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Why Teach Theology?

Susan Ross

Loyola University Chicago, ross@luc.edu

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Why teach theology?

College students are eager to explore the subject of faith, says this seasoned professor. And they are asking great questions along the way.

In a recent class discussion, Loyola University Chicago professor Susan Ross posed a question to her undergraduate theology students: Why should a person be good? The students struggled to come up with an answer. Their responses included, “Because it will help me sleep better at night,” “Because it will make society run more smoothly,” and “Because if I’m not good to my neighbor, my neighbor won’t be good to me.”

Ross, now in her 35th year of teaching theology to college students, offered them a different answer: “Perhaps we should do good because it is the right thing to do, apart from how it makes us feel.” The students, she says, looked stumped.

Such are the challenges that come with teaching introductory theology courses at Loyola—a requirement for all who attend the Jesuit institution. These days many of Ross’ students come from varied religious backgrounds or belong to no church at all. They may have chosen Loyola to study science or medicine and have little interest in learning about the Catholic tradition.

Ross, however, is up to the challenge. “What I try to do is tap into what I see is going on beneath the surface,” she says. “It is pushing them to ask the questions that sometimes they haven’t even articulated themselves. But I think that really those are the questions all of us have.

“I get paid to read, write, think, and talk about the ultimate questions in life,” she adds. “What a great job.”

How have college students changed since you began teaching theology in 1980?

In some ways they have not changed very much. College students are still young, fresh, enthusiastic, or blasé, depending on the topic. Would I say that my students back in the early 1980s knew more about theology? I’m not sure. But I think overall the level of catechetical training for young Catholics is one of the things that has suffered since the Second Vatican Council.

A couple of things have changed. One of the first classes I taught, in the fall of 1980, was a course on women and religion. The students came into the classroom expecting lessons on the Blessed Mother and St. Joan of Arc. I had been reading all of this brand-new feminist theology in the late ’70s—Rosemary Ruether, Anne Carr, people like that.

It was a shock to the students to learn about the very checkered history of the Catholic tradition with regard to women. Nowadays, undergraduate students come to my Women in Religion class expecting feminist theology, except for a few of them who don’t know very much about it.

Another way students have really changed has to do with same-sex relationship issues. I distinctly remember being in a classroom in the early ’80s and saying something about homosexuality—that’s the word we would’ve used then—and the class was either giggling or reacting like, “Gasp! We can’t go there.”

Sometime in the late 1980s or early 1990s, I had a student who actually came



Angela Cox

The editors interview

Susan Ross

Professor and department chair,
Department of Theology, Loyola
University Chicago

Past president, Catholic Theological
Society of America

Author, *Anthropology: Seeking Light
and Beauty* (Liturgical Press, 2012)

*Extravagant Affections: A Feminist
Sacramental Theology*
(Continuum, 1998)

out in class in a very matter-of-fact way. And that has happened more and more often over time.

In one of my classes this semester, a student said, “Well, as a queer woman...” I thought, “This would not have happened 30 years ago.” The other students reacted as if it was commonplace.

Students today also talk to their mothers three times a day. I certainly didn’t do that.

What has your experience been in challenging students to think seriously about faith?

It’s a happy surprise to students in my class to realize that asking difficult questions about their faith is fine, and is in fact encouraged. I just had a student come to my office the other day and say, “This is the first time I’ve been able to ask these questions and pursue them.”

Why haven’t they been able to ask these questions before?

People in parishes who are doing sacramental prep and religious education are often working with a curriculum that emphasizes learning content. Now, one of the good things the students are getting is an emphasis on social justice—they’re enthusiastic about that.

But to be honest, if catechists are not well educated and if students have questions about the Eucharist, the church’s position on divorce and remarriage or same-sex marriage, or other thorny issues, I think catechists aren’t always prepared to answer those questions in a sophisticated way.

That is not to say catechists do not work hard and are not dedicated, because I think they are. But many students see their religious education as a requirement to be filled.

Do you notice any obvious gaps in students’ knowledge of Catholicism?

Not long ago I was talking about Jesus in Introduction to Theology. I was saying, “When Jesus is preaching the Sermon on the Mount, we see clear parallels to Moses, because Matthew’s gospel is addressed to Jewish Christians.” Two thirds of the class was nodding, but I saw a couple of people looking puzzled.

So I asked, “Does everybody know who Moses is?” Some people had no idea who he was.

Fewer than half of the students at Loyola now are Catholic. It’s a much more diverse group than in years past. I have five Muslims in my class this semester, three Orthodox students, and at least one Jewish student. At the start of each semester I send around a little information sheet with an optional question asking students their religious affiliation.

About half of them leave it blank or write “nothing” or “unchurched.” From an unchurched perspective, many of them think that religion is about obeying what church leaders tell you to do.

If students have had some religious education, they know a little bit. Occasionally I get someone who has had a very good religious education for 12 years—often someone who has graduated from a Jesuit high school. They know all the answers to all the questions. I love dealing with those students because if they’re going to start asking questions, they do it in a way that’s informed, that allows them to articulate their concerns.

How do students respond to hearing church positions that they may personally disagree with?

Two years ago I was teaching senior honors students, and I had them research Catholic Church documents on same-sex marriage and women’s ordination. They said, “Oh, I guess the church does have some reasons for these positions. I may not agree with this, but I can see where they’re coming from.”

Part of my job is to make sure they know that what the church teaches is not, “We hate gays. We think women are inferior.” Church teaching comes out of a position that has developed over a long period of time, although it may be articulated at present in a way that the students may not agree with.

I tell them that there are people who are intelligent, who are thoughtful, who really think that this is how we should understand these issues, and that this is how reasonable people talk about issues.

I get some interesting responses. One student, who some years back was in my Women in Religion class, wrote in her evaluation, “If you want to hate God, take Dr. Ross.” I thought, “Oh no.” Then another student responded right away and said, “Dr. Ross is the best Jesuit lay-woman I know.”

Do you see it as your role to defend the intellectual tradition of the church?

Yes, absolutely. I think the new atheism portrays religion as something akin to believing in fairies.

The other thing about students today is they’re very pluralistically inclined. They believe strongly that everybody is entitled to their own opinion. Students will say things like, “Well, that’s your opinion,” or “That’s Thomas Aquinas’ opinion,” or “That’s the pope’s opinion.”

It’s a struggle sometimes for me to say, “But not all opinions are equally worthwhile.” I have to pull out something like, “Well, what if it’s your opinion that it is OK to torture children?” You have to bring up an extreme position to get them to realize that positions have to be thought and reasoned through.

You mentioned the increase in non-Catholic students at Loyola. Why is it important for them to get an introduction to Catholicism?

I had my students write a short paper so I could get to know them and figure out their writing abilities. One of the Muslim students said, “Well, I’m glad you’re not going to try and convert me.”

For some of the Muslim students who choose to attend a Catholic university, their parents may think, “At least

..... The Catholic advantage

What is the main draw today for students to choose a Catholic university over a secular school?

That’s a question about the purpose of higher education itself. Catholic higher education is not just about providing a good education. It is about forming the person with an exposure not only to the breadth and depth of the sciences and the liberal arts, but also to an informed understanding of a faith tradition. With the group of students I have this semester, I’m pleasantly surprised that they think there’s room for that.

But it’s kind of an uphill struggle. Higher education is under attack today. People are asking, “Why should you spend all this money to go to college? Is a college degree really worthwhile?” We hear about Steve Jobs and other famous people who dropped out of college but were still

very successful.

I think liberal arts colleges and universities, whether they’re Catholic or not, have never seen college as simply training for a job. It’s not just vocational education. I always say to my students that the best skills you can get are reading critically, learning how to write well, and learning how to take a good, hard look at things.

How does faith fit into that model?

When you make faith a part of this, it means that your education doesn’t get set aside at the front door of whatever institution you end up working at after graduation. Your education in a religious tradition is worth something. That kind of education, I think, is still very much needed.

this school takes religion seriously.” You don’t perhaps find as many secular Muslims as you might have 20 years ago. I think today’s Muslim students appreciate the approach to theology that says, “This is something that we think through.”

Over the last couple of decades, there has been a concern about the Catholic identity of Catholic colleges and universities. Loyola shares that concern. I remember being in an academic council meeting 20-some years ago and a math professor said that when prospective professors would come for an interview and see the statues and crosses on campus, he would tell them, “Oh, don’t worry, it doesn’t mean anything.”

I was sitting next to one of my colleagues from the theology department, and the two of us just went, “Hmm.” This math professor actually was Catholic, and his sense was that outsiders think Catholicism means just pay, pray, and obey.

I remember another story, again from probably 20 or so years ago. I ran into a colleague who taught biology. We got together for lunch and realized we both had the same student in our classes.

She said, “He told me he was reading Freud in your class. I told him that couldn’t possibly be true because Freud’s an atheist.” I said, “No, he was right. He was reading Freud in my class because I think if students are going to learn to think about religion, they have to read some of the best critics.” Those are some of the attitudes that you get from the people who say, “Why should being Catholic make a difference?”

How do you answer them?

Catholic colleges and universities have academic integrity. We’re not just catechetical schools. We have a sense of the Catholic tradition as being worthwhile and rigorous.

In the last few years I’ve had conversations with Loyola’s Jesuit president, Father Michael Garanzini. Through a combination of circumstances he real-

ized that a student could go through all their time at Loyola never encountering the Catholic tradition in their core classes. He deliberately set out to change that.

For students to come to a Catholic school—and I agree with our president on this—and not have any exposure intellectually to the Catholic tradition, that’s too bad. Now, all students must

narratives in the class where I have five Muslims and one Jewish student. I said, “Muslims don’t see this as a story of original sin,” and the Muslims nodded their heads.

I said, “Yusef, tell me, what do you think about this?” It’s interesting for the Catholics who have always been taught one way of reading the story to hear this other perspective. Yusef says, “Well,

I think if students are going to learn to think about religion, they have to read some of the best critics.

take two theology classes. The first is either Introduction to Theology or Introduction to Religious Studies. In the latter they will at least spend three weeks on Catholicism, and in the former, far more time than that. After the intro course, they can choose from a broader array of options for their second required course.

Somewhat to my surprise, students are hungry to do this kind of investigation and thinking about Catholicism. They have questions, and they welcome having the opportunity to ask them. There are always some people who just don’t want to be taught—the guys with the baseball caps in the last row—and for them it’s apparently meaningless. But the opportunity is there for them.

I think there has been a maturing over the last 20 to 25 years. We’re saying that Catholicism is a significant intellectual tradition, it’s worth studying, and we’re not going to apologize.

How does having non-Catholic and unchurched students influence the discussion in a theology class?

It’s very good because these students, if they feel comfortable enough, will weigh in on the issues. A couple of weeks ago we were talking about the Genesis

we think that this story is basically that human beings make mistakes.” The Jewish student said, “You know, I haven’t ever thought of it in quite this way.” It shows you how important it is to make the classroom a welcome enough place that students from other faiths and traditions can offer their own perspective on an issue.

I had a Women in Religion class a few years back where I had three or four Muslim students, one of whom wore a hijab while the others did not. One day the student wearing a hijab ended up sharing that she wears it because her family insists on it. There was this crucial moment in class where she came in one day and said, “I’m taking this off when I’m in class.”

In another class, halfway through the semester, a student came in wearing a hijab that she had not been wearing before. It was Ramadan and she’d had a conversion experience.

On that same day in the same class, I remember this so vividly, there was an Asian student sitting in the front row with a very low-cut T-shirt and short shorts. The T-shirt, across the front, said “Hottie.” I looked at these two students, and I said to the class of 35 women, “Can we talk about this?”

So we all got to hear the Muslim student talk about her choice to wear the hijab. I was remembering my other class, where I heard from the student who did not choose to wear it. Then the student wearing the “Hottie” shirt said, “I feel comfortable because it’s my body, and I can do whatever I want with it.” It developed into this very interesting discussion in which students could begin to see that the American individualist perspective is not necessarily the only way to see things.

I also have a couple of Iraq War veterans in my class this semester. They have been forthright in talking about their experiences. I’ve had vets in class before, but these guys have been wounded, not just physically but psychologically. That adds something else to the class dynamic.

This one veteran wants to go into counterterrorism work. Then, sitting behind him in my class are two Muslim students. It’s very interesting to have these three guys all sitting together in the same area. Sometimes they end up working in a group together.

Do students ask tough questions about the institutional church?

I was recently asking the students why people would feel alienated from religion or from the church. One of them answered, “The way they treat nuns.” I thought, “Oh, they are paying attention.”

It’s hard for almost anyone to avoid the sex abuse crisis. There is some sense among the students of “How can you trust this institution?”

You have to be honest about it and basically say, yes, it’s pretty tough, and you have to admit there has been corruption. That corruption goes back thousands of years. It’s a miracle that the church is still able to do the kind of good that it does.

But there’s always positive stuff, too. I talk about what religious groups are doing for the sick, for the poor, for immigrants. There’s all of this good stuff, but there’s also a fair amount of cynicism,

I hope in my classrooms that they’re able to see that I can be a thinking person, that I can ask these tough questions.

the idea of, “Who is the church to tell me what to do if they can’t even keep their own house clean?”

How do your students view you as a representative of the church?

I hope in my classrooms that they’re able to see I can be a thinking person, that I can ask these tough questions and not feel like I’m being told to check my brain at the door when it comes to religion.

Do they ask if you go to church?

Yes, they do.

Does being part of a parish inform what you do in the classroom?

It does to a certain extent. Sometimes I’ll say to the students, “Did anybody go to church this past week? Did anybody hear what the gospel was? It was kind of interesting.” A couple of students will say that they went.

Often the question that I get is, “How can you still go to church?” I say a couple of things in response to this question. One is that I never know who’s going to sit next to me in church. Another is that I need to hear something inspiring, or at least an effort to be inspiring, about the scriptures. I’ve been hearing these readings for more than 60 years, but it’s not like you hear it once and you just get it.

I also like to sing. In church we get to sing, so that’s another reason to go. And church provides me with a place where I have this hour when I’m supposed to pay attention. Half the time I’m planning a class, thinking about what I might make for dinner, or something like that, but then you have to get drawn back in.

The students will often say, “I don’t get anything out of going to church. It’s boring.” I say, “Yeah, I know what you mean, and sometimes I don’t either. But you know what? It’s not all about me.”

Adolescence is a very self-centered time. It’s understandable, because kids are figuring out who they are. I hope I’ve gotten more tolerant of that as I’ve gotten older. But Mass is also a humbling experience because, as I said, it’s not about me. It’s about other people. For me it’s a time when I feel like I can open myself up to the wisdom of God.

If the students tell me it’s boring, I say, “Well, you know, perhaps it’s shaping you in ways that you may not even be aware of. It’s like doing exercises. You keep doing these things and you get good at them.” That’s my answer.

It must help them to hear the perspective of somebody who has been in the trenches.

Yup, I have been in the trenches. But they are good trenches.

I have a student this semester who’s from China, and she is struggling. She’s had no religious background whatsoever. Plus she’s struggling with English. One of the questions we are grappling with in class is, “What does it mean to be happy?” How is she going to make sense out of this question? I have to sit down with her and go through this.

Then I’ve got my Iraq War vet who says, “I don’t think it’s possible to be happy.” I said, “OK, then write a paper about that.”

I have to say, it can drive you crazy, but it’s great fun. I love it. **USC**