Opinion
Guest Voices



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As the American Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once quipped, "nothing is more absurd than the answer to a question that is not asked."

It has become common practice for Catholic secondary school religion curricula in the United States to begin with the life of Christ before exploring the universal human needs and questions that he claims to be the answer to. Is it any wonder that so many young people leave the faith behind once their natural inquisitiveness starts to rear its head?

For this reason, and others such as mass secularization and the influx of non-Catholic students attending Catholic high schools, Catholic educators need to teach young people to ask philosophical questions before urging them to accept our faith as the answer.

Demographics are changing from the old days when most students hailed from the parish with which the school was affiliated, and using models based on the Baltimore Catechism, or teaching from textbooks that assume that the students reading it are Catholic and have already been evangelized, is no longer adequate. Many Catholic high schools are drawing in students who are not from Catholic families — some belonging to other faith traditions, and a significant number without any religious background whatsoever.

The rise of both secularization and religious diversity calls Catholic educators to take a step back and reconsider the most appropriate way to help students enter into the foundational teachings of Catholicism.

In my own experience, I've noticed how much high school students are more immediately receptive in my philosophy classes than they are in my religion classes, where they tend to come in with a kind of protective shield. Students light up upon finding out that a philosopher from as far back as 2,500 years ago asked the same questions that they find themselves asking today.

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It's often the case that students who take my philosophy elective before taking my required religion classes are much more interested in learning about theology than the others. In philosophy, the soil of reason is tilled to receive the seeds of faith

more openly.

I've also observed that students who come from devout families that discourage asking questions about their religion are often disposed to abandoning their faith altogether. One very intelligent and inquisitive student, who was raised with strict Catholic parents who recently immigrated to New Jersey from Latin America, was discouraged from asking questions, in part to protect her from losing her cultural traditions and moral values. Little did they realize that stifling her questions would have the reverse effect, discouraging her from delving deeper into her faith and cultural heritage.

But after studying philosophy, this student — and many others like her — found she was able to formulate coherent and decisive questions that enabled her to enter more deeply into the reasoning behind certain beliefs and practices. More importantly, philosophy fosters in students a sharper awareness of the intrinsic needs and questions in their own hearts that most religions claim to respond to.

Philosophy has also helped my Muslim and Hindu students explore their own traditions, while also enabling them to better appreciate what they learn in Catholic theology classes.

Further, I've seen students who didn't grow up with any religious background start becoming curious about God after studying questions about metaphysics, ultimate truth and life's meaning.

From a classical point of view, philosophy explores "natural" human questions, while theology explores the "supernatural" response to those questions revealed to us through Christ and the sacramental life of the church. As Aquinas understood well, God's grace builds on human nature, and our development of supernatural virtues like faith, hope and charity depend on the natural virtues of prudence, temperance, justice and fortitude.

The Scholastic method of theology that Aquinas developed engaged directly with "virtuous pagan" philosophers like Aristotle and Plato, whose vigorous use of reason enabled them to intuit greater truths that would soon be revealed by God. One may here think of Plato's "prophecy" of the truly just man, "God's equal," who would inevitably be "scourged and crucified," or of Paul's sermon in the Areopagus in front of the altar to the unknown god.

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As distinct from more pessimistic modes of Protestant theology, Catholic theology acknowledges that the gift of reason was not totally destroyed by the Fall, and thus is not exclusive to those who have encountered Christ. Engaging philosophically with those who may not come to the same conclusion that Jesus is the son of God — but who share the same questions about truth, ethics and meaning — enables us to broaden our own sense of reason and to further develop our conscience. Thus the reason seminarians study at least two years of philosophy before moving on to study theology.

Jesus himself prioritized engaging the reason of those he encountered and fostering questions in them before revealing who he was. Think of when he asked John and Andrew what they were looking for, rather than starting off by telling them that he is the one they should be looking for, and why he asked Peter who he says that Jesus is, before revealing who he is.

The church, says Pope Francis, "is called to form consciences, not to replace them."

The Pharisees, who may have had all the "right" answers, were the object of Jesus' condemnation due to their refusal to make use of their consciences. Their understanding of laws and doctrines were totally disconnected from the questions, needs and desires at the depths of their hearts, thus rendering their answers — as correct as they may have been — flat and meaningless.

Studying philosophy can also serve to deepen student's general curiosity and desire to learn for learning's sake, making their experiences in other classes more engaging and meaningful. And the tools it affords students in terms of using logic and critical reasoning are essential in our politically divided culture where arguments are more often than not fueled by emotions and "groupthink."

Leaders in the church talk about how to keep young people in the fold amid growing waves of secularism. Unfortunately, most of this talk turns quickly into evangelizational models that look more like marketing schemes that aim to obtain a desired "result," rather than doing the actual work of forming young people's

consciences and walking with them as companions on the journey of faith. Teaching young people to think philosophically is more conducive to the latter approach to evangelization.

Other methods, like the ones used within many classical Catholic high schools, are also worth considering. Take the Chesterton Schools Network, which, starting from students' freshman year, integrates study of philosophy alongside theology, "braided together" with other humanities courses in an "integrated curriculum."

It shouldn't be of any shock to educators and clerics that teaching young people *what* to believe rather than teaching them *how* to think about life and to arrive at the conclusions themselves usually has the reverse of the intended effect. While it may require us to deviate from methods we've grown accustomed to, it's time to, as Francis says, "open wide the doors" to the ways philosophy can help young people understand their faith more deeply.