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RESPONSES FROM THE FIELD

High school theology instruction receives little attention in scholarly research. This is regrettable because such a unique curricular component has the potential to add much to the Catholicity of the school and to the religious development of faculty and students. To advance the discussion and application of the ideas presented in this focus article, the editors invited three current high school theology teachers to offer reflections, observations, and critiques of the approach and lessons presented. While each contributor responds from his or her own background and situation, the remarks offer insight into the applied setting of the high school classroom and demonstrate how Catholic education is a journey of both inquiry and practice.

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A priest and friend who is principal of a Catholic school recently said to me, "We shouldn't teach religion in high schools. We teach the answers to questions students don't have yet and it winds up turning them off to their faith and the Church." His comment feels representative of many difficulties with high school religion courses: poor theology texts, ill-prepared high school theology teachers, and seemingly disinterested students. Into this breach is thrown "Narrative Theology in the High School Classroom: Teaching Theology Through Literature" by Lou DelFra, C.S.C. This essay and the accompanying prospective curriculum establish a framework for a course to address the difficulties many Catholic school principals, teachers, parents, and students, whether they realize it or not, have with theology courses.

Fr. DelFra opens his essay posing the question, "Why is today's catechesis and theological pedagogy not more informed by 'narrative theology' – theology which focuses on the narratives told by Jesus and the Gospels precisely as narratives?" The question assumes this objective is not being well-achieved and gives clue to the substance of DelFra's proposed course. In reading the essay and appendix, I thought, "Wow, this would be tough to teach but an awesome experience." Teaching this course would be difficult because it is time consuming, labor intensive, and tack-

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les questions of faith, theology, and scholarship atypical in many Catholic high schools. Yet, it could be rewarding because those questions are crucial to living our faith. The questions unify intellectual discourse and faith journey, emotion and academia, good works and good prayer, communities and individuals, and the objective and subjective dimensions of faith. It would be enriching because it is new and exciting and will hit students right where they are daring us to hit them: their souls.

It would be a challenge to find someone qualified to teach this course. We are told that the curriculum is "designed for 12th grade teachers of religion or English." I would suggest the teacher needs to be someone possessing a deeper than average understanding of the Catholic intellectual tradition and theology, as well as literary awareness, experience with skeptical or disinterested students, and planning, presenting, and assessing courses with abstract concepts. The teacher must anticipate objections to literary interpretations as well as theological or faith dilemmas and engage students in a responsible and confident manner.

It may be problematic if a school administrator does not support the course. Seniors would need to take the course in lieu of what would be typically required for seniors, or the school would need to be large or sufficiently diverse to fill a class of students willing to take extra theology credits. Without a text, the planning is extensive, and assessing the many assignments would take time – the instructor would, in my opinion, need to have extra planning time to manage the workload necessary for the course.

The ideal student for this course would be a high school senior that can organize and manage time, be self-motivated, be able to write lucidly and frequently, and be able to analyze and articulate abstract concepts. He or she would need to have a mature faith understanding and foundation that could withstand critical analysis.

Our students want intelligent, accurate, and soul-feeding theology. They are saturated in a culture espousing axioms of choice, consumerism, and quick-fix quackery; Catholicism's rich tradition and depth is out of step. The task assigned to all Catholic school teachers, and that DelFra addresses, is presenting "theologically valid and catechetically effective" curricula that are engaging, interesting, and relevant. If Catholic schools do not provide this theological framework for students, they will form their lives around other archetypes and value systems.

What I see as the main hurdle for the proposed course is that too many students do not possess a deep enough understanding of the history and teachings of their faith to frame and support the objectives proposed. Many senior-level students would not be prepared to step into the course and understand the objectives as stated without extensive background preparation. This is regrettable.

Why do our students seem unprepared for developing a mature faith? There can be a hesitancy or a reluctance to explore faith critically, specifically the Gospels, in Catholic high schools. The Hebrew Scriptures are open for contextual and interpretative exploration, similarly are the Epistles, but Jesus' life and the allusions, symbolism, and narrative structures utilized carry an aura about them that suggests they should be introduced but not critically explored. Either the instructor is ill-equipped to present coherent Christology, Church history, and scriptural background to give context and guidance to the student's realizations and questions or – if the school is blessed to have such a talented instructor – the larger school, parish, or parent community may be reluctant to support such scholarship. In part, the fear is that teaching students to think might result in them doing just that.

This needs to change before a student's senior year, and DelFra has challenged teachers and schools to shift their paradigm for teaching theology. As proposed, it is not a course about giving answers but about raising lifelong questions and presenting a context for those questions to be lived. Our lives are narratives. And the course does not opt out of the final assessment, only to ask the students to write the narrative of their lives, but to write their narrative of Jesus' life. This is awesome and dangerous because it is unique and thought-provoking, even life-changing – just the type of danger our students need, crave, and deserve.

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A daily struggle in classrooms is making learning valuable and enduring. Too often, students memorize facts for the purpose of regurgitating them on a test to earn a desired grade and promptly forget the knowledge, or if they do incorporate the information into their long-term memory, cannot comprehend how the small bits of information fit into a larger theme. This struggle is obvious in high school theology classes, where teachers strive not simply to pass on basic elements of Bible stories but encourage students to glean a moral framework for their daily life choices. The idea of integrating secular literature into the curriculum of a narrative theology high school course evokes an immediate, almost instinctive excitement from the perspective of a teacher. Students, like people of all ages, like stories. People like sharing stories and telling stories; stories enable people to

view an event through a certain lens, giving it highlights, meaning, and making it easy to share with others. Teaching theology through biblical and secular literature taps into a mindset that appeals especially to teenagers. Adolescents value their own circle of friends immensely, and they love simply talking and sharing stories. As they develop their own identities, the importance of hearing and sharing stories is very much a part of their social and cognitive development. It makes perfect sense to incorporate stories more formally into their courses. Stories, simply put, are fun and easier to remember than straight facts.

Furthermore, the idea that the story form is not constrictive and encourages further thought by students should not be quickly acknowledged as obvious. Students would have a role in their learning simply by the fact that they have to work as the interpreter. Reading and examining a story – because there are images involved – require insight and even imagination on the part of the reader. There is a point in a story, whether it is in the Bible or a C.S. Lewis novel, but it is not straightforwardly stated. Students will have to peel back the layers to discover the theme. While the teacher will be guiding them, the format and exercise encourage them to make the knowledge their own, and therefore make it enduring. This curriculum's attention to pedagogical method assists teachers in the constant struggle to make the learning taking place in their classes genuine learning. In addition, the curriculum, because it is strongly based in story-telling, encourages students to think about elements of the story outside of the classroom. With a variety of genres incorporated in the curriculum, perhaps a student will be struck by one or more stories and ponder a character's actions, the ending, and the point in a quiet – admittedly rare – moment outside of the classroom.

While the many benefits of such a curriculum are obvious and exciting, there are some cautions that an educator should keep in mind. The mirroring of biblical stories by a variety of secular literature would encourage a class to engage in more responsible biblical studies. Just as students are encouraged to keep in mind a novel's author, his or her background, and his or her purpose, students will keep in mind the authors of the Gospels, their personal backgrounds, and the theorized purposes of the Gospels. However, a teacher should also be mindful that students do not "fill in" details of Bible stories irresponsibly in a sub-conscious attempt to make them similar to the secular literature of the curriculum. Presuming details of Bible stories is often challenged in biblical studies; even biblical scholars disagree on many important elements of biblical interpretation. Also, while the curriculum does encourage students to listen to different interpretations and enter into respectful dialogue, the teacher should be careful that students do not lean toward relativism. Moreover, a teacher probably ought not attempt to implement this curriculum without extensive background in

biblical exegesis and history.

Yet while these cautions do exist, they should not dissuade a teacher from using the curriculum. It is clearly sensitive to the developmental stage of high school students, addresses teachers' concerns about genuine learning, and is holistic.

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Recently, I joined a number of my colleagues at an after school social event common on Friday afternoons. Though I had joined them late, I was reminded almost immediately of one of the reasons why I find teaching such a compelling endeavor. Seated between a history teacher and an English teacher, I noticed how quickly our conversation moved from a review of the evening's activities to a sampling of the some of the best things heard from the mouths of our students that week to a discussion of the future of education to, finally, a sobering discussion of our personal understandings of the person of Jesus Christ. In what other line of work would you find people so willing to move right to a discussion of what matters most?

Whatever one might say about the social habits of teachers, I am thoroughly convinced that our socializing that evening was about the consumption of one thing: stories. Each of us had converged that evening for the opportunity to hear one another's and to tell our own. In the midst of our evening together, one of my peers related a news story which he had recently seen that indicated that books were a quickly-dying medium in our culture and that they might soon become extinct. As we struggled with such a concept and how it might impact our future, we noted how, in contrast to this hypothesis, a number of our students had been particularly engrossed during the past few weeks in some of the novels assigned in another teacher's English class. We reflected on how refreshing it had been during the past several days to tell a student that he had to put his novel away. We concluded that the reason that students struggled to put their novels away was not that these were particularly great works of art that they were reading but rather that their teacher had chosen great stories for them to read.

Humans have a natural affinity for stories, and there is wisdom in an approach to teaching theology which actively appeals to and then engages the human love for storytelling. My 12th grade theology students often

express a desire to know the hard facts and the bottom line when it comes to the Church's teachings, particularly as they relate to controversial modern issues. It is as if my students are telling me that they can handle the truth – and maybe even live by it – if I will just give them the truths in black and white terms: no story, no context, just the facts. The temptation as a teacher is to give them precisely what they seek: the propositional data that they think they need to move toward a more Christian lifestyle. But Jesus often resisted such bottom-line queries in order that his students might know more intimately. Jesus, through his use of stories, demonstrates that knowledge which is felt is more personal and therefore more compassionate, relevant, and practical. Stories force us to feel in ways that are both known and new to us. Either way, we remember the experience of feeling, and therein lies the gateway to the deeper insights regarding how we ought to live. Jesus knew this, and narrative theology reminds us of it.

Students who encounter Christ through their imaginations and emotions will almost certainly know Christ more intimately; Saint Ignatius demonstrated this some 500 years ago with his *Spiritual Exercises*. Students who reflect on their own and others' lived experiences in an attempt to relate some personal story with a story about Christ (or one told by Christ) will afford themselves the opportunity to know Christ still more intimately. A narrative theology approach to teaching the Gospels is legitimate in the obvious way that it was legitimate enough to be employed by the one whom we imitate and call "Rabbi." Jesus knew that storytelling was an effective tool for instructing his followers, and, on an infinitely higher plane, he knew that his own story had to be told for the sake of humanity. So, the history of both our tradition and of our Scriptures seems to support the validity and effectiveness of storytelling in its capacity to concretize our abstract notions of God.

But a narrative approach to retelling Christ's story will only be effective insofar as it meets its audience where they are. As teachers, ultimately we want our students to know the Gospels in order that they might live them. We facilitate our students' knowing when we acknowledge and celebrate their very human penchant for storytelling, search their library of preferred books, movies, and songs which express their valuing of the inclusive, holistic, existential, and practical, and, finally, marry these with a Gospel story that has communicated the same for some 2,000 years. This makes for a Gospel that can be felt, experienced, and known – a Gospel worth living and perhaps even dying for.