

High School Theology Program at Padre Pio Academy

I. The Goal

The goal of the theology program at Padre Pio Academy is to help students think in a serious way about the principles of Catholic theology under the guidance of St. Thomas Aquinas in order to help save their own souls and to help save the souls of others. It aims to provide a unified view of reality by offering Thomistic wisdom in the contemporary world. The program does its work in fidelity to the Sacred Scriptures, Tradition, and the Church's Magisterium and gives the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas a privileged place.

What We Do Here At Padre Pio Academy (See Below)

II. The Challenges that We Aim to Address

Catholic theological education, at best, has a few basic problems (this is to set aside the glaring fact that much of “Catholic” theology that is taught in Catholic schools is not in accord with the Catholic faith). The (1) first problem is that the theology taught is largely unserious, and the (2) second results from this, namely, that no coherent worldview, let alone the faith, is actually handed on or transmitted in some kind of rationally attractive way. And so, our children are left open to a myriad of attacks on their faith because their faith is not rooted in reason. Lastly, (3) there is little serious training for a life of holiness.

(1) The Unseriousness of Catholic Theological Education

Catholic theological education is unserious insofar as we never get past a middle-school theological education (at best) even though Catholics continue taking “religion” through high school and even college and are highly educated in other areas. As Fr. Thomas Joseph White, O.P. said:

Deep curiosity leads to engagement. If I have a problem in understanding the faith, or even a real difficulty of belief, it can be the beginning of a better and truer form of believing. In all fairness, it's not that easy to teach one's self Catholic theology. *Today many people are well trained engineers, nurses or lawyers, but they have the theological education of a middle school child.* We can talk about who is to blame for this state of affairs, but the truth is that we are all to blame. Catholics need to study real theology—as best they can—and to talk about theological beliefs among each other. Otherwise, we create at best only a culture of apologetics and politics, which is what tends to predominate in orthodox Catholic circles. That means we never really learn to speak confidently about the mysteries of the faith among ourselves or with others, and in turn this greatly hinders the evangelical dynamic of the Church. There is no way to learn to swim than to get into the water. Studying theology in this case is the metaphorical water, and it is important to immerse oneself gradually and learn how to swim.ⁱ

Another author has put this well:

Herein lies the problem. Our kids don't understand Catholicism on any profound level. As far as I can tell, we seem to do an excellent job of teaching our children about Catholicism until a few years after the age of Confirmation, and then it stops because we think we have to focus on college and careers. All too often, our own theology and metaphysics never grew up. How can we expect anything more from them when we fail to understand it ourselves?

A Christian should, at various points growing up and throughout life, be completely baffled. A teenager should cease to be satisfied with the Catholicism of his youth. He should wrestle with his religion. The wanderings of an adolescent mind can be dangerous, but they should be a part of life and an opportunity for deeper faith. We have to harness and guide the restless mind and show our children that there is a why for everything in this Church and even more importantly, a way to live it as they grow up and have the capacity to comprehend the mysteries of our faith on a deeper level.

We begin to help them build a strong Catholic house, brick by brick, on a shaky, precarious, weak foundation. We need, at some point in their lives, to stop teaching them just about what we believe, but why we believe it and how it all fits together into an integrated Catholic worldview which is necessarily centered on God. Our kids are completely unprepared to critique the arguments against their belief system and they abandon Christianity, or any meaningful form of Christianity anyway, because they never comprehended the First Principles to begin with. The house that should shelter them from the wild winds of a sinful life collapses under the all-consuming guise of a carefree, enthralling, exciting secular world. It is hard to fight a battle when you never learned how to wield a sword.

We should be teaching them to argue for and about Christianity, not merely to accept it superficially....

We are sending spiritually malformed young people into a hostile world, and losing your faith is all too easy if you don't understand why you believe what you believe.ⁱⁱ

(2) There is No Coherent Worldview That is Transmitted

The faith is not transmitted as a coherent whole. As a result, there is also no coherent worldview for the individual Catholic since this worldview requires an integration of what we know through evidence available to reason (in its more rigorous state this is philosophy) and what we know/believe through faith (theology). And this lack of transmission of a coherent whole happens for many reasons (many of which are also evidence for why Catholic theological education has been unserious), but the most important reason, as a Dominican priest has said, is that

many catechists/theology teachers have so little training that it is in effect the blind leading the blind, and without adequate training they have little understanding of what they are teaching. The result is the Church's teaching comes across as a matter of fact and fideistic (i.e. "because the Church says so").

Unfortunately a degree in theology is not necessarily evidence of the needed training. This is a problem on a broad level. Edward Feser helpfully compares the Church's intellectual life today to *Rocky III*:

The Church, in her human element and in particular in her *intellectual* life, has in my view in recent decades too often been like Rocky at the beginning of the movie [*Rocky III*] — undisciplined, unserious, inattentive to the true nature of the challenge on the horizon and unprepared to deal with it. Just as Rocky coasts on the reputation he acquired from his past victories but has little to show for it when confronted by a vigorous new challenger, contemporary Catholic churchmen and theologians are the heirs of a glorious philosophical and theological patrimony of which they have, in the face of the moral, political, and intellectual challenges posed by secularism, made little use.

And just as the Mr. T character, despite his boorishness and vanity, at least knows what it takes to win, so too do the New Atheists, for all their smug ignorance, know where the fundamental issues really lie in the dispute between religion and secularism. They understand that it is, at the end of the day, useless to appeal to the social advances that Christianity ushered in historically, or to the dignity that Christian morality attributes to human beings, or to the beauty of Christian art and architecture, unless there is good reason to think that the central claims of Christianity are *actually true*. They know, as St. Thomas Aquinas did, that it is useless to talk about faith unless you have shown that faith is something other than the self-deception its critics take it to be — that is, unless you have first established the rational preambles of faith, the *praeambula fidei*. They know, at least implicitly, that **since man is a rational animal, you will not win him over in the long run if you cannot win over his intellect.**ⁱⁱⁱ

So this is what we need to do – to introduce young people to the **riches** of the Catholic *intellectual* tradition and habituate them to thinking (about these things) in a serious way. This is what a theological education is meant to do.

(3) Unserious Spiritual Formation

Finally, the perseverance in the faith and the development of holiness however require more than serious theology – they require also a rich and devoted relationship with God. Of course, many places will offer mass, retreats, and various other activities that relate to the faith (and we do too). But the same problems that are present in the teaching of theology are present in the offering of spiritual formation; most of these activities are largely unserious and aimed at something less (often having some kind of fun or community building among young people –

which are all good things; they just are not spiritual formation – that is, they do not include the kind of thing that directly aims to develop holiness). Moreover, what is missing is, among other things, the foundation of all these things, namely faith and a life of prayer.

III. Solutions

In response to these issues, a faithful Catholic theological education then needs:

- (1) to be serious intellectually,
- (2) to actually transmit the faith and a coherent worldview that goes along with it,^{iv} and
- (3) to include spiritual formation – in other words, it should include an introduction to the spiritual life and training in a life of personal prayer (among other basic but important practices that aid in developing holiness).

In other words, serious intellectual formation and serious spiritual formation (with prayer and mortification and a deep dive into the saints) are the two most under-appreciated and helpful things to persevere in the faith and to prevent such faith from being over-taken by the culture.

(1) THE NEED THAT THEOLOGY IS SERIOUS INTELLECTUALLY

AN OBJECTION: One might ask: haven't Catholics survived for centuries without such serious intellectual training? So why do we need it now?

THE SIMPLE ANSWER: because the culture that we live in is vigorously anti-Catholic and anti-reality our children need to be able to think seriously about many things so that their faith is not destroyed. Young people can be swallowed whole by the culture without the proper intellectual and spiritual resources, and since most young people have not been given these resources, they are leaving the faith in droves.

Sadly, many Catholic places do not provide the rigorous training for real and serious thought about the most important things. Orthodoxy is not sufficient. And the good work that faithful Catholic colleges do can be too late for some young people because many are leaving the faith so young (and many young people will not end up at these faithful Catholic colleges anyway).

Moreover, we all know that many students lose their faith at college and that it does not take long. We even know this happens to (what we *think* are) very well-formed homeschoolers and children from Catholic schools and/or from good families.

Contrary to the general practice, teens need someone who can answer their questions in ways that are compelling and satisfying - not some pat answer that should not even be given to a 7-year-old. They have serious questions, and they should be shown the respect they deserve and their questions should be taken seriously. When they do not receive real and deep answers to their questions, they begin to think such answers do not exist. High schoolers are capable of serious discussion about serious things; instead, they typically get more grade-school level “catechism” answers about things that do not seem to pertain to their life.

This serious thinking provides a bulwark against the onslaught of the culture, but it also allows for well-formed people to evangelize the culture (that is, *after* they are well-formed) since the task of the laity is to be *in* the world and to bring people into the Church.

The Way Thinking Provides a Bulwark Against the Onslaught of the Culture

We have all had the experience where we *thought* we knew something, but it turned out we were wrong. And that experience leads us to wonder whether *this* is one of those times. So we have to not only *know* the truth but we have to *know that we know it.*^v It is very easy to succumb to the pressures of the culture; we are naturally social animals and it is easy to go along with whatever culture or sub-culture we live in.

We can even succumb to such pressure when we know the reason that something is true. So how much easier it is to succumb to the social pressure when we were just told that it is true but have little to no reason for it?

Students not only need to think deeply about the *reasons* or about the *evidence* that certain things are true, but they also need to know *why* we get a very different answer than the dominant culture; they need to know *why* what the culture holds as true is attractive for people in the culture. When you see both the reason for the truth and the reason for why someone would hold to the opposite of the truth (and why it is ultimately not a good reason) you can be confident in your holding fast to the truth. It is then that we do not worry we are missing out on something else because we see why they hold the false judgment and why it is false.

(2) WHAT IS NEEDED TO TRANSMIT THE FAITH AND A COHERENT WORLDVIEW, AND FOR SERIOUS THINKING

A. The Need for Philosophy

The world today is truth starved and lacking in knowledge of basic principles and ultimate perspectives. To transmit a coherent and compelling worldview, one needs these basic principles and ultimate perspectives (wisdom). And so one needs philosophy (a natural reflection/thinking about natural things), theology (a reflection/thinking about divine revelation which requires supernatural faith), and how these two fit harmoniously together. We need to be able to see the order among things (both natural and supernatural). Narrative (or stories) is not sufficient to do this; we need reasons and theoretical (not just practical) thinking.^{vi} At some point, we cannot just tell stories or rehearse opinions, we have to answer the question. As Fr. Thomas Joseph White, O.P. has said:

Whatever its intentions, a ... theology that would like to forgo appeal to distinctly philosophical formation will inevitably doom itself not only to cultural irrelevance but even to internal incoherence. For without recourse to the explicit practice of philosophical study in its own right, Christians are unable to receive from the tradition they espouse its own classical practices of thought.

Ignorance of philosophy sterilizes the intellectual reception of the Christian tradition.^{vii}

So for a serious understanding of the faith, philosophy is simply necessary.

AN OBJECTION: Why not just focus on what revelation says about important questions and so just stick to theology rather than philosophy? Why would Catholics want philosophy in addition to theology?

ANSWER: For one, it is impossible to understand revelation without an understanding of natural or created things. In other words, philosophy is necessary for understanding revelation. So even when we receive divine revelation, it must fit into a conceptual and metaphysical form of thinking in us that is philosophical. ***Revelation does not short-circuit, as it were, our natural thinking process.*** Rather, revelation provides new, additional, light, principles, and object that presuppose the same basic thinking power with the same kind of conceptual thinking.

In other words, one *cannot* simply *just* focus on what revelation says about these questions because as soon as you try to understand what Scripture means it will include some philosophizing. A few examples will make this clear.

- a. God reveals in Scripture that there are three persons in God.
 - What is a person?
- b. God reveals that Christ has two natures.
 - What is a nature?
- c. Transubstantiation means that the substance of the bread changes into Jesus Christ but the accidents stay the same.
 - What are substance and accidents?

All of these questions (about *person, nature, substance, and accidents*) are natural or philosophical in nature. Revelation does not give us the answer to them.

And if all this seems too intellectual or too heady then we ought to reflect on a few things:

- God commands us to think. The greatest commandment says to love God, with all our *mind!* (Matthew 22:37)
 - So you cannot be committed to following Jesus and refuse to think about what that means and requires. And in fact it often causes us harm when we believe errors because “bad theology [inevitably] leads to difficulties in one’s spiritual life.”^{viii}
- Traditionally, the Church teaches that we are made to ***know***, love, and serve God (and so we must do these things to save our soul). *Knowledge* is an essential part of the Christian life.
- *We cannot love what we do not know:*

Thomas Aquinas affirms that **we cannot love what we do not know, and that when we grow in understanding of God, we can also grow in love**

for Him, precisely because we begin to understand more deeply who God is. There is no opposition between intellectual understanding and our emotions or intuitions, but we need intellectual analysis to test our initial intuitions, and to give structure to our emotional life. In fact, over time, it is the search for the truth that does the most to steady the internal development of the human person, and this search is most noble in the person.... Seeking the truth in the right way, however, is not only not opposed to being loving or just but something they presuppose. **Growth in spiritual love perfects or completes the human person but it presumes and is aided by truth. As we become more realistic we are able to love more realistically.**^{ix}

As Aquinas notes, the study of theology can also be genuinely ‘meritorious’: it can stem from charity, and can also intensify love, as we draw closer to what we know. In fact, when we begin to love others, we seek to get to know them better, and even ‘study them in love’ in a certain way. This is true not only in our natural experience, but also in the domain of supernatural life. **Intellectual engagement with the Christian faith is essential to our personal relationship with Christ.**^x

So the point is that this knowledge of divine things ought to stem from a deep love of God. We love Him and so we desire to know Him whom our heart loves. It does not mean that we all need to be scholars (though for some this is a vocation – a means of becoming holy). However, it does mean that we ought to be generous in our efforts to come to know God.

B. The Wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas

However, it is not sufficient for the study of revealed truths to use just any philosophy, but the philosophy needs to be true. *Not every philosophy is equally true and so equally helpful in understanding revelation.*

St. Thomas Aquinas and the Thomistic tradition offer a profound and coherent approach to the Christian intellectual tradition that enable us to understand the nature of things and to have an ultimate perspective of things (wisdom). We need a guide in being educated, and the Church teaches, continually and without reservation, that St. Thomas is *the* great master of the intellectual life.

Pope John XXII, speaking about St. Thomas, said before his canonization that *“his life was saintly and his doctrine could only be miraculous ... because he enlightened the church more than all the other doctors. By the use of his works a man could profit more in one year than if he studies the doctrine of others for his whole life.”*

(Quotes of this sort could be multiplied from popes. For more see this [sampling](#).)

C. The Need for Teachers with an Intellectual Life

To have teachers with a serious intellectual life there needs to be teachers in place that are properly trained. A curriculum alone cannot fix this problem because it is not *simply* about the content (though the problem does include a kind of content problem). There is a need for teachers who have themselves been trained to think and know the reasons for things, *and* for this to happen on both a natural (philosophy) and supernatural (theology) level. And this is very rare: most theology teachers, at least in elementary and secondary schooling, simply do not have the training to do this; they are unable to think through these questions in a serious way themselves, let alone to do so with the students. They have not developed, through their own education, an intellectual life themselves that they can pass on.

The point is *not* that teachers have to have all the answers, but rather they need to understand the principles and be able to think through new things with students. In part, then, teachers need to realize that not knowing things is normal (we cannot know everything). So teachers also need to respect that students are asking good and reasonable questions and teachers do not need to be defensive about not knowing something.

This is a very deep and wide-ranging problem since the reason why teachers do not have this training is that most universities or graduate schools of theology are not giving them the necessary training. Most undergraduate and even graduate programs do not require serious thinking since they do not require much philosophical education.

(3) THE NEED FOR SERIOUS SPIRITUAL FORMATION

We become saints through persevering in the faith and development of supernatural charity (holiness). But this cannot happen by chance (anymore than professional athletes become the best by chance). We need to have a plan. The Church and her saints have deep wisdom concerning what the life of holiness consists in and how to attain it, avoiding common pitfalls along the way and so we need to become enmeshed with the thought of the saints.

Basic practices for the development of holiness include, but are not limited to:

- ❖ Prayer (St. Alphonsus has emphasized the practical necessity of prayer for attaining salvation.)
- ❖ The practice of the virtues and how to avoid vices.
- ❖ Discovering our root sin and focusing on the relevant virtues to overcome it.
- ❖ The practice of penance and mortification (including picking up our cross and following Jesus).
- ❖ Spiritual reading.
- ❖ Plan or program for the spiritual life.
- ❖ Like it is for any serious athlete, some significant coaching is extremely helpful in reaching these goals.

IV. What We Do Here At Padre Pio Academy

In light of all of this then the goals of the theology program at Padre Pio Academy should be understood. We want to help students think in a serious way about the principles of Catholic theology under the guidance of St. Thomas Aquinas in order to help save their own souls and to help save the souls of others. We aim to provide a unified view of reality by offering Thomistic wisdom in the contemporary world. The program does its work in fidelity to the Sacred Scriptures, Tradition, and the Church's Magisterium and gives the teaching of St. Thomas Aquinas a privileged place.

To this end:

- We spend *more* time on *less content*; we go deeper into the important questions and principles.
- We focus more on thinking through arguments and less on memorizing conclusions.
- Class time is dedicated for discussion, allowing students to have a space to develop their own thinking (intellectual habits), instead of simply giving students information.
- We focus on important philosophical principles within our theological study.
- We prioritize the speculative/theoretical questions rather than the historical questions.
- We read serious texts; we do not use the typical introductory high school textbooks (which may be helpful summaries but are not helpful for thinking deeply).

(1) COURSE CONTENT

In the 9th and 10th grades students study fundamental theology, moral theology, and spiritual theology.

- Fundamental theology (faith/reason, nature of revelation, Tradition, magisterium, etc.)
- The nature of man
- Principles of moral theology (happiness, human action, virtue and vice, law and grace)
- Spiritual theology

In the 11th and 12th grades the focus is, on the one hand, dogmatic theology where students focus on God and Salvation, and, on the other hand, students will also focus on developing virtue, friendship, and marriage and family life.

- Existence and Attributes of God
- Trinity
- Christ
- Salvation
- Sacraments in general
- Developing virtue
- Sex, Marriage, and Family
- Friendship

(2) SPIRITUAL FORMATION

- ❖ The spiritual formation program at Padre Pio Academy begins with training the students in personal prayer (the foundational practice of the spiritual life), discovering their root sins (and how to overcome them), and what mortification is and how to practice it. All of this is brought together in a plan for their own life. Upperclassmen will be offered spiritual direction.
- ❖ Student's formation continues in their courses work with a quarter of spiritual theology and a focus on virtues and vices in moral theology. Moreover, students will have yearly reading from the works of the saints (St. Therese the Little Flower, St. Francis de Sales, St. Alphonsus, and St. Theresa of Avila).
- ❖ Yearly retreats will provide an opportunity for reflection on one's own life and on important themes such as: sin, the end for which we were created, death, judgment, hell, heaven, God's gifts, the vanity of the world, Christ crucified, etc. While more regular mini-retreats will be offered to prepare students to live the various seasons of the liturgical calendar (Advent, Lent, etc.) and to reflect on how their plan of life is going.
- ❖ Finally, either school rosary or school mass is offered every Friday as well as regular opportunities for confession.

If you have any questions, please direct them to Dr. Matthew DuBroy who developed the theology program at Padre Pio Academy. He is the dean of religious formation and teaches the theology program (mjdubroy@pioacademy.org).



Dr. DuBroy, a father of five, received his B.A. from Franciscan University of Steubenville in philosophy after spending two years at Borromeo Seminary in Cleveland. Next, he earned a master's degree in theology (S.T.M.) from the International Theological Institute in Austria and a License in Sacred Theology (S.T.L.) from the Pontifical John Paul II Institute for studies on Marriage and Family in Washington, D.C. Finally, he earned a Doctorate in Sacred Theology (S.T.D.) from the Thomistic Institute at the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception at the Dominican House of Studies under the direction of Fr. Thomas Joseph White, O.P. Dr. DuBroy has also published in the English Edition of *Nova et Vetera*, a journal of Catholic philosophy and theology. Before coming to Padre Pio Academy, Dr. DuBroy taught Latin at St. Jerome Academy (Hyattsville, MD) and theology at Archbishop Hoban High School. Dr. DuBroy is an affiliate member of the *Sacra Doctrina Project*. The *Sacra Doctrina Project* is devoted to the study of

theology as a *scientia* which is ordered toward the contemplation of the divine nature and the relation of all creation to God. Furthermore, he has founded the *Thomistic Institute for Ongoing Formation* which seeks to educate both laity and priests in the rich tradition of the Church's philosophy and theology. He is also the vice-chair of the Cleveland chapter of *Una Voce* which works, in union with Rome, toward the promotion and support of the traditional Latin Mass within the Church.

ⁱ <http://www.catholicworldreport.com/2017/10/03/we-cannot-love-what-do-not-know-an-interview-with-fr-thomas-joseph-white-o-p/>

ⁱⁱ <https://epiphanymn.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/The-Lamb-of-God-Is-Not-Made-of-Cotton-Balls.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://thomasaquinas.edu/news/lecture-dr-edward-feser-what-we-owe-new-atheists>

^{iv} Fr. Thomas Joseph White, O.P., "Toward a Post-Secular, Post-Conciliar Thomistic Philosophy: Wisdom in the Face of Modernity and the Challenge of Contemporary Natural Theology," *Nova et Vetera*, Spring 2012 (Vol. 10, No. 2), 527: "The pressing question the present context raises is far different from that of our Vatican II – generation forebears.... For the real challenge of contemporary Catholic life is to possess and transmit integrally *any coherent account of classical philosophical and theological doctrine at all.*"

With a free account you can read the article here: <https://stpaulcenter.com/10-nv-10-2-white-1/>

^v Michael Augros, *The Immortal in You* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017), c. 13.

^{vi} Fr. Thomas Joseph White, O.P., "Toward a Post-Secular, Post-Conciliar Thomistic Philosophy: Wisdom in the Face of Modernity and the Challenge of Contemporary Natural Theology," *Nova et Vetera*, Spring 2012 (Vol. 10, No. 2), 530: "Without [a distinctly philosophical, scientifically ordered thinking], theology as a science breaks down into a mere narrative of profound intuitions, devoid of internal order and incapable of coherent transmission to a younger generation."

^{vii} <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2011/07/whether-faith-needs-philosophy>

^{viii} Michael Barber, *Salvation: What Every Catholic Should Know* (Augustine Institute, 2019), 4.

^{ix} <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2017/10/03/we-cannot-love-what-do-not-know-an-interview-with-fr-thomas-joseph-white-o-p/>

^x Fr. Thomas Joseph White, *The Light of Christ* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 46.