



# UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS

## The Return to God

Corey Stephan, Ph.D.

coreystephan.com

- Email: corey.stephan@stthom.edu
- Office hours by appointment (email in advance)

Fall 2024: Online and Asynchronous

Syllabus updated August 18

Notes:

1. As of the start of the semester, some aspects of this syllabus remain to be determined.
2. I reserve the right to revise this syllabus at any time during the semester.

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The glory of God is man fully alive, but the life of man is the vision of God.

St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV

You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.

St. Augustine, *Confessions* I

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A synthesis of readings and themes introduced in prior core instruction, this course draws together fundamental questions considered throughout the curriculum dealing with such topics as revelation, history, transcendence, suffering,

death, and salvation. The course orients life in the context of a Christian sacramental vision to the final end of the human person: the contemplation of the vision of God.

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## **Journey**

Guided by the riches of the Catholic intellectual and moral tradition, you will acquire the knowledge and skills needed to confront, formulate, and answer the question of what makes our lives, at bottom, unified and meaningful, and to see a Christian answer to that question as a serious and persuasive one. You also will learn how in the concrete sacramental and spiritual theology of the Church, such a meaningful life might realistically be pursued.

## **Destination**

By the end of the semester, which is also near the end of your time as an undergraduate student at the University of St. Thomas, you will:

1. Be able to give an account of the contemplative end of man as fulfilled in the Body of Christ.
2. Show that you can accurately compare and contrast, in the light of divine revelation, the conception of the human person as contemplative with one in which the purely technical predominates.
3. Be able to give an account of the progression of the spiritual life as flowing from the sacraments and expressed in the liturgy of the Church.
4. Be able to articulate accurately the sacramental worldview of Christian theology and apply its consequences to their lives and the contemporary context.

I, Dr. Stephan, will consider anything short of this to be a failure --possibly mine, but possibly yours. This must be a team effort.

To that end, we have a "Return to God Class Survey and Contract" in the "Start" page in Blackboard that everyone is required to complete and sign by the end of the first week.

Above all, note that you are expected:

1. To do all assigned readings and watch or listen to all assigned lectures every week.
  2. To be prepared for engaging full-group and small group discussions with your assigned Truth Troop Teams (study groups) at set intervals during the semester.
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## **Required Books**

All of these books are required in order to participate in the class:

1. *The Catholic Study Bible: Third Edition* [Catholic Study Bible]
  - ISBN 9780190267230

2. *Saint Augustine: Confessions* [Augustine's Confessions]
  - Translated by Henry Chadwick (Oxford World Classics)
  - ISBN 978-0-19-283372-3
3. *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from St. Maximus the Confessor* [Maximus's Cosmic Mystery]
  - Translated by Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken (Popular Patristics Series)
  - ISBN 978-0-88141-249-9
4. *Bonaventure: The Life of St. Francis* [Bonaventure's Life of Francis]
  - Translated by Ewert Cousins with a Foreward by Donna Tartt (Harper Collins Spiritual Classics)
  - ISBN 0-060057652-9
5. *In Tune with the World* by Josef Pieper [Pieper's In Tune with the World]
  - Translated by Richard and Clara Winston
  - ISBN 978-1890318338
6. *For the Life of the World* by Alexander Schmemmann [Schmemmann's Life of the World]
  - St. Vladimir's Seminary Press Classics Series: Volume 1
  - ISBN 978-0881416176
7. *The Spirit of the Liturgy* by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) [Ratzinger's Spirit of the Liturgy]
  - Commemorative Edition with a Foreward by Robert Cardinal Sarah
  - ISBN 9781621644293

I distribute other assigned readings in Blackboard either as .pdf scans or via hyperlinks to online materials in the public domain.

## Required Electronic Equipment

Since this is a fully online class, the following electronic equipment is required:

1. Stable Internet (WAN) access
2. Webcam (may be built-in, such as is ubiquitous in laptop computers)
3. Microphone (may be built-in, such as is ubiquitous in laptop computers)

You *must* be able to do both live video conferencing and self-recordings for this class. You do *not* need to purchase any special, high-end equipment, but all of your audio and video (both live and recorded) *must* be clear.

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## Themes

The course is broadly divided into five thematic units that will last approximately three weeks apiece:

1. Creation
2. Fall
3. Christ
4. Liturgy
5. Eternity

This thematic sequence approximately aligns with the traditional Christian understanding of the unfolding of salvation history.

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## Grades

The total class grade is weighted out of 100 points.

1. Start of Term: (2.5%) CLASS SURVEY AND CONTRACT
  2. Semester Long: (20%) TRUTH TROOP TEAM STUDY RECORDINGS
    - 5 study group recordings, 1 at the end of each thematic unit, in which you demonstrate your collective understanding of the assigned material
  3. Unit 1 (Creation): (20%) SHORT ANSWER TEST (Early Term Exam)
    - 1 timed hour of writing paragraphs synthesizing the material from Unit 1 into your own reasoned language, thinking of yourselves as 'instructing the instructor'
  4. Units 2 and 3 (Fall and Christ): (20%) PARTNER/GROUP DEBATE
    - Partner or small group 'staged' argument for and against one aspect of traditional Christian belief
    - Each pair or group will be required to provide critical feedback on 3 other pairs' or groups' projects
  5. Unit 4 (Liturgy): (20%) TRADITIONAL LITURGY REFLECTION
    - Attend and write a critical reflection on an unfamiliar traditional Christian liturgy, drawing clearly upon lessons learned in the class
  6. End of Term: (15%) CLASS ROUND-TABLE
    - During the last week of the semester, all students will be expected to attend 1 of 2 to 3 scheduled virtual round-table discussions about the class and share their sincere reflections about it.
  7. End of Term: (2.5%) UST LEARNING OBJECTIVE ASSESSMENT QUIZ *or* DR. STEPHAN ASSESSMENT QUIZ (TBD)
    - Online assessment quiz required for University accreditation *or* short quiz prepared by Dr. Stephan to help assess the learning results of the class. As of the start of the semester, details are to be determined.
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## Schedule

You are expected to have completed each week's required lectures and readings before the end of that week *or* before beginning work on a project directly related to those readings, whichever comes first.

Items specially labeled "Optional" are *recommended* for all students but not, in fact, *required*. They variously serve as ready-to-go 'backup' tasks in case of

unexpected changes to our class and supplemental materials to assist regular student learning.

All items not labeled "Optional" are required for all students.

Each instance of "Blackboard #" corresponds to a specific matching numbered module (folder) inside the "Readings & Lectures" tab in Blackboard.

## **Unit 1: Creation**

*Fundamentally and permanently good -- but fragile*

### **Week 1: Introductions** Blackboard 1: Introductions

**August 19-23** Complete the Faith, Reason, and Revelation Class Survey & Contract in Blackboard by 11:59 PM on Friday, August 23 (2.5% of class grade).

Truth Troop Team assignments will be made by the end of the first week.

#### Lectures

- What is this Return to God class?
- The Return to God: Syllabus & Class Bones
- What is Catholic theology? 30 Minute Guide
- How to Read and Think Like a Theologian
- How do I use the Catholic Study Bible?
- Optional: The Best Free Computer Sources for Catholic Theology
- Optional: Oxford Reference Website: Theology & History Usage Guide

RECOMMENDATION: During the first week, start reading Bonaventure's *Life of Francis* in the background (e.g. between classes on campus), since you will need to have read the entire story (book) by the end of Unit 1.

### **Week 2: Genesis and Creation** Blackboard 2: Genesis and Creation

#### **August 26-30** Lecture

- Genesis 1-3 Theological Dive: Why did God create us? What does it mean that we are fallen?

#### Readings

- Catholic Study Bible: Genesis Reading Guide (RG 120-134), Genesis Introduction (pp. 9-11), Genesis Ch. 1-3 (pp. 11-16)
- St. Basil's Hexaemeron, Homilies I-IX (all) on newadvent.org

### **Week 3: Thinking through Creation with Sts. Maximus and Francis** Blackboard 3: Thinking through Creation

**September 2-6** Lecture

- Who is St. Maximus the Confessor?

Readings

- Maximus's *Cosmic Mystery*: Introduction, Ambiguum 7, and Ambiguum 8 (pp. 13-78)

Lecture

- Who is St. Francis of Assisi?

Reading

- Bonaventure's *Life of Francis* (all)

Lecture

- Optional: Who are the Fathers of the Church?

**STUDY GROUP RECORDING #1 DUE BY 11:59 PM ON THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 5.**

**SHORT ANSWER ESSAY TEST ON FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 6.**

The short answer essay test is specifically scheduled for the day after all Truth Troop Teams have submitted their first study group recordings.

**Unit 2: Fall**

*Is all lost?*

**Week 4: The Fall of Man** Blackboard 4: The Fall of Man

**September 9-13** Lecture

- The Fall of Man: A Close Reading of St. Maximus the Confessor's Ad Thalassium 61
- Optional: What is original sin? CCC 385-390 & 396-421 Deep Dive

Readings

- Maximus's *Cosmic Mystery*: Ad Thalassium 61 (pp. 131-143)
- John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Book IV (available on poetryfoundation.org)
- Optional: CCC #396-401

RECOMMENDATION: During this fourth week, start reading the Chadwick translation of Augustine's *Confessions* in the background (e.g. between classes on campus), since you will need to have read it in full by the end of Unit 2.

**Week 5: Augustine's Journey through Sin and Death** Blackboard 5-6: Augustine's Confessions

**September 16-20** Lectures

- The Life of St. Augustine and How to Read his Confessions
- Optional: What is the Problem of Evil?

Readings

- Augustine's *Confessions*: Chadwick's Introduction and Books I-VII (first half)
- Optional: Larrimore, *The Problem of Evil: A Reader, Introduction*, Plato's *Timaeus*, and Irenaeus's *Against Heresies*
- Optional: CCC #309-314

**Week 6: Augustine's Conversion and Christian Life** Blackboard 5-6:  
Augustine's Confessions

**September 23-27** Reading

- Augustine's *Confessions*: Books VIII-XIII (second half)

**STUDY GROUP RECORDING #2 DUE BY 11:59 PM ON FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 27.**

**Unit 3: Christ**

*The Savior of the Universe...but how?*

**Week 7: John's Gospel** Blackboard 7: John's Gospel

**September 30-October 4** Lectures

- John's Gospel: The Descent & Ascent of the Logos
- Optional: What are the Gospels?
- Optional: Who did Jesus claim to be? An Introduction to Jesus's Profession(s) about Himself in the Gospels

Readings

- Catholic Study Bible: John Reading Guide (RG 457-468), John Introduction (pp. 1486-87), and John's Gospel (all, pp. 1487-1525)

**Week 8: Maximus on Christ as the Unifier of the Cosmos** Blackboard 8: Maximus on Christ as the Unifier

**October 7-11** Lecture

- Christ's Reunification of the Cosmos: St. Maximus the Confessor's Ambiguum 41

Reading

- Maximus's *Ambiguum 41*, introduced and translated by Fr. Maximos Constas (Blackboard)

**STUDY GROUP RECORDING #3 DUE BY 11:59 PM ON FRIDAY, OCTOBER 11.**

**Week 9: Debate Week** Blackboard 9: Debate Week

**October 14-18** Lecture

- Return to God Group Debate Project Directions [TBA]

DEBATE WEEK DETAILS ARE TBA.

**Theme 4: Liturgy**

*Living the traditional Christian life in the modern world*

**Week 10: What is liturgy?** Blackboard 10-11: Introduction to Liturgy

**October 21-25** Lecture

- Introduction to Liturgy, part 1: What is Traditional Christian Liturgy? (Citing CCC & the Didache)

Reading

- Ratzinger's *Spirit of the Liturgy* (all)

**Week 11: Why perform liturgy?** Blackboard 10-11: Introduction to Liturgy

**October 28-November 1** Lecture

- Introduction to Liturgy, part 2: What is the Purpose of Traditional Christian Liturgy? (Citing Schmemmann's *For the Life of the World*)

Reading

- Schmemmann's *Life of the World* (all)

**STUDY GROUP RECORDING #4 DUE BY 11:59 PM ON FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 1.**

**Week 12: Liturgy Attendance** Blackboard 12: Liturgy Attendance

**November 4-8** Lecture

- How to Attend Liturgy: Preparation, Mindset, and Prayer [TBA]

**LITURGICAL IMMERSION ASSIGNMENT DUE BY 11:59 PM ON FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 8.**



## **Theme 5: Eternity**

*What is your ? Dare you hope for Heaven?*

### **Week 13: Spiritual Senses** Blackboard 13: Spiritual Senses

#### **November 11-15** Lectures

- Song of Songs & the Spiritual Senses (Live Class Recording)
- Optional: Grace, Central A/C, and the Seven Gifts of the Holy Spirit

#### Readings

- Catholic Study Bible: Song of Songs Reading Guide (RG 303-307), Song of Songs Introduction (p. 890), and Song of Songs (all) (pp. 891-898)
- Optional: CCC #1804-1831

### **Week 14: Heaven as a Dance** Blackboard 14: Heaven as a Dance

#### **November 18-22** Lecture

- Heaven as a Dance [TBA]

#### Reading

- Pieper's *In Tune with the World*

### **Week 15: Class Finale**

#### **November 25-29, December 2** NO READINGS, NO LECTURES

2 to 3 virtual class meetings will be scheduled for separate 1 hour blocks of time. Attending and actively participating in one of the class round-table discussions will count as 15% of the student's grade.

**STUDY GROUP RECORDING #5 DUE BY 11:59 PM ON FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 29.**

**ASSESSMENT QUIZZES DUE BY 11:59 PM ON MONDAY, DECEMBER 2.**

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## **University Policies**

### **Accommodations**

In accordance with Section 504 of the Federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the University of St. Thomas will provide academic accommodations to ensure access for students with disabilities.

Students with disabilities who require accommodations for this class, must register with the Office of Access & Disability Services (ADS) and provide documentation of a disability to determine what accommodations are most appropriate. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and disability accommodations are not provided until a Course Accessibility Letter has been provided to the instructor. For questions regarding academic accommodations and accessibility, please contact the Office of Access and Disability Services by email at [ACCESS@STTHOM.EDU](mailto:ACCESS@STTHOM.EDU), or visit the ADS website at [STTHOM.EDU/ACCESS](http://STTHOM.EDU/ACCESS).

### **Preparation**

You must have all the required textbooks, ideally as soon as the class begins. Their ISBN numbers must match those on the syllabus. It is your responsibility, not the bookstore's, to arrange to have the proper books.

### **Meetings**

I encourage you to meet with me (Dr. Stephan) outside of the classroom, especially for guidance on the readings and assignments. Generally, appointments will be handled during my office hours (as listed at the beginning of this document).

### **Communication**

You must use university email for electronic correspondence with me. I do not communicate digitally with students via any other means.

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## **Other Class Policies**

### **Late Submissions**

I (Dr. Stephan) know that life happens, and I know that the best work sometimes has to be submitted late (the Sistine Chapel's painting went behind schedule, after all). At the same time, this class is a team effort, so we all must strive to have our work to share with each other on time. Even one 'weak link' can tear down everyone's experience; you (as an individual student) really do matter to the class as a whole.

With all that in mind, I have structured class assignments in such a way that there should not be any legitimate reason for anyone to make a late submission. Most late submissions will incur a late penalty, and, occasionally, I will not be able to accept a late submission at all.

### **Statement on Software Freedom**

I (Dr. Stephan) am a longtime advocate of Free Software as defined by the Free Software Foundation. I encourage you to teach yourself about software freedom. For my part, I promise that I will never require you to use non-free software -- except class infrastructural tools that are currently required as part

of our experience at the University of St. Thomas (e.g. Microsoft Teams and Blackboard) or otherwise of practical necessity for our work at hand. Whenever possible, I will encourage you to prepare your work in free software and submit it in formats with open standards.

### **Class Prayer**

A Prayer by St. Thomas Aquinas

Grant, O Merciful God, that I may ardently desire, prudently examine, truthfully acknowledge, and perfectly accomplish what is pleasing to Thee for the praise and glory of Thy name. Amen.