The University of Mary proudly offers authentically Catholic courses and degrees in Theological Studies right here in Tempe, Arizona. Learn more or listen to audio from our Third Friday Theology talks at umary.edu/asu.

Why Study Theology?

The Church has always taught that “education is a good in and of itself.” However, with the rising expense of university education, many families can no longer justify the cost of going to college based on this principle alone. An important question for any particular major or course of study is how it will serve them personally and professionally. Perhaps the most pressing question of any Catholic university education is the value of theology within its curriculum, and whether or not traditional theology—and philosophy for that matter—should give way to more practical and utilitarian subjects within the field of religion. This brief article seeks to accomplish two ends. First, to propose a Catholic perspective on ‘value’, that is the importance, benefit and worth of a subject, as distinct from ‘utility’, that is a subject’s particular usefulness and practical function. Second, to answer the question Why study theology?

The Goal of Education

Education from a Judeo-Christian perspective means encountering God through His self-revelation and His creation: scripture, tradition as well as the created world, what it is, what it does, and the laws that govern it. Similar to Plato’s teaching that education is meant to form both the person’s intellect (nous) and soul (psyche), education for both Jews and Christians has been understood as a distinctive feature of our being made in God’s image and likeness and a necessary component of human flourishing. The Vatican II Council even calls the moral and human formation provided by an authentic education a “sacred right” and a “common good” (Gaudium et Spes). While parents serve as the primary educators of their children, broader social institutions of education are necessary to advance growth and knowledge both in the practical and specific aspects of life and culture. The basic principal that education is a good in and of itself has led to the creation of innumerable institutions in western civilization from the Lyceum school of ancient Greece to the medieval guilds and eventually to the university system. The value of education in each of these social institutions did not evolve purely from their usefulness, but rather in the way they formed the person for family and social life. Intelligence and rhetoric formed the goals of Lyceum, beauty and craftsmanship drove the guilds, and the pursuit of truth guided liberal education at universities; the more important and central goals of human formation and the universal and particular purpose (telos) of each person built the foundation for these institutions not the need to answer a question of personal future finances or job-related purpose. Certainly, a degree’s ‘utility’ for a career deserves consideration, and every program should provide a legitimate answer. However, the primary and more important question of the ‘value’ of a particular degree lies in its ability in breadth and scope to form the human intellect and develop the soul. These two questions are not at odds, though one supersedes the other. For a Catholic, the ‘utility’ of a degree has to be considered in light of the broader purpose of education, its ‘value’ in forming the mind and soul.

The Aim of Theology

In light of the above, the value of studying theology becomes more obvious. Theology studies the most central questions of the human heart and mind, the questions of our origin, identity, purpose, and destiny. These questions compel the mind to search for patterns, meaning and finality. These questions compel the heart to search out love, hunger for justice and desire fulfillment. Theological study encompasses a rigorous study of both man and God, and who we are called to be in this life and the next. Dr. John Cavadini points out in his article “Why Study God?” the Role of Theology at a Catholic University” that theology is a distinct academic discipline that engages “the truths of faith in a ‘dialogue with reason’—that is, with all the other disciplines that arise from the questioning human spirit and our observation of the world. Theology affirms the truths of other disciplines even as it integrates them into a discourse that transcends their methodologies.” Through the engagement of sacred scripture and tradition, the observation and examination of the material world and the contemplation of the rational intellect, the academic study of theology can reveal mysteries of immense value and great utility.

The Value

Why study theology? Because God has revealed Himself to us, so we can know, love and serve Him. As Catholics, we have received a great gift: two thousand years of contemplating what the incarnation has revealed about who we are, two thousand years of responding and participating in the narrative of our salvation, and two thousand years of prayerfully reflecting on the deepest questions of human life and love. In Ex Corde Ecclesiae St. John Paul II spoke of the indispensable mission of a Catholic University in the life of the Church and the world. Whether it’s a course, minor or degree the study of theology is perhaps the most ‘valuable utility’ for life.

By: Dr. Ryan Hannan Umary-Tempe