CATHOLIC STUDIES:
Unifying Faith and Life

It was the fall of 2002. In the midst of gelato, Renaissance art, and lectures at a medieval pontifical school, my fiancé and I knelt before St. Pope John Paul II during a private audience. We were studying abroad in Rome through our Catholic Studies program, the highlight of four years immersion in Catholic figures such as Dante, St. Augustine, St. Therese, the historian Christopher Dawson, and many others. Catholic Studies changed our lives, enlivened our faith, drew us into a lifelong community of friends, and inspired us with a vision that is still guiding our lives.

What is Catholic Studies?

“What is Catholic Studies?” and “how is it different from theology?” As the director of a Catholic Studies program, these are two of the most common questions I encounter. The easiest answer is that Catholic Studies engages and studies all things Catholic. That is actually also how it is different from theology, which focuses more specifically on the understanding of God’s revelation. Catholic Studies takes this understanding of faith in theology and brings it into relation with broader questions of life, culture, the professions, and art.

Catholicism is a sacramental religion focused on the coming into the flesh or Incarnation of the Son of God. Catholic Studies follows this sacramental principle in exploring how the Catholic faith has become enshrined in human culture throughout history. It examines how Catholicism has shaped the world in the past and how today it can continue to shape everything that we do.

Interdisciplinary Approach

In order to appreciate Catholicism’s complete impact on the world and culture, Catholic Studies takes an interdisciplinary approach that draws upon the great tradition of the unity of faith and reason. It draws upon the theological tradition to receive God’s supernatural revelation of his life and will for us. It also draws upon the rich human tradition of philosophy, which asks the great questions of life and strengthens the mind in its contemplation of truth.

History and the human and social sciences also help to put flesh on the ideas of theology and philosophy by relating them to the life of Christians and the cultures they have formed throughout the centuries. Art, architecture, music, and literature are central to the Catholic imagination, which poetically manifests faith in the world and presents an opportunity to perceive God through beauty.

The University of Mary proudly offers Catholic Studies courses and degrees for traditional and non-traditional students right here in Tempe, and at our campus in Rome.

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Integrating Faith and Life

Within this holistic approach to Catholic faith and life, questions of vocation and leadership inevitably arise. The lives of the saints provide models for transforming the world from the inside out and the sacramental imagination seeks new ways of expressing the faith for our times.

Catholic Studies does not study the faith in the abstract, but provides opportunities to apply the faith concretely. This happens by extending the interdisciplinary focus to practical concerns in the professions. Professional careers are the most common way that graduates will find opportunities live out the faith in service of others in the world. Catholic social teaching, in particular, provides guidance for business, medical ethics, and our relationship to the environment.

Most Catholic Studies students double major in Catholic Studies and another field, many times in professional areas. Catholic Studies provides the enrichment and integration students need to bring their faith to whatever future endeavor they undertake.

More than a Classroom Experience

Finally, Catholic Studies aspires to more than the imparting of knowledge. It seeks the transformation of the person by living out what is studied in the classroom. Catholic Studies is a community as much as it is an academic field. In particular, the University of Mary campus in Rome continues to be a central and transforming experience for Catholic Studies students as they enter the heart of Catholicism and come into contact with Catholics from around the world. Back on campus, the students participate in a community of prayer and service and have many opportunities to experience Catholic culture, such as trips to the theatre, community dinners, and retreats.

Catholic Studies is not the ordinary academic program. It is an interdisciplinary and comprehensive study of the Catholic faith as it is lived out in the world, a study which is meant to transform the student as a Christian leader, who in turn can help transform the world.

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