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Figure 1: University of St. Thomas - Core Curriculum

The Return to God

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Summer Session I (2025)

Online and Asynchronous

This syllabus was last updated on Tuesday, May 20.

Notes:

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

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

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.

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.

Required Materials

I have prepared a master .pdf document for this class called “The Return to God Reader” (abbreviated *Reader*). This is the *only* required text/document for the class.

I recommend that you print the *Reader*, but for this online and asynchronous class, printing the text is optional. Another great option would be to interact with the text on a digital tablet.

Recommended Materials

The required portions of the following items are included in the Reader. If you are someone who likes to hold a traditional book, then you might wish to purchase these separately. *The Catholic Study Bible: Third Edition* (#1) is particularly recommended, since it is a superb scholarly resource that one can use long past graduation.

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

Other Materials

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

Themes

The course is broadly divided into five thematic units:

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.

Grades

The total class grade is weighted out of 100 points.

1. Start of Term: (10%) CLASS SURVEY AND CONTRACT

2. Unit 1 (Creation): (30%) SHORT ANSWER TEST (Early Term Exam)
 - Timed test in which you will write short paragraphs synthesizing the material from Unit 1 into your own reasoned language, thinking of yourselves as ‘instructing the instructor’
 3. Units 2-4: (50%) TRADITIONAL LITURGY REFLECTION
 - Major/main class project
 - Attend and write a critical reflection on an unfamiliar traditional Christian liturgy, drawing clearly upon lessons learned in the class
 4. End of Term: (10%) ASSESSMENT QUIZ
 - Short quiz to help assess the learning results of the class.
-

Schedule

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.

Each instance of ” *Reader*, ##-##” corresponds to my pagination in the bottom-right of each page in the *Reader*.

Dates listed above a list of video lectures and class readings are *recommended*.

Dates listed next to a task/item for you to submit/complete are *strict due dates*.

Unit 1: Creation

Fundamentally and permanently good – but fragile

May 19-23

Blackboard 1: Introductions Complete the Faith, Reason, and Revelation Class Survey & Contract in Blackboard by **11:59 PM on Friday, May 23**.

Lectures

- What is this Return to God class?
- The Return to God: Syllabus & Class Bones (Summer 2025)[TBA]
- 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* during free time.

Blackboard 2: Genesis and Creation Lecture

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

Readings

- *Reader*, 1-27 | Catholic Study Bible: Genesis Reading Guide (RG 120-134), Genesis Introduction (pp. 9-11), Genesis Ch. 1-3 (pp. 11-16)
- *Reader*, 28-91 | St. Basil's Hexaemeron, Homilies I-IX (all) on newadvent.org

Blackboard 3: Thinking through Creation

May 24 - 30 (Recommended Reading Dates) Lecture

- Who is St. Francis of Assisi?

Reading

- *Reader*, 128-214 | Bonaventure's *Life of Francis* (all)

Lecture

- Optional: Who are the Fathers of the Church?

SHORT ANSWER ESSAY TEST is due by Friday, May 30 at 11:59 PM.

Blackboard 12: Liturgy Attendance Lecture

- Return to God Class: Liturgy Attendance Assignment (Fall 2024)

The Liturgical Immersion Assignment will be due no later than 11:59 PM on Friday, June 13. The reason why I have this 'main' or 'final' project due by this date, 11 days before the end of the term, is so that every student will have the opportunity to choose (optionally) to do a revision for an improved grade.

Unit 2: Fall

Is all lost?

Blackboard 4: The Fall of Man

May 31 - June 6 (Recommended Reading Dates – Includes John's Gospel) Lecture

- Optional: What is original sin? CCC 385-390 & 396-421 Deep Dive

Readings

- Optional: CCC #396-401

Lecture

- The Fall of Man: A Close Reading of St. Maximus the Confessor's Ad Thalassium 61

Readings

- *Reader*, 215-223 | Maximus's *Cosmic Mystery*: Ad Thalassium 61 (pp. 131-143)

Unit 3: Christ

The Savior of the Universe...but how?

(NB: We are bypassing Blackboard 5, 6, and 8 in this compressed summer term class. They remain in place online so that the most curious among you may explore them.)

Blackboard 7: John's Gospel 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

- *Reader*, 382-437 | Catholic Study Bible: Gospels & Acts Reading Guide (RG 411-414), John Reading Guide (RG 457-468), John Introduction (pp. 1486-87), and John's Gospel (all, pp. 1487-1525)

Unit 4: Liturgy

Living the traditional Christian life in the modern world

Blackboard 10-11: Introduction to Liturgy

June 7 - 13 (Recommended Reading Dates) Lecture

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

Reading

- *Reader*, 465-595 | Ratzinger's *Spirit of the Liturgy* (all)

Lecture

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

Reading

- *Reader*, 596-685 | Schmemmann's *Life of the World* (all)

REMEMBER that the Liturgy Attendance Assignment is due by **11:59 PM on June 13.**

Blackboard 13: Spiritual Senses

BONUS: After Term Material (for enrichment) Lectures

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

Readings

- *Reader*, 686-699 | 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

ASSESSMENT QUIZZES are due by **11:59 PM on Tuesday, June 24.**

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, or visit the ADS website at STTHOM.EDU/ACCESS.

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 planned ahead by email (24 hours or more).

Communication

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

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.