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## New Initiatives in Mission and Identity



### Saint Ignatius's Examen Captured in Sculpture

*Above: Fairfield University President Rev. Jeffrey von Arx, SJ, blesses the new statue of Saint Ignatius in front of the Egan Chapel on campus. The Examen, which is Saint Ignatius's "cornerstone prayer for discerning God's presence in daily life," represents a critical part of the Spiritual Exercises. Photo courtesy of Fairfield University.*

## Systematic Theology at a Catholic University

By: Edward P. Hahnenberg, Ph.D., Jack and Mary Jane Breen Chair in Catholic Systematic Theology, John Carroll University

If you spend enough time at a Jesuit school you're sure to hear the story of the rector who approached his Jesuit community with a request: "We've lost a professor in our law school and we need someone to teach torts." Immediately an older Jesuit stood up and volunteered, "I can teach torts." As he sat down, he turned to his neighbor and asked, "What's torts?"

In 2011, John Carroll University established the Breen Chair in Catholic Systematic Theology—a sign of commitment to mission and identity on the part of both the university and two of the most generous alumni of the university, Jack ('56) and Mary Jane ('91, '94G) Breen. Since taking up the Breen Chair, I feel as if I have been asked one question again and again: "What's systematic theology?"

Systematic theology is an area of theology that explores the meaning and interrelationship of important doctrines within a particular religious tradition, in this case, the Roman Catholic tradition. Systematic theology stresses the mutual interplay among beliefs, it explores their connections.

What do Catholics claim about Jesus? And what does this imply about God, on the one hand, and about ourselves, on the other? How do these beliefs, in turn, impact our view of sin, or redemption, or the world in which we live? What do the claims of the Creed imply for ritual practices, for ethical commitments, or for the way Catholics engage people of other faiths and worldviews?

By its very nature, the discipline of systematic theology brings into dialogue religious tradition and contemporary experience. It creates conversation between the wisdom of the past and the challenges of the present. And, like any genuine conversation, the dialogue is mutual—open to the ways the tradition illuminates and challenges our experience, and open to the ways

our experience illuminates and challenges the tradition.

A contemporary example illustrates the tension that comes with this effort to hold together faith and life. It just so happens that the Breen Chair arrives at John Carroll in the midst of a lively national debate about the role of theology in Catholic colleges and universities. A number of bishops have recently challenged theologians to do a better job providing basic faith formation for their students. Theologians have responded saying that this expectation fails to appreciate the nature of theology as an academic enterprise based on critical inquiry and freedom of expression.

The debate is not altogether new or entirely unexpected. It is the inevitable tension that comes when church meets academy. In this debate, we should note, bishops are doing what bishops are supposed to do. Theirs is a pastoral vocation, one charged with preserving and handing on a tradition. Their role is by nature conservative. Likewise, theologians are doing what theologians are supposed to do. Theirs is an academic vocation, one made possible by unbiased research and critical investigation. Their role is by nature exploratory.

Both bishops and theologians have good reasons for their particular concerns. Catholic theologians have spent the past 50 years pulling their discipline out of a long period of stagnation. Prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965), much of theology in Catholic colleges and universities was little more than glorified Sunday School—"the Baltimore Catechism with footnotes," as a mentor of mine used to say. After the council came a period of professionalization and diversification, marked by greater methodological rigor, the integration of modern tools of historical and literary criticism, constructive dialogue with religious studies and other disciplines,

and broader philosophical engagement. All of this transformed theology into a serious academic discipline. And there is little desire to go back to an earlier catechetical model.

And yet, as the bishops explain, many Catholic students arrive at college today virtually uncatechized, with little knowledge of even the most basic tenets of their faith. Leaving aside the fact that this says less about our Catholic colleges and universities than it says about our Catholic parishes, parochial schools, and parents, the bishops nevertheless have a point. How can you expect students to reflect critically on a subject about which they are ignorant?

Here lies an opening for dialogue. It is true that students come to college, for the most part, religiously illiterate—not just about their own tradition, but about any tradition. My colleagues and I are reminded of that fact almost daily! And few would deny that every course in theology or religious studies includes a significant amount of introduction and explanation of basic beliefs and concepts. This is true in every discipline, increasingly and unfortunately so. My friends in the English Department recognize that, before you can ever expect students to appreciate a poem or write one themselves, many of them need basic instruction in grammar, sentence structure, and metaphor. Similarly, before you can ever explore the meaning of the doctrine of the incarnation, you have to spend time introducing students to basic facts about the Gospel of John or the Council of Chalcedon. However, this is done with the goal of understanding, not indoctrination.

As "shepherds of souls" and leaders of the church, the bishops want not only more knowledgeable Catholics, but more faithful ones. But achieving that end cannot become the goal of the theologian in the way that it is for the bishop—and not simply because

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so many non-Catholics fill our classrooms. It follows on the very nature of the academic task. As I tell my students, “My goal is not to get you to think like me. My goal is to get you to think”

But is that really where the conversation ends? When I am honest with myself, I have to admit that I don’t just want my students to think. I want them to love to think, and to love what they’re thinking about. The mission of a Catholic university is not narrowly confessional or exclusively professional. It is to create a community of loving learners.

The best teachers I remember were the ones with such a commitment to their students and such a passion for the subject, that I couldn’t help but be drawn in. There is a kind of indoctrination in every act of effective teaching—though I would never use that language in a faculty meeting! It is an indoctrination into a love for the subject, an enthusiasm for learning, a conviction that these questions matter. Through great teachers, students learn to see the wisdom of a political system, the beauty in a mathematical proof, or the goodness in a poem. When taught well, theology too can bring a subject into the lives of students in a way that is attractive and compelling. Not every graduate will live a life of faith, just like not every student will become a poet. But we can hope that our time together will open up for all of us a world beyond the prosaic.

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in today’s environment. Consequently, institutions of higher education must commit increasing attention and resources to faculty development of senior faculty members. An area of faculty development which cannot be overlooked is the area of mission. The XMA is specifically designed to play an explicit role in furthering mission in senior faculty members.

Participants have expressed the value seen thus far in the program:

■ *The reality is that between class preparation, grading, research projects, and committee obligations, time for such deliberations rarely exists. One great aspect of the Mission Academy is that it carves out of one’s busy schedule the opportunity to sit down with colleagues from across the institution for serious discussion of some of the Big Issues facing Xavier. It is great time that is well spent!*

■ *Throughout my participation in the Mission Academy, I was able to identify and address not only a range of conceptual aspects relevant to mission integration, but also a great spectrum of practical ways in which mission integration can be made possible.*

■ *The Mission Academy debunked a range of myths and misconceptions with regard to mission integration.*

■ *The Mission Academy unveiled ways of integrating the university mission into the classrooms without having to compromise on the format and scope of curricula.*

■ *Having an opportunity to understand the Ignatian mission at a deeper level has motivated me to reevaluate the courses I teach. In business, quite often we consider meeting the mission is including the teaching of ethical behavior but the academy has helped me focus on other areas of the mission such as critical thinking and men and women for others.*

■ *As a professor in the physical sciences, I could not on my own find a way to integrate Ignatian principles into my classroom in an explicit way. Fortunately, the Mission Academy has provided me a forum to engage in deep, rich conversations with colleagues from all three colleges at Xavier. Through these conversations, I have been challenged, encouraged, and, most importantly, equipped to accomplish the goal of mission integration.*

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Spiritual Exercises were the two feature presentations offered to the seventeen attendees. Periods of quiet, personal reflection, and follow-up group response provided the day’s dynamic.

A second opportunity for prayer and reflection is scheduled in May, coinciding with the annual regents’ ball and trustee meeting. We are already brainstorming a summer retreat linked with the college’s annual reunion weekend.

The Office of Mission & Identity promotes the deeper understanding and invites the active engagement of the entire Canisius College community, across all of our faith traditions and human ideals, in living our university’s Catholic, Jesuit educational mission. Understanding and engagement are key concepts in this campus-wide, 141-year institutional dynamic. So, too, is the inimitably Jesuit pedagogical experience of building our brand of education in the crossroads of Catholic, interfaith, and humanist intellectual currents. Assessment measures to gauge the success rate of any and all our M&I initiatives will follow. They will do so just as surely as three rounds of annual goals and a nascent office strategic plan grew out of the first semester’s experiences.

With so many colleagues and alums already engaged with me, and the college-wide community as our constituency, I look forward to more energized semesters and academic years ahead for the work of Canisius College’s Office of Mission & Identity.