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A Conversation with Professor Janz

Intellectual life in the “Big Easy”

By Ramon Antonio Vargas



to focus their studies around Catholic, Jesuit studies courses. Dramatically fewer actually become professional Catholic scholars or philosophers.

As a professional journalist who has covered a slew of crime news for The Times-Picayune and spent almost all of my time at Loyola covering sports for the campus paper, I am one of the many students who opted against centering my education around Catholic and Jesuit studies courses. The only Catholic course I took was three hours of New Testament study. The only time I attended Mass at Holy Name Church on campus was to watch my friend marry his girlfriend.

That isn't to say I don't dearly embrace the main principle of Catholic intellectual life.

Janz explained it best. The best physicists, biologists, chemists, philosophers and accountants at the university all mostly strive toward one ultimate — the truth of their field's world. Likewise, Catholic educators strive for the truth — in the scholarship, philosophy and study — in God.

Some of the best physicists, biologists, chemists, philosophers and accountants at the university may claim to be atheists. Their best scholarship may not, in their eyes, wholly reinforce the teachings Janz finds so much value in.

Biologists who passionately study safer birth control or more effective pre-natal screening methods obviously don't have the sensibilities or traditions of Catholicism or the Jesuits in mind.

But that's fine, Janz teaches. Anyone striving toward a truth is simply striving toward a smaller truth housed under the highest truth: God. He concedes that some people don't even know or want to see that that's what they're doing. But they are.

“There He is, wherever truth is known,” Janz said, quoting St. Augustine. “Catholicism, at its best, is never anti-intel-

lectual. People may blindly be groping toward something they believe is truth.”

And that, I realized, is what made a Catholic college education worthwhile for me.

God has never been at the forefront of my mind when I have worked as a journalist or have studied to be one. I write mostly about people's loved ones — many who were young and poor both economically and in opportunity — who have met violent ends. Often all I focus on is writing nothing untrue about them, so as to not be unfair to someone who may never have known fairness in life, so as to not add undue stress to anyone they left behind.

This journalism principle is one I know Catholic educators simply don't contemplate. I never saw how it ever advanced God's purposes.

But the educators surrounding me could see how it did, and they allowed me to honor that principle without ever questioning its integrity. My educators encouraged me and taught how best to honor it, making me feel as if I approached a piece of a great Truth along the way.

Catholic intellectualism doesn't drive most students at Catholic universities to a lifetime of the scholarship of itself.

It turns out it only dignifies whatever search we undertake. Being made to embrace that is what we most value from Catholic intellectuals as students. ■

Ramon Antonio Vargas, who wrote for Conversations when he was a Katrina refugee at Saint Peter's College, graduated from Loyola University New Orleans in May and has worked for The Times-Picayune as a reporter since February of his junior year. He recently won a first place prize for best news feature story from the Louisiana Press Association.

Dr. Denis R. Janz is a Protestant who makes his living teaching Catholic intellectualism to college students at Loyola University New Orleans. I was born and raised in the very insular, very Catholic area of metropolitan New Orleans, and I can't say I know one single Catholic native who makes his living teaching Catholics the ideals of their own intellectual life at that level. And not one person my age that I am close to aspires to.

Janz, in his thirtieth year as a professor at the university, knows teaching Catholic life to college-age kids is a low efficiency game. At Loyola, students need to complete just nine hours of religious studies and nine hours of philosophy to graduate. Most philosophy students prefer the lay, European variety. Meanwhile, religious studies enthusiasts can delve into courses that touch upon Islam, Buddhist, Hindu and Protestant beliefs.

That leaves Janz little room to work with when trying to convince students that devoting their lives to Catholic scholarship is a worthwhile venture.

“I'm not even Catholic, and I dedicated my life to this,” he said. “I wouldn't have done it if I didn't think it was worthwhile. But it's hard to convince a person who wants to major in marketing that Thomas Aquinas is worthwhile.”

Admittedly, “very few” — no more than 20 percent — do find it worthwhile enough