

Newman, Inter/Multidisciplinarity, and the Catholic Studies Classroom: “Sex and Gender in the Christian Tradition”

IT IS COMMON NOWADAYS TO HEAR LAMENTS ABOUT THE decline of the university and of the liberal arts, accompanied by various diagnoses as to cause, so as to advise a cure. Many point to the widespread adoption of the German Enlightenment model of the university, some to the rise of relativism, and still others to the pragmatist and anti-intellectual streak that lies close to the bone of American culture.¹ Whatever the causes (and they are legion), the effect has been one of fragmentation, a loss of a sense of the wholeness and coherence of reality and one's place in reference to that whole, casting into doubt the purpose and ends of a university education beyond certification—and this is as true for many professors as it is for students and their parents.

Many students enter university studies unclear about the nature and goods of a liberal arts education. Increasingly, they come to study in the professions and pick up a minor in the humanities for fun, and are annoyed by the core curriculum. They think of a university education as transactional, as a certain set of informational inputs in order to achieve a certain socio-economic output.

Yet many of my colleagues in the liberal arts strive to help students understand that the liberal arts are about intellectual and moral formation and a transformation of vision, about giving them the capacities to understand the shape of the world and their place in it, to know more deeply what it means to be human with all its glorious possibilities and painful limitations, to know their strengths and weaknesses, to refine their ability to recognize the true, the good, and the beautiful and to accord their lives to them so that they will be prepared for life. But this understanding only comes with repeated, deliberate connections made by professors between classes and within classes, so that students come to shed their fragmented, myopic lenses and glimpse the whole. Newman's concept of the Unity of Knowledge is at the heart of this enterprise of healing the vision of our faculty and students so that they can recognize the wholeness and the connectedness of creation and the various disciplines that study it.

For Newman, the Unity of Knowledge is rooted in the Unity of Truth, which is the object of university study. All of creation is a revelation of God himself, who is Truth itself, and we pursue understanding ("knowledge") of the different aspects of creation ("the acts and works of the Creator" as Newman put it) through the various disciplines. Because the object of study for each discipline is a revelation of Truth, all the disciplines are "intimately united" and connected through their origin and endpoint in God himself.² Newman observes, further, "Hence it is that the Sciences, into which our knowledge may be said to be cast, have multiplied bearings on one another, and an internal sympathy, and admit, or rather demand comparison and adjustment. They complete, correct, balance each other."³ Governed by the principles of philosophy and theology, which study God-who-is-Truth himself, each discipline possesses its own object and method for the pursuit of truth of a particular aspect of creation, but couched within a commitment to the unity governing the whole. To get at the truth of a thing—the mystery of a tree, a galaxy, a human person, for example—one needs many disciplines to begin to grasp at it. The ability to see the relations between the disciplines as pertaining to trees, galaxies, and persons affords a deeper vision of them, as well as to a more

profound appreciation of their mystery. And this, of course, leads to a properly ordered vision of the world, which in turn leads to wisdom.

This is a very different conception from modern university study. The myopias of the various disciplines make the relations between them difficult to see; even our graduate studies did not prepare us to think widely, but rather narrowly. Even so, we modern academics seem to sense that somehow more than one discipline is needed to know a thing; hence, the proliferation of interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary programs within universities. However, like an orchestra without a conductor, these inter/multidisciplinary programs or classes struggle to create a coherent and harmonious expression of the thing studied. Without a concept of the Unity of Truth leading to a Unity of Knowledge and governed by some set of theological and philosophical principles, many of these programs have no real way of elucidating the relations between these disciplines as they seek to understand, for example, women, the environment, or the medieval period (my area of specialization). There is no unifying principle articulated within these programs that brings the disciplines into harmony in the study of a thing; rather we are left with disjointed, inharmonious, varied conceptions of things. They become an accidental collection of disciplinary competencies, lacking a capacity to offer a unified vision or understanding of trees, galaxies, or persons. To return to the image of an orchestra: Newman's concept of the Unity of Knowledge rooted in the Unity of Truth is like a conductor who can bring the disciplines into harmony and a vision of the whole. It demands that we look for the relations between the disciplinary perspectives and allow them to correct and refine one another in the light of the truths of philosophy and theology, so that we can come to a unified, coherent understanding of a thing.

One example of a class that deliberately tries to help students see the connections between the disciplines is one that I designed and taught as a Catholic Studies class at the University of Mary called "Sex and Gender in the Christian Tradition." This class partially arose out of demand from students, who were struggling with how to think about all the new, emerging questions surrounding sex,

gender, and marriage. And it arose out of my need: someone I love dearly lives with autism, and autistic people tend to struggle with embodiment, so I wanted to understand all the complex issues surrounding embodiment, among them sex and gender, so that I could better care for her. I wanted to think about these questions holistically and from the heart of the Church's tradition.

Hospitality as a Pedagogical Approach

"Sex and Gender in the Christian Tradition" is a 300-level class with no prerequisites, meaning I have no idea who is in the room on the first day. I might know a handful of students, but I do not know most of the thirty to forty students. Some are Catholic Studies majors or minors, some are not. They come from a wide variety of backgrounds and levels of preparation: junior nursing students, sophomore social work students, senior philosophy students, the odd poor freshman, theology majors, literature majors, computer science majors, you name it. They also come with questions and baggage. Some come in with clear positions on all the hot button issues on sex and gender. Many come in confused. Most have a sibling, friend, or relative back home who has embraced an alternative lifestyle, and they want to know how to relate to them.

Most students expect that we will begin this course by talking about the controversial issues up front, and some hope that I will just tell them what to think. They are disappointed when I tell them that this course is not a Politics class but a Catholic Studies class, and that they do not know how to think well enough about these topics to have a conversation anyway. I tell them that they lack precise language, principles, categories, and concepts to do so, and that to begin discussion without shared language, principles, categories, and concepts would be irresponsible and damaging. We are dealing with human persons and sensitive human questions, and therefore the utmost refinement, respect for persons, and hospitality is necessary in how we think and talk. In fact, I tell them, it will take us ten weeks of study and reading across various disciplines in order to even begin to have a responsible conversation about sex and gender.

Hospitality, with all that it implies about openness to the other, the dignity of the person and especially the stranger, as well as care and respect for persons, is the defining pedagogical stance of the course. In my opening lecture, I point to the deep tradition of hospitality as a basic human virtue and primordial value, stretching from the ancient pagan world and brought to fruition in the early and medieval Christian church.⁴ We refer to the *Rule of St. Benedict*, particularly the mandate that "all be received as Christ"⁵ and "honor everyone and never do to anyone what you would not want done to yourself."⁶ I tell them the story of St. Benedict receiving Attila the Hun and point to more modern examples of radical hospitality in Dorothy Day and St. Charles de Foucauld. Hospitality requires generosity and vulnerability toward persons and ideas that may be strange to us, but if we are pursuing and loving Truth who is One, then there is nothing to fear. We talk about the opportunity to exercise the four cardinal virtues that seem in such short supply these days: the courage to listen carefully so as to understand, tempering our speech with respect and restraint, practicing justice by avoiding ad hominem and straw man arguments and assessing arguments generously and prudently. These are the rules of engagement for the course and the fundamental stance that I expect all of us to hold toward the texts and toward each other, and I refer to and elaborate on them often throughout the course.⁷

Because the course is a combination of lecture and discussion, students have the opportunity each class to practice hospitality and the virtues it requires. I also require them to keep journals through the course in which they are asked to 1) briefly summarize the readings and 2) note two things that surprised, concerned, or confused them. At the beginning each class discussion, I ask someone to summarize and another to share their surprise, concern, or confusion. Initially, students are shy about this, but as they get to know each other through small-to-large group discussion (done weekly), they gain the confidence to respond openly. Throughout the course, there are moments when students struggle with hospitality; however, because we've had this discussion from the beginning, I am able to point to it and gently redirect toward more fruitful engagement.

A consequence of the expectation of hospitality and all that it demands from us is a “community of the classroom,” which grows in depth over the course of the semester. At the beginning of the course, only a handful of people might know each other from outside the course. Through pedagogical strategies such as weekly small-to-large group discussions and assessment strategies such as a group oral exam that requires personal and group preparation and follow a carefully designed rubric, students engage one another regularly. Community and growing friendship invite a level of hospitality that might be harder in more impersonal circumstances.

The Structure of the Course

The academic goals for the course are that students will 1) identify, evaluate, and engage the Catholic tradition with respect to questions of sex and gender; 2) identify, evaluate, and engage non-Catholic anthropological, philosophical, or theological approaches to questions of sex and gender; and 3) understand historical and cultural developments that influence approaches to questions of sex and gender. The title of the course reveals that the unifying principles of the class are provided by the Christian tradition.

In order that students might grasp the complexity of the questions with which we are dealing, I decided to approach the question of sex and/or gender from a set of liberal arts disciplines central to the question. Philosophy and theology provide the unifying principles to guide our study; biology anchors us in material reality; history, sociology, and psychology provide context; literature and art provide meditations on the suffering and redemption of the person. I also decided that professors of those disciplines would guest-lecture. This decision was made for several reasons. First, I am patently not prepared to answer precisely or in any great depth questions about biology or psychology, for example. Second, a liberal arts perspective that emphasizes the Unity of Truth leading to the Unity of Knowledge enables us to avoid the myopia of a particular discipline (or a particular professor, for that matter) on these important questions of the human person, for as Newman said, the various disciplines “complete, correct, balance each other.” Third,

it is important for students to see faculty from across the university thinking carefully and clearly about modern challenges. And finally, it is important for students to come to understand that the contentious issues on sex and gender are best approached wisely rather than rashly, holistically rather than merely politically. I want them to see that, governed by the Church’s two thousand-year tradition, we can know the truth of the person and compassionately and truthfully engage our friends in conversation about the great human questions of our day.

We begin our course together with two topics in the first week: the virtues governing our discussion and chapter 3 of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church*. I note to our students that charity toward one another in the search for truth will be our *modus operandi*. I remind them about the Unity of Truth and the Unity of Knowledge, and that the perspective of many disciplines can help us to know the human person more fully. I also tell them that truth is a most beautiful thing, and yet we can be tempted to wield it like a hammer, using it to bludgeon others into submission. In light of this observation we read and discuss in class Benedict XVI’s introduction to *Caritas in Veritate*, in which he observes that “the search for love and truth is purified and liberated by Jesus Christ from the impoverishment that our humanity brings to it, and he reveals to us in all its fullness the initiative of love and the plan for true life that God has prepared for us. In Christ, *charity in truth* becomes the Face of his Person, a vocation for us to love our brothers and sisters in the truth of his plan. Indeed, he himself is the Truth.”⁸ When approaching discussions of sex and gender, charity in truth is paramount for the Christian. Persons who struggle with body dysmorphia or gender dysphoria experience deep suffering, and this suffering ought to be met with the gentleness of the Good Samaritan and the clarity and compassion of Christ in John 5, who healed the paralytic Jew seeking a remedy at the healing pools of Bethesda. In this regard, the guidelines for pastoral care set forth by the USCCB and Courage International help me to frame for the class how we as Catholics and Christians ought to speak and talk about persons who struggle with issues related to sex and gender.⁹ Chapter 3 of the *Compendium* rounds out our first week together,

providing the foundational concepts assumed for the course: the person as created *imago Dei*, wounded by sin yet redeemed in Christ; the unity of person in body and soul; the person as open to transcendence, as unique and unrepeatable; the dignity and freedom of the person; and the person as made for relationship with God and others. With these guidelines and concepts, students are prepared to discuss the difficult questions of sex and gender with the aim to understand better the truth of the human person, to do so charitably, cheerfully, and with equanimity.

In the first module, students explore the question “what is a person?” from the perspectives of philosophy, biology, and theology. A colleague who is a metaphysician first gives lectures on the major philosophical perspectives on the human person, namely reductive materialism, mind-body dualism, and hylomorphism. It is most helpful to students to be able to name the first two perspectives, so dominant in the current cultural discourse, and to hear why hylomorphism is the most reasonable, satisfactory approach for understanding the nature of the human person. In week three, a biologist does a heroic job presenting a basic introduction to the process of sex differentiation at the cellular level and systems biology to non-biology majors. Students learn about the complex series of hormonal cascades that switch on or off various genes linked with sexual development in the growing fetus. In the ensuing discussion, the healthcare students in the class often raise connections with other classes, especially pharmacology and the implications of sexual difference in the metabolization of various drugs and other treatments. In week four, students explore the question of Christ’s humanity and its implications for our own humanity in an introductory lecture on Christology, as well as the question of sex and gender in light of Genesis 1 and 2 and in two lectures on John Paul II’s Theology of the Body. Throughout this module and the ensuing ones, it is my job as lead instructor to help students make the connections from one week to the next, to point out the differences of object and method of each discipline in their approach to the question, to keep track of the main principles and concepts pulled from each week’s lecture, readings, and discussion, and to help them begin to synthesize what they are learning into a whole.

The second module examines the human person as made for relationship. Week five begins with a discussion of the concept of complementarity as understood philosophically and theologically and using the writings of both John Paul II and Prudence Allen. Weeks six and seven allow for extended discussion of the concept of feminine genius and masculine genius as articulated in the writings of John Paul II. Students read much of *Mulieris Dignitatem*, *Letter to Women*, and *Redemptoris Custos*. Students are often surprised to find that a “genius” is not defined by a set of tasks or a style of dress, but instead describes a set of dispositions that are realized in specific persons, circumstances, and cultures. This is helpful for opening up the frame beyond the narrow constraints of the American cultural discourse and begins to hint at our own particular cultural assumptions about men and women that many of us unblinkingly accept.

The third module is dedicated to contextualizing our current cultural moment. Week eight begins with a series of lectures by a Catholic psychologist on the current American Psychological Association’s perspectives on sex and gender, as well as an understanding of dysphoria as a struggle for congruence and integrity within a person. Many students relate to this, recalling adolescent struggles for bodily and personal congruence or integrity and the desire to integrate perception with reality. Week nine offers the perspective of sociology, particularly the shifts in attitudes and expectations toward dating, marriage, and family, which is the dominant framework for male-female relationship. The week also presents to students the history of feminism and the shifting goals and expectations of the women’s movement over the last century. Here, students are shaken out of a certain presentism in which they assume that their expectations and ideals about male-female relationships have always held sway, across time and cultures. It also helps them understand the social and historical context for the current debates about sex, gender, and marriage.

The fourth module of the course opens up to discussion and readings on sex and gender and marriage and family from a variety of perspectives. Students read, discuss, and engage articles and excerpts from feminists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Gloria

Steinem, Claudia Card, bell hooks, Anne Fausto-Sterling, and Alison Jaggar, as well as articles by Sarah Ruddick, Jane Kelley Rodeheffer, Abigail Favale, and Michael Hannon. It is in this module that students begin to understand that they have grown in the intellectual and personal capacities over the first ten weeks, enabling them to thoughtfully and carefully engage the wildly varied modern and post-modern perspectives on sex and gender, men and women, marriage and family through the long experience of the Catholic intellectual tradition. Whereas some students entered the course ready to wage the political battles of left or right, they now see the complications of our present moment, the complexity of the human person and human experience, and the need for charity that seeks the truth and truth proclaimed in love. Instead of reacting with the fear or anger of the unprepared or unequipped, students now feel themselves to be sufficiently in possession of the language, principles, categories, and concepts to begin a conversation with others.

The course closes with Karol Wojtyła's play, *The Jeweler's Shop*, a theatrical meditation on men and women, masculine and feminine geniuses, the weight of history and the wounds of sin. Wojtyła first traces out the destiny of two couples, one pious and happy yet marked by the early death of the husband, the other bearing the unhappy habits and wounds of their own upbringing into their marriage. In the third act, the children of these two couples themselves meet and hope to marry, but will their destiny be happy or unhappy? Taught masterfully by a literature professor, this play ends the class on a note of hope, as it points toward the hope offered by cooperation with grace. The concluding class is a wide-ranging discussion in preparation for their oral final exam around five broad questions that asks students to synthesize what they have learned into a whole.

The responses to the course are generally positive. While there is the odd complaint about the difficulty of the readings, the student reviews of the class indicate that they appreciate the deliberate liberal arts approach. They see how philosophy, theology, and biology speak to one another, how literature and history help us understand our present moment, how psychology is responsive to

modern philosophic trends and history. They are exposed to disciplines and professors they might not otherwise engage outside of the core curriculum. The students in the professions come to a better understanding of the importance of the liberal arts to their professions, especially theology and philosophy, and all students should leave the course more thoughtful and careful in their estimations of others and their engagement with the issue. It also helps them to situate a contentious and difficult topic within the Catholic Intellectual Tradition.

The Catholic Studies Distinction

So, how is this a Catholic Studies class and not just another modern inter/multidisciplinary course at a modern university? It is true that this course includes the empirical and social sciences alongside the four traditional Catholic Studies disciplines of history, English, theology, and philosophy. However, what makes this liberal arts course a Catholic Studies class is the Newmanian concept of the Unity of Knowledge anchored in the Unity of Truth. With Newman as our orchestra conductor, faculty and students are able to situate the human person and the question of sex and gender within a coherent whole. Further, it is a genuine relief to students to know that we can come to know something true about the human person, men, women, sex, and gender, and that we can know it *together*. Because of the pedagogical strategies discussed above, class discussion does not unravel into "your truth, my truth," but rather pursues what we can know as true, as well as acknowledging the limits of what we can say about the mystery of the human person before God-who-is-Truth, the origin and end and in-between of every person. Another practice that makes this course a Catholic Studies class is the *relationality* of the course. Not only are students encouraged to see and think wisely by looking for the relations between the disciplines as they bear on the topic of sex and gender, as embodied by the variety of faculty who together present the whole, but students are also encouraged to think about how they relate to one another in the class and to those outside of the class. The kerygma of the Gospel is always part of the conversation, particularly as we get to

the end of the class, with history, sociology, and psychology to help students understand how we have arrived at this moment. How do I talk to others about this winningly and wisely? How do I talk to my friend, my sibling, my uncle, in a way that communicates *caritas in veritate*?

I am aware that it would be likely challenging for this particular course to be taught in this manner at many universities for a number of reasons. Nonetheless, I hope it provides a helpful exemplar by which we can think about the application and working out of Newman's concept of the Unity of Knowledge rooted in the Unity of Truth and the pursuit of wisdom. While it is a particularly useful path for addressing contentious contemporary issues from the heart of the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, the model presented here is helpful for designing any Catholic Studies class in order to pursue truth and wisdom together.

Notes

1. Reinhard Hütter, "University Education, the Unity of Knowledge—and (Natural) Theology: John Henry Newman's Provocative Vision," *Nova et Vetera* 11, no. 4 (2013): 1017–1025.
2. John Henry Newman, "Discourse 5," in *Idea of a University*, <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/idea/discourse5.html>.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Ann Brodeur, "The History of Hospitality: The Historical Development of the Care of Persons," in *Humanistic Perspectives in Hospitality and Tourism*, ed. Kemi Ogunyemi et al. (New York: Springer, 2022), 15–32.
5. *Rule of St. Benedict*, 54.
6. *Ibid.*, 4.
7. In addition to St. Thomas Aquinas, Dorothy Day, St. Benedict and others, my thinking about hospitality has been enriched in part through critical engagement with phenomenologists such as Emmanuel Levinas, Anne Duformantelle, and Julia Kristeva. Thanks to Dr. Hannah Venable for directing me to them.
8. Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), introduction. This is paired with Pope Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), 19–20.
9. *The Handbook for Courage and Encourage Chaplains, Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Trumbull, CT: Courage Int'l, 2020), available at <https://couragerc.org/2020-handbook/>.