The aim of a seminary philosophy program is to equip the seminarian and priest with a certain vocabulary and certain intellectual habits.

Philosophy in the seminary curriculum

By Robert Sokolowski

I wish to discuss the purpose of a seminary program in philosophy, as well as the structure and content of such a program, but I would like to begin by making a few institutional and pragmatic remarks.

1. Three practical points

The determination of a seminary curriculum is not primarily the work of the faculty, but of the institution that sponsors the seminary. To use modern secular categories, a seminary provides a professional formation; in this respect, it is much like a law school or an engineering or architecture program. We are all familiar with the stringent requirement that professional associations impose on professional schools. Such schools have to prepare their students for a certain role in society and they get evaluated from time to time. The faculty of such a professional school cannot do anything they like with the curriculum; they have to comply with the overall guidelines of the professions if they are to be accredited. A seminary is like this also. The Church sponsors the Catholic seminary and has the authority and the right to determine the curriculum prevailing in it, because the students in that program are being trained and educated to serve in a certain capacity, and the Church ought to be able to specify what she wants them to know and what they must be able to do.

It is not the case that the seminary is like an experimental center for the faculty, who can do whatever they want with it. The same is true, incidentally, for colleges and universities; they too do not belong to the faculty. It is not the case that the faculty that temporarily occupies an educational institution at a given moment has the power to set the course of that institution from that time onward. The course and structure of an educational institution is

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set first of all by the nature of that institution, by its telos, and the faculty alone are not authorized to define that nature and that end. To return to the specific case at hand, the Church, which establishes and sponsors seminaries, determines the kind of courses that should be made available to seminarians in them.

What about academic freedom? Are the faculty not supposed to be able to exercise their minds freely, and to present things as they see fit? The strategic distinction in reply to this question is this: academic freedom is not the same thing as free speech. The two are very often confused, even by law courts and sophisticated elites. It is as citizens that we have the right to free speech; as citizens we can speak our minds in regard to public issues. Academic freedom, however, is not a kind of superior version of free speech, one that empowers faculty members as even more authoritative citizens, as super speakers, people whose opinions are much more valuable than those of others because they are expert in a certain field of study. Academic freedom is the right to teach and publish in accord with the methods, principles, and sources of a given scholarly discipline, and it does not extend beyond that. It is a freedom that is constrained by an objective body of knowledge and by the nature of its subject matter; it is not a freedom to express an opinion, say, about ecclesiastical or governmental policy. People who work in a seminary may have such freedom of speech as citizens and as members of the Church, but not formally in their role as seminary teachers.

I have made two points; first, that a seminary program is to be determined by the institution that sponsors the seminary, and, second, that academic freedom is not the same as freedom of speech. A third practical point I wish to make is something that Francis Slade once observed, that the seminaries that were established by the Church after the Council of Trent were the first modern attempt at a kind of universal or general education, an education that was geared not specifically to form other scholars, but to provide for large numbers of students, with different intellectual talents and interests. This too has to be taken into account in preparing a seminary curriculum and in determining the role of philosophy in it.

2. The Telos of a philosophy curriculum in the seminary

It is obvious that in their spiritual and professional formation seminarians need courses in theology, liturgy, canon law, and the like, but why do they need philosophy? Why has the Church traditionally made philosophy a part of the seminary curriculum? This requirement has been strongly restated by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical Fides et Ratio, where he says that philosophy is "fundamental and indispensable to the structure of theological studies and to the formation of candidates for the priesthood" (§62). After complaining about a lack of philosophy in such programs, he says, "I cannot fail to note with surprise and displeasure that this lack of interest in the study of philosophy is shared by not a few theologians" (§61).1

One of the major reasons why philosophy is important in conveying the Christian faith can be found in the doctrine of the Incarnation. The Church teaches that in Christ the two natures, human and divine, were complete and intact; neither was diminished or destroyed by virtue of the hypostatic union. In particular this means that in contrast with the various Christological heresies (thearian, Apollinarian, Nestorian, monophysite, and monothelite), the Church teaches that human reason, which specifies our human being, remained intact in Christ. It is not the case that the Divine Word somehow replaced human reason and the freedom that followed from it. If the integrity of reason is preserved in Christ, it is also preserved in the Christian and in
the Church. The Word of God does not only bring a new revelation of the life of God and his covenant with man; it also confirms and heals our reason, that which specifically makes us human and makes us persons. Philosophy is the most intense exercise of human reason; it is the activity in which reason comes to the fullest possession of itself. Part of the mission of the Church, as Fides et Ratio tells us, is to restore faith in reason.²

One of the major challenges in restoring faith in reason is the fact that in our modern world reason has been taken to be primarily scientific rationality, and so the Church must show that scientific rationality is not the most fundamental kind, even though it is a legitimate and noble exercise of intelligence. In fact, to take scientific reason—in the natural, social, and psychological sciences—as the most basic kind of reason ultimately leads to irrationality. As such scientific thinking tries to handle the specifically human things, like human freedom and knowledge, political life, moral action, and so on, it becomes obvious that it cannot do so, and since people would have assumed that the only true form of reason is found in the rationality of science, they conclude that they must abandon reason in approaching such things and they turn to irrational ways of thinking such as extreme existentialism and deconstruction. Existentialism and deconstruction are the rebound from scientism.

Now, of course, a parish priest should not be expected to deal with problems raised by the technical aspects of science, such as questions in quantum physics or the various theories of evolution or linguistics, but he has to be able to deal with the popular impact of such things. The faith in scientific reason, with a corresponding loss of faith in any other kind of reason, has had a major influence on how people understand themselves, and these misunderstandings do surface in the local parish, not only in universities. Think how often psychological explanations are taken to be the definitive and final answer to human problems. A book like C. S. Lewis’s The Abolition of Man is an excellent example of how such issues can be treated in a popular but still very profound way. Even the catechesis of the Church herself needs a philosophical element if it is to avoid being reduced to sentimentalism, which is a popular version of deconstruction. I would like to quote the French philosopher Alain Besançon on this topic. In a book entitled, Trois tentations dans l’Église, he discusses the Church in France and says: “For a generation the catechesis of children has been troubled and uncertain. It no longer aims at putting into their heads stable dogmatic formulas, learned by heart, but tries to breathe into them a state of soul that is vague, affectionate, and kindly towards everyone.”³ The intellectual element of catechesis is lost when this occurs, and people’s faith becomes thoughtless. This lack of a thoughtful faith makes Christians vulnerable to indifference, to the loss of what they think the faith to be, and liable to conversion to other beliefs.⁴

Clearly, the aim of a seminary philosophy program is not to make seminarians into philosophers, academic experts, in the full sense, but it is to try to make them philosophical, to have a sense of how questions can be pursued, to have an attraction and definition able to respond with standing to questions the issues that people think human problems a theological or religious or even if they are more of they also have a human component. The aim of a program is to equip the priest with a certain intellectual habits or able to use such w meaning, the human, moral obligation, virt and to use these wo should be able to bring important natural thing sible to reason.

Philosophy helps things are and the way be of great value ever good way of present is to contrast them develop some human that people know from and then to show how confirms this good a Christian sense of God conveyed to people the human sense of the world, and then revelation transcends even while speak not part of the work ies of faith, hope, is not just by the with the natural virt spontaneously from the theological virtu by showing how the man agency. The the y, for example, can but by showing how

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pursued, to have a number of strategic distinctions and definitions clearly in mind, to be able to respond with philosophical understanding to questions people raise. Many of the issues that people bring to priests are simply human problems and not exclusively theological or religious ones, and in most cases even if they are more specifically theological they also have a human or philosophical component. The aim of a seminary philosophy program is to equip the seminarian and then the priest with a certain vocabulary and certain intellectual habits. He should become better able to use such words as responsibility, meaning, the human person, human nature, moral obligation, virtue and vice, and the like, and to use these words thoughtfully. He should be able to bring out with some clarity important natural things, things that are accessible to reason.

Philosophy helps us articulate the way things are and the way they appear to us. It can be of great value even for homiletics. A very good way of presenting the Christian things is to contrast them with natural things: to develop some human good, some human truth that people know from their own experience, and then to show how the Christian truth both confirms this good and goes beyond it. The Christian sense of God, for example, is best conveyed to people by developing for them the human sense of an ultimate meaning in the world, and then showing how Christian revelation transcends it, and fulfills that meaning even while speaking about a God who is not part of the world. The theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity are best presented not just by themselves but in contrast with the natural virtues, which we understand spontaneously from our natural experience; the theological virtues are best brought out by showing how they go beyond natural human agency. The theological virtue of charity, for example, can be effectively brought out by showing how it differs from—but is also related to—human friendship. What we seek in friendship, as our highest moral good, is ultimately found and fulfilled in charity in a way that we never could have imagined without revelation. Furthermore, it charity needs friendship as its base, as that which it should be distinguished from, charity also perfects human friendship and lets it be more fully what it is by its own nature.  

Christian faith thus elevates, heals, and perfects reason, but it also appeals to reason, because faith presents a message and a truth that is to be understood, not just a law that is to be obeyed.

3. Thomism and phenomenology

We can better understand the purpose of a philosophy curriculum if we spell out a bit further the kinds of things that we would expect a seminarian or priest to know, the kind of intellectual habits that he should acquire in regard to philosophy. Before doing so, however, I wish to give a name to the kind of philosophy that I think should be taught in the seminary. I would like to call it streamlined Thomism. I think that seminarians should learn the essentials of Thomism, but they should not be expected to become medieval philosophers. Some may wish to become expert in medieval thought, but most of them, in their general education, would be better served by the fruits of Thomism, not by the whole orchard. In learning such a streamlined Thomism, seminarians would be introduced to the great tradition in philosophy, because in Thomas’s writings we find not only his own thought but many of the essentials of the thought of Aristotle and the Platonic tradition. Thomas gives the student access to the great classical tradition of philosophy. A seminary program should distill for the students the central teachings of Aquinas, formulated in a classical vocabulary but also adapted and supplemented in view of our contemporary needs and understandings. I think there should
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be a new revival of Thomism in the educational effort of the Church. Certainly, the important historical research into Aquinas and medieval thought that has occurred in the past 150 years should continue, but for a more general education, especially in the seminary but in college programs as well, a kind of distilled, modern Thomism should be formulated. In the past three or four decades Thomism has been replaced in Church institutions by an eclectic and historical study of philosophy, but such an approach never comes to a conclusion and does not form the mind in the way a Christian philosophy should. A return to a Thomistic approach would be very desirable.

I would also like to suggest that this streamlined Thomism could profit very much from insights that have been achieved by phenomenology. This use of phenomenology could help Thomism come to terms with modern thinking, with modernity. It would help Thomism address contemporary problems in a classical way and it would, I think, make Thomism more interesting and keep it from appearing historically “dated.” The encyclical Fides et Ratio seems to take phenomenology to be rather like phenomenalism; this may be the meaning of the passage that reads, “We face a great challenge at the end of this millennium to move from phenomenon to foundation. . . . We cannot stop short at experience . . .” (§83) I do not think that phenomenology has to be interpreted in this phenomenalist manner, even though many writers and scholars who work in that tradition may take it that way. But we need not be limited by the ideas of, say, Sartre or Merleau-Ponty, for example, why can we not interpret phenomenology in our own way, and take advantage of the manner in which it allows us to treat the modern problem of appearance?

One way of interpreting the phenomenological method is the following: it consists in making strategic, elementary distinctions. When we make such distinctions, we work with phenomena, with the way things appear, but we certainly do not just rest with superficial phenomena. If we distinguish between, say, anger and hatred, and work out the essential character of that distinction, or if we work out the difference between pictures and words, or that between essentials and accidentals, we are not working with “just” the phenomena. We are getting to the foundation of things, we are getting to an elementary understanding and are not remaining just with experience. We are elevating experience into philosophical understanding. If we work things out this way, the whole absurd modern problem of idealism versus realism just drops away as a serious issue. We do not and indeed we cannot “prove” that there is an external world or that there is such a thing as truth; to get tangled up in problems like this is to get lost in a whole host of ridiculous, artificial puzzles from which we will never free ourselves. Instead, we should simply make a lot of clarifications and distinctions in regard to basic issues, and the truth of such insights will evidence itself. I think phenomenology can help us do so in a simple, direct, and understandable way, and I also think that analytic philosophy is not nearly as helpful. The philosophical work of Gilbert Ryle and J. L. Austin held much promise, but I think that most other

analytic philosophers of the Cartesian assistance in the Thomism.

4. Examples of curriculum which know

What sort of students get to know, get a sense of kinds of causality and final, as well as the real and the accidental whenever we speak about some of that thing are at all we can be paraded as “essentially important concept of the nature do have nature, shapeless, meaning make use of as necessary. Along with all the important ends that things have, their teleological ends from the five make use of the five ends, and pur up example, in the human and human social moral teaching it sense to a semi-natural, ends, art. him?

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analytic philosophers have never gotten out of the Cartesian box; they are of much less assistance in the project of a streamlined Thomism. Phenomenology, if it can avoid jargon, can formulate philosophical problems in the way that people spontaneously experience them, but in my opinion analytical philosophy is far less able to do so.

4. Examples of what a philosophy curriculum should help seminarians to know

What sort of things, then, should seminary students get to know? They should, for example, get a sense of causality and the various kinds of causality: efficient, material, formal, and final, as well as instrumental. They should be taught the difference between the essential and the accidental in things, and be shown that whenever we name an object, whenever we speak about something, some of the essentials of that thing are being put into play, that if we speak at all we cannot avoid what is often disparaged as “essentialism.” It would be especially important to convey to students the concept of the nature of things, to show that things do have natures, that they are not merely shapeless, meaningless entities that we can make use of as we see fit for our own purposes. Along with the concept of nature, it would be very important to convey a sense of the ends that things have, their internal final causes, their telologies, and to distinguish such ends from the purposes we have when we make use of things. A clear grasp of nature, ends, and purposes is obviously crucial, for example, in the discussion about the family and human sexuality; how could the Church’s moral teaching about such matters ever make sense to a seminarian or priest if the ideas of nature, ends, and purposes were not clear to him?

In the realm of human action and the human person, the student should learn the meaning of human responsibility and choice, and the way they are differentiated from non-responsible conduct, the role of compulsion and ignorance as exculpatory, the differences between virtue and self-control, between vice and weakness, between intellectual and moral virtues, the way the theoretic life is lived in regard to knowledge and art, the meanings of justice and friendship, the sense of personal identity over time, the role of memory and anticipation, the way actions shape a character and shape the person himself, the meaning of the principle of double effect. It would be especially important to cover the philosophical definition of the various human appetites, inclinations, and emotions, such as love and hate, pleasure and pain, anger, indignation, cruelty, kindness, gratitude, resentment, envy, admiration, contempt, and the like. It would be extremely important and extremely interesting for the student to understand these things, to bring a rational appreciation to our human emotive life. One might even ask, with some exasperation, “Why on earth would anyone not want to learn such things?” not only in the seminary but in college programs as well.

I think that this examination of the human things should discuss not only ethics and the human person, but also some political philosophy, which was sorely underemphasized in Neo-Scholastic thought: it should show what political society is as opposed to the family and other prepolitical associations, the nature of citizenship, the various kind of political communities, and the shifts and changes that occur in political life. This kind of study would not try to make priests into ertzat politicians but to make them capable of evaluating public policies and helping people to be good citizens and to preserve their freedom. The clergy must be helped to avoid credulity and oversimplification in regard to public life.

In regard to human cognition, the program should help the student appreciate what words are, how words are used to make judgments,
how judgments are blended into arguments. It should discuss the most common fallacies, and distinguish rhetoric from dialectics. It should show the difference between perception and understanding, and also bring out how we take responsibility for the things that we speak, how the human person, the agent of truth, expresses the nature of things when he communicates with others. The role of other people in helping us know the truth, the role of tradition, the way an ancient text can still speak to us now, with undiminished force and clarity, should also be discussed: the hermeneutic problem of a text, the question of how there can be an identity of meaning in a text over a long period of time and in very different contexts, is obviously of great importance for the study of Holy Scripture, and it is one among many of the questions that deal with human cognition. It would also be good to show the difference between science and common sense, and science and philosophy. The program should show what science can tell us as well as what it cannot speak about, and why. It should also show that while science gives us truth, there are also other things that are true as well, and other ways of coming to the truth. Furthermore, it is not the task of philosophy to somehow prove that there is such a thing as truth; rather, it is its task to bring out the various ways of achieving truth, and precisely in making these distinctions philosophy will have established the possibility of truth. The discussion of truth, of course, also involves a discussion of the various forms of error, ignorance, and concealment.

The ideas I have sketched out are highly interesting things. It is good to know them; they are valuable in themselves. Perhaps I am naive, but I find it hard to imagine that someone who has been introduced to them would not be happy and grateful to have this knowledge. Such knowledge, which is part of our cultural heritage, addresses many things that are extremely perplexing to people in our current world, and indeed in any world. Furthermore, such ideas provide an excellent context in which to study theology. Finally, priests who know such things would be in a better position to help the laity understand many of the problems that they have to face in our present culture.

I have one final point to make about the value of a program in philosophy. There is one very significant distinction that very much needs to be made in our present situation, both in the Church and in society, and I think that a program in philosophy can help us make it. It is the distinction between thinking and speaking rhetorically and thinking and speaking philosophically. Far too much discourse is simply rhetorical, even when the speakers pretend to be giving an analysis. Far too often people think they are presenting the truth of things, or they pretend to be presenting the truth of things, when they really are arguing, and arguing rather emotionally, for their own point of view. The very grasp of this distinction, the very insight that surreptitiously or deliberately we may be speaking only rhetorically, is a tremendously important thing. It makes us aware that we must try to do something other than speak rhetorically, that we must speak analytically, thoughtfully, and philosophically. The very appreciation that such a thing is possible is of overriding importance. It is also salutary, in its own way: it gives us hope that there is something like the truth of things that can rescue us in a complicated and confusing situation. It encourages us to look for true friends and advisors, and not just allies in a struggle. It makes us more willing to look for guidance from the Church and from tradition. A well ordered program in philosophy can help the Catholic clergy to be beacons of light in a foggy world, agents of reason, and not just bullhorns of sentimentality. To bring about this philosophical spirit would be of prime importance to society as whole.

5. Final Thoughts

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5. Final thoughts about the curriculum, textbooks, and resources

I think that there is little mystery about the external form that a seminary curriculum in philosophy should adopt. It should look very much like a traditional major in philosophy. Let me present what I would consider a minimum. It should consist of ten courses, each with three credits, for a total of 30 credit hours; it would be hard for a good program to have fewer than this number. The courses I think are essential are the following:

- History of Philosophy (9 credits)
- Metaphysics, Philosophy of God (6 credits)
- Philosophy of Nature and Science (3 credits)
- The Human Person (3 credits)
- Ethics and Political Philosophy (6 credits)
- Logic, Theory of Knowledge (3 credits)

I think that the remarks I made earlier are sufficient to justify the categories in this list. I should say something, however, about the first category, the history of philosophy. This course is essential because it provides what I would like to call the “spine” of Western thinking. It would lay out the standard sequence of historical periods: ancient, patristic, medieval, modern, and contemporary. To know this sequence is very important for the study of theology, and it is better to treat it in philosophy than in theology, because so much of it is purely philosophical. This historical sequence would help the student locate various authors and it would also help him locate himself and his own culture. Furthermore, if the student were to be taught things like the various forms of causation or the various forms of human conduct, it would be important for him to know when these concepts were expressed and how they were reinterpreted over time. This course would involve some reading of classical texts. It might also be desirable to have still another course, beyond those I have listed above, one that would be devoted to classical texts in Christian philosophy, in which the student might read in a deeper way some of the major works of Christian writers.

I would also like to suggest that it would be a good idea to develop textbooks for the courses listed above. The tendency now is for teachers to develop their own courses on the basis of primary texts and selected readings, but I think it would be advisable to have books that summarized the most important concepts in each of the courses I have mentioned. A textbook of this nature need not be coextensive with the entire course, but it could provide the core content of the course, the basic material that definitely ought to be covered. More material could be added at the discretion of the teacher, but the basics should be made available in a systematic way. I think that students benefit from a good textbook. It provides order in the course, and it makes sure that the essentials have been presented. Such texts could also be a great help to teachers. As a final practical remark, I would like to recommend two particular authors for their profound, modern, and yet traditional treatment of the topics that should be covered in a seminary curriculum; they are Yves R. Simon and Robert Spaemann.

The question of a seminary curriculum in philosophy brings us also to the question of Christian philosophy as such; it is a special version of that more general problem. Perhaps this discussion about the seminary can help us deepen our appreciation of the way in which revelation confirms and enhances the power of human reason.

End Notes

1 See also §60: “I have myself emphasized several times the importance of this philosophical for-
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