investigations which exercise a greater influence in their own nations. Account should also be taken of the more recent progress of the sciences. The net result will be that students, correctly understanding the characteristics of the contemporary mind, will be duly prepared for dialogue with men of their time."

Contemporary philosophies must be appreciated and understood as a basis for dialogue with men and women about matters of faith. There is truth as well as error to be discovered in the history of philosophy. Philosophy is to be made relevant to the problems of life and questions of students. What this philosophy is and where it will lead was left open. Certainly, however, it could not be imposed as a pre-established body of truths. Philosophy studies were to be defined by dialogue and discussion with past and contemporary philosophers.

Jesuits trained exclusively in scholastic philosophy were not qualified to teach philosophy in this new spirit, a spirit which also implied a new content. Philosophers previously dismissed as "adversaries," were now understood as sources of insights into a human condition always to be understood in terms of its social, cultural, and historical situations.

The council's openness to the variety of philosophies and philosophers, combined with US Catholic colleges and universities' commitment to adopt the standards, structures, and policies typical of American universities, also felt as consonant with Vatican II's spirit, resulted in the hiring of all variety of philosophers who had earned their doctorates in many different universities, Catholic and non-Catholic.

Both before and after the council, U.S. Jesuit colleges and universities had extensive core requirements centered on the humanities. Inevitably, philosophy



departments and philosophy offerings in Jesuit colleges and universities began to look pretty much like other humanities departments and their offerings.

The number of required hours in philosophy had gradually been reduced before 1962. Left over from the pre-Vatican II era were four-course requirements in philosophy and theology, almost all of which after Vatican II were reduced to three or two required courses. The reasons philosophy should have a privileged place in the core curriculum were not evident to increasingly diverse faculties. In any case, most revisions of the core requirements decreased the number of required courses. The obvious place to cut was the philosophy requirement, which almost inevitably, post-Vatican II to the present, went from four required courses, to three, and then to two.

Philosophy continues to treat questions of ultimate meaning and justification concerning a good life for humans, the nature of justice and other moral virtues, the extent and limits of human knowing, the ultimate nature of reality, the reasons (if any) for affirming God's existence, and so forth, all of which are vital for a Christian inspired liberal education. These perennial philosophical questions are not, however, treated exclusively by philosophers. I suggest that to be faithful to our tradition today all faculty should be attentive to the questions of ultimate meaning and justification which arise in their disciplines. Surely many of the aims the Second Vatican Council ascribed to "philosophy" are also the aims of the social and hard sciences, as well as other humanities' disciplines. ■

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