

# THEOLOGY

## Theological Foundations (Theo 111) Jesuit Theology and Spirituality (Theo 236)

*Chris Pramuk, Ph.D.*

*Mentor: Ginger McKenzie, Ed.D. (Childhood Education & Literacy)*

### I. Using Music and Poetry to Teach the Whole Person

#### Theological Foundations (Theo 111)

#### Course Description (Fall 2008/ Spring 2009)

This course introduces students to the academic study of theology by reflecting on the mysteries of human life and the divine dimension of reality. We approach the subject through many lenses: historical and critical analyses, sacred scripture, literature, and science; through art, poetry, film, and music; and inevitably, through the lens of our own experiences, questions, and personal histories as human beings. By exploring religious faith and theological questioning as a universal dimension of human life on the planet, this class provides a foundation for a deeper personal engagement with Catholicism and global religious traditions in general.

#### Mission-Driven Components

The Ignatian Mentoring Program has reinforced my desire as a teacher to engage the whole person of students through the use of poetry and music. As St. Ignatius wrote in the *Spiritual Exercises*: "It is profitable to use the imagination and to apply the five senses to [these contemplations], just as if I were there. Then, reflecting upon myself, I will draw some profit from this." Through frequent exploration of music and poetry in the classroom, I aim to help students "get inside" the experiences of others in a holistic way, "just as if [they] were there." That is, to get beyond the "literal" surface of things and immerse oneself in the depth (or mystical) dimension of reality, history, sacred texts, etc., thus giving them tools for exploring the transcendent dimension (and questions) of their own lives.

Bill Huebsch expresses a very "catholic" (universal) truth when he writes: "Human beings stand constantly at the very edge of mystery. . . . The language of the poet is not ordinary, common language to us. It is a language that seems to come from the other side." By exploring the life and poetry of Abraham Joshua Heschel, Thich Nhat Hanh, and many others, as well as the poetic landscape of the Bible, students are invited to place themselves "at the edge of mystery," and to dwell there a while, even (or especially) when doing so opens up the most difficult and elusive questions: Is God real? Where is God when people are suffering? For what can I hope for in this life and the next? Where are my desires leading me? Does God (or Jesus) have anything to do with my sexuality? And so on. By opening up hidden realms of experience and imagination, music and poetry are uniquely positioned to help young adults get inside and wrestle with such questions.

### II. Protest Music in an Ignatian Context

#### Jesuit Theology and Spirituality (Theo 236)

#### Course description (Fall 2008 / Spring 2009)

The seminar seeks to understand the historical, theological, and imaginative roots of Jesuit (or Ignatian) spirituality as expressed in the *Autobiography* and *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius Loyola. Building on this foundation, students explore how aspects of this spirituality come to fruition in the lives and thought of four influential Jesuits of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Teilhard de Chardin, Karl Rahner, Pedro Arrupe, and Anthony De Mello, as well as in a range of related Jesuit and non-Jesuit thinkers.

The seminar prepares students to articulate their own vision of a "spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> century," and to consider how Jesuit theology and spirituality might contribute essentially to that vision.

## Mission-Driven Component & Research Fruits

Beyond the clear connections between this course and the Jesuit mission and identity of Xavier University, teaching this seminar has opened my eyes to the theological underpinnings of Ignatian spirituality. In particular, studying the *Spiritual Exercises* in great depth has helped me understand the intrinsically theological link between the “service of faith” and the “promotion of justice,” as articulated by GC 32 and carried forward by Pedro Arrupe. Ignatian spirituality trains us to “see” the world “from below,” as it were, as Jesus saw the world, with particular attention to the poor and suffering. As Johann Metz puts it, Ignatian spirituality cultivates a “mysticism of open eyes,” a spirituality that “sees more and not less. It is a mysticism that especially makes visible all invisible and inconvenient suffering, and—convenient or not—pays attention to it and takes responsibility for it, for the sake of a God who is a friend to human beings.”

Again, one way I have sought to cultivate this kind of “seeing” in the classroom is through music, and in particular, through the venerable tradition of “protest music.” With much encouragement from my IMP mentor, Dr. Ginger Mckenzie, I shared examples of protest music with students in the seminar, and together we explored certain “resonances” with Ignatian spirituality, not least the impulse to firmly resist injustice and dehumanization in all its forms. One of the theological or mystical keys to this particularly Christian “way of seeing,” we discerned, is a living grasp of the “incarnation” of God in all things, and consummately, in the drama of human life. Another is the willingness to enter into communion with Jesus not only in the drama of his life, but also in his death on the cross, as Ignatius invites us to do in the First Week of the *Exercises*. In an analogous way, protest music draws us into the experience of “the crucified peoples” of history, and confronts us with the question of complicity and responsibility: “What are you going to do about it?”

This “experimenting” with protest music in an Ignatian context has been tremendously thought-provoking, both for myself and, I believe, my students. It culminated in the writing of a full-length essay on the subject, which I have submitted for consideration to a volume on *Justice in Jesuit Education* being published by Fordham University Press.