

# Newsletter

OF THE THOMAS MORE CENTER  
FOR THE STUDY OF CATHOLIC THOUGHT AND CULTURE

Rockhurst University

September 2001

## *The Politics of Catholic Studies*

It has occurred to me recently that the academic enterprise of Catholic studies is a bit like professional wrestling – no one really believes that what you see is what you get. Everyone is convinced that the fix is in and the game is rigged. Of course, this is true of professional wrestling, we accept it as entertainment and go on from there either to embrace or ignore the “sport.” Catholic studies, not being a sport or entertainment but a serious attempt to study serious issues that most people take very seriously, can be significantly undermined by the perception that it is not quite what it purports to be. For instance, this summer I received a phone call from a professor at a prominent Catholic university (somewhere on the plains of northern Indiana) inquiring about the Thomas More Center. The professor was doing background research for an article on Catholic studies programs to be published in a popular Catholic magazine. She was a personable and understanding interviewer who, to alleviate my fears, offered to send me her finished article for review before publication. Why was I suspicious? Partly because the magazine she was writing for has a reputation for decided opinions, partly because of the questions she posed, and partly because of my own experience of the politics of Catholic studies.

The politics of Catholic studies stem, obviously, from the divisions within the contemporary Church. In my own dealings with Rockhurst colleagues I have encountered “conservatives” who believe the Thomas More Center might (if it hasn’t already) compromise its integrity before the siren call of academic secularism and “liberals” who regard the Center as a potential bastion of Catholic fundamentalism. I have argued that we are what we appear to be – an academic center devoted to the study of all things Catholic, established to promote a genuine dialogue about Catholic contributions to human thought and culture. In the process of study and dialogue, the Center will entertain differing and even controversial viewpoints. And given the often sensitive nature of issues touching on personal religious faith, sometimes the differences and controversies will result in heightened emotions. I believe that is good – it affirms the relevance of the Center and the need for Catholic studies. Surely controversy is better than indifference and an emotional response is better than no response at all.

The Center will try hard to avoid endorsement of a particular viewpoint on issues open to honest disagreement but will not apologize for the diversity of opinions represented by its programs. The committee of the Thomas More Center is composed of faculty from various disciplines with various ideas and perspectives. In the interest of full disclosure, you should know that my own opinions favor the traditional perspective. Others on the committee would probably consider themselves progressive. Still others might see themselves as “flaming

moderates" or observers seeking an education on the issues before venturing an opinion. What unites us is a sincere belief that the tradition of Catholic thought and culture remains a vital, dynamic object of study that still speaks to the human condition. We believe that Rockhurst University is in a unique position to contribute to the discussion on Catholic issues and we commit ourselves to providing a forum for that discussion. We invite the entire campus, and the broader Kansas City community, to join us as we venture into the murky and politics-infested (but rich and teeming) waters of Catholic studies.

*Richard J. Janet*

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*Thomas More Center Conference and Resource Room*

Thanks to the generosity of Jeanne Langdon and the library staff, the Thomas More Center is pleased to announce that it now has a place to call its own. Over the summer, the Center furnished a room on the mezzanine level of Greenlease Library with a conference table, bookshelves and a pair of comfortable chairs for quiet reading or study. The bookshelves will eventually hold the Center collection of resources on Catholic studies. The entire Rockhurst community is invited to use the room, located on the northeast corner of the library mezzanine just off the elevator. Come by to browse the materials, study, read or simply relax. The room is also available for small meetings of faculty, staff or students. The conference table seats 10 people. To reserve the room for your meeting, please call Rick Janet (501-4053) or visit his office on the mezzanine level of the library (right next to the conference room). A schedule of reserved meeting times will be posted on the doors of the room. Look for future announcements of a house-warming reception at the Center's new digs.

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*Conference Notice*

The Catholic Studies Program at the University of St. Thomas in Houston, Texas is sponsoring a conference next spring entitled "Mapping the Catholic Cultural Landscape." The international conference will focus on the Catholic impact on cultures and cultural impacts on Catholicism over the past 2000 years. Keynote speakers include Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces on Hispanic Catholic culture and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese of Emory University on the relationship of faith and culture. The conference is scheduled for April 18-2001 on the St. Thomas campus. Session topics and a conference schedule may be found on the St. Thomas Catholic Studies web site ([www.stthom.edu/csp](http://www.stthom.edu/csp)).

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### *Catholic Biographies Course*

Last semester I chose to enroll in the class “Catholic Biographies” at Rockhurst University. As a history and theology major, as well as a student in the American Humanics program, I hoped this class would enrich my chosen fields of study. After listening to twelve presentations that reflected on the impact and contributions of fourteen men and women to the tradition of Catholic thought, I have a greater appreciation for the mission of the Thomas More Center for the Study of Catholic Thought and Culture at Rockhurst University.

One of the first aspects of the course that I noticed was the involvement of the community. Although this can be an intimidating factor to younger students, I found that the community enhanced the presentations through their questions and knowledge of various Catholic individuals. Knowing that people left their busy schedules to attend these lectures was a powerful witness to the fact that what we were learning was worthy of our valuable time.

However, the aspect that I enjoyed most about the course was the opportunity to hear various faculty members present a Catholic biography. I was able to listen to professors that I would never have had in class. Their obvious enthusiasm and excitement in sharing their knowledge was amazing as well as inspiring.

In conclusion, these biographies show that, throughout history, many Catholic men and women, whether through large or small acts of love, attempted to live their lives for the greater glory of God. Although their humanity is evident in their failings, they rose above sin in order to glorify God. After listening to these presentations, I have come to realize that, as Christians, we, too, are called to a holier life. Just as these people of God fought against sin, we must fight against sin. In the end, like St. Thomas More, we will be able to say, “I die the King’s good servant, but God’s first.” This, I believe, through the efforts of the Thomas More Center for the Study of Catholic Thought and Culture at Rockhurst University, is the reason Catholicism is worthy of study.

*Anna Opie*

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### *Catholic Culture Course*

In the spring semester 2002, the Thomas More Center will again sponsor a one credit hour course on Thursday afternoons open to students and the broader Kansas City community. The spring 2002 course will focus on Catholic culture in all its manifestations. Topics might include Catholic ideas on community, the human person and the environment; themes in Catholic literature, art, architecture, film, music; Catholic contributions to politics, society and the economy; or the nature of popular culture and devotion among various Catholic populations. The course will examine the nature of these manifestations of Catholic culture and attempt to analyze the roots of Catholic cultural influences. Once again, various Rockhurst faculty will be invited to contribute to the course.

An interesting twist to next spring's course is the Center's plan to film the lectures and, contingent on funding, to incorporate the lectures and insights of the course in a professionally produced videotape available for broad public distribution. If you are interested in participating in the course, please contact Dr. R. Janet (501-4053). Faculty with expertise and interest in any aspect of Catholic culture are particularly encouraged to contact Dr. Janet to discuss their involvement in the course and the video project. More details on the course, including time and place, will appear in later issues of this newsletter.

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*Garry Wills Lecture*

On Wednesday, Sept. 12, 2001, Pulitzer Prize winning author Dr. Garry Wills -- "eminent historian and one of the most intellectually distinguished members of the Catholic laity in the United States" -- will give the first presentation in the 2001-2002 Visiting Scholar Lecture Series. In his talk, co-sponsored with the Thomas More Center for the Study of Catholic Thought and Culture, Wills will answer the question, "Is the Pope Still St. Peter?"

Wills' presentation grows out of his recent, very controversial book, *Papal Sin, Structures of Deceit*. In the book, Wills argues, on important issues ranging from birth control and ordination of women to celibacy of priests and papal infallibility, that modern popes have subordinated truth to "ecclesiastical tactics." Though he takes popes to task for their errors and human weaknesses, he still finds them essential to the Catholic Church. Indeed, his answer to the question at the center of his talk -- "Is the Pope Still St. Peter?" -- is an emphatic "Yes -- just as flawed as Peter, and just as necessary."

Wills' honors and publications are many; they have been reviewed in both the recent Center for Arts and Letters Newsletter and a Visiting Scholar brochure. Suffice it to say, his honors and written work deserve and have earned high praise. And despite the controversy surrounding his recent book, an institution like Rockhurst -- committed to cultivating "those dispositions of mind and spirit which keep the love of learning and awareness of moral responsibility alive" -- should listen to what Wills has to say about the Church. The Visiting Scholar Lecture Series, in fact, seeks speakers who challenge many people's beliefs and positions, including Catholic beliefs and positions.

To be sure, there have been different positions regarding *Papal Sin*. Father Michael Fahey, S.J., found it "not completely convincing" for a variety of reasons, whereas Fr. John O'Malley, S.J., found it to be "a serious book by a serious author that must be taken seriously." Given the controversy, some people -- who may agree that Rockhurst and the Visiting Scholars ought to sponsor his talk -- may question whether it is appropriate for Wills to be speaking under the auspices of the Thomas More Center for the Study of Catholic Thought and Culture precisely because Wills has strongly criticized various aspects of Catholic thought and culture. I think the Center should be sponsoring his talk.

Catholicism and the Ignatian tradition both seem to lend their support to the Center's sponsoring Wills and other controversial critics of Catholic thought and culture. Both find no contradiction between faith and reason, faith and knowledge of the world. Neither presumes that Catholics should only study Catholic thought and culture that is above reproach; neither

presumes that all Catholic thought and culture is above reproach; neither presumes that Catholic thinkers should not criticize Catholic thought and culture. Neither Catholicism nor the Ignatian tradition presumes that reasonable believers need not seek truth because it has been found -- certain, absolute. Such presumptions seem to view reason and reasonable inquiry after truth at odds with faith.

But Pope John Paul II, in his encyclical on this topic -- *Fides et Ratio* -- notes that humans seek "the certitude of truth and the certitude of its absolute value," but "the natural limitation of reason and the inconstancy of the heart often obscure and distort a person's search." For this reason, no one person or Center or "historical form of philosophy can legitimately claim to embrace the totality of truth, nor to be the complete explanation of the human being, of the world, and of the human being's relationship with God." That is why, in a Catholic, Jesuit, liberal education one should hear many voices, including controversial and conflicting voices, in a search for truth.

More importantly, the Pope insists that reasonable Catholics must learn from even "erroneous opinions." He argues that it strengthens faith and enhances our search for truth not only because we should be able to analyze and respond to erroneous opinions, but also because "even in these false theories some truth is found at times" and because "these false theories provoke a more discriminating discussion and evaluation of philosophical and theological truths."

In brief, Rockhurst University and the Visiting Scholar Lecture Series owe it to all members of our learning community to sponsor Wills' speech, his critique -- as a faithful Catholic -- of the modern papacy. So, too, does the Thomas More Center for the Study of Catholic Thought and Culture. Despite the controversy surrounding Wills' views and despite some questions about having him speak under the auspices of the Thomas More Center, it seems to be precisely what Pope John Paul II finds essential to both a faith and a Church that rely so much on reason in seeking truth.

*Joseph Cirincione*

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A PUBLIC LECTURE  
SPONSORED BY THE ROCKHURST UNIVERSITY  
VISITING SCHOLAR LECTURE SERIES  
AND THE THOMAS MORE CENTER FOR THE STUDY  
OF CATHOLIC THOUGHT AND CULTURE

Garry Wills, "Is the Pope Still St. Peter?"

Wednesday, September 12, 2001  
7:30 p.m.  
Mabee Theater, Sedgwick Hall

Admission is Free -  
Call 501-4828 to reserve space

