

Intro

I'd like to begin by thanking you for having me at this wonderful Seminar Series. I am humbled and honored to be here. I want to express my gratitude to Jeff Liautaud for inviting me to speak and my appreciation to all of you for attending.

Part I

I had considered being a teacher for quite a number of years. The idea of imparting one's knowledge to a gaggle of hungry young students had quite the lure for me. In fact, prior to a midlife career change that had me moving out of the corporate world into pursuing theology degrees, I had opportunities to instruct when rolling out new software and later as part of a corporate training department. These experiences did not always live up to the idealized version of teaching that I had in mind. Rather, I found that it was not uncommon as the instructor to deal with a "tough crowd" – folks that didn't want to be in class, are distracted, disinterested, or even antagonistic. Now certainly not all participants were this way, and there was much satisfaction in seeing the "light bulb" turn on for certain attendees, but often the day ended with more of a feeling of exhaustion than gratification.

In moving on to teach theology as an adjunct while pursuing a PhD (an endeavor I am still pursuing), I finally had the opportunity to be in front of a group to which I could impart my knowledge and love of the Faith. I am deeply indebted to a couple of fine department chairs for giving me the opportunity to do so. But even here I found that there was not always the level of interest and engagement that I thought I might expect from such a group. Undoubtedly some of this had to do with my own growing and learning in my role as professor (more about this in just a bit) and some of it had to do with the nature of the courses (they were required for non-theology or religious studies majors). So, even in my area of expertise and "first love" I did not

always experience an explicit sense of gratification in my role as teacher, although I was always grateful for the opportunity to teach students, to learn much in preparation and interaction, and to enjoy the experience of the classroom from the other side of the desk.

All this being said, when unsolicited moments arose in which I felt I was making a real difference in a deep and abiding way in a student's life, a new appreciation for my role and a personal revitalization would occur.

Maybe the most notable instance of such an event occurred with a very engaged student in the latest class I taught on the Theology of the Human Person from a Christian perspective. A working professional who was closer in age to me than most of the students, she told me that her experience as the course progressed "was one of a revelation and a deeper understanding of things [she] already knew intellectually." She went on to say that she had "developed a relationship with God over the years through the sacraments, reading, retreats, etc.," but that "in the recent past, however, [she] was struggling with [her] spirituality. It was through [my] class that [she] was brought to a higher level of understanding of what it means to be a Christian." She went on to tell me that "it is difficult to explain a spiritual experience other than to say it is like the proverbial light bulb lighting up." She spoke of a deeper realization of the story of creation, the importance of not only the soul but also of the significance of the body, an understanding of the power of the devil in his angelic nature, and a deeper appreciation of grace.

But, most significant to her "was the realization that our attraction to each other lies within the mystery of creation. This was particularly pertinent to [her] relationship with [her] husband of [many] years. [...] Through this class [she] learned that [their already strong relationship] was now beginning to transcend into a deeper love and understanding as to who [they were] as a couple within [that] mystery. [She came to realize that their] attraction to each

other comes from God: it is a gift and it is unique.” She was astounded to come to the realization “that the attraction [she] had towards [her] husband [lay] within the mystery of God’s intelligent design. [She] was then able to apply the same appreciation for all relationships [with which] God ha[d] blessed [her]. Understanding the mystery of creation [...] helped [her] to look at everything with a deeper respect and appreciation and awe.”

What a profound impact this course had on her! It was gratifying to me that the time and thought I put into the lectures, readings, assignments, and discussions could evoke such a strong reflection and deep understanding. And that it could make a difference personally and be applied to one’s life in a practical and meaningful way.

I started this little talk bemoaning the fact that the impact of one’s teaching efforts is not always immediately apparent. In this case, the student provided affirmation several times during the course, but only when it was completed did I realize the full significance of the class on her. As a teacher of theology, I take comfort in knowing that by presenting the truth faithfully, I am planting a seed for the Spirit to water. I may never realize the impact of it on individual students in this life, but in striving to follow the Lord ever more perfectly in the important task of teaching, I hope that I am helping to do His work.

Now, going about this important task requires constant learning in one’s field and ongoing consideration and refinement of teaching methodology. Allow me to provide a few key points I’ve found most important based on my own experience and reflection.

Part II

I've had over twenty years of formal schooling, not counting various seminars and certifications I've attended over the years. When I made my career switch to theology, knowing that my plan was to someday teach, I made a point from the very beginning of my studies to note, ongoing, what worked pedagogically (a fancy word for the art of teaching) and what didn't work pedagogically for me in the classroom as a student. Now these ended up being quite lengthy lists, so I won't be able to share everything in the short time we have, but I would like to mention a few key points that I found most important in practice. I don't know if there are any classroom instructors here, but, regardless, I believe what I speak about here will be useful to you in many of your day to day interactions, whether at home, in the workplace, or out and about. At least I hope so.

First: "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you realize that we will be judged more strictly, for we all fall short in many respects." (Jas 3:1-2)

This quote from the letter of St. James is not meant to frighten any teachers or prospective teachers. But it is an important caution. One of my favorite Bible commentaries says, in part, about this passage: "The prospect of a stricter judgment should restrain [teachers] from uttering careless words and teaching what they themselves do not understand." (Hahn and Mitch, *ICSB: The Letter of James*, 18) The importance of proper preparation and careful expression of ideas is stressed here. Humility is key. Note that the passage says "we all fall short" – there is no perfect instructor. Realizing this should make us strive even harder to recognize that by our humility we come to acknowledge that the source of all truth is God and we endeavor to convey this truth – and only the truth -- in a way that is the most impactful.

Constantly striving to know Him through Divine Revelation and His Church is imperative not only in formal teaching but in all of our personal interactions.

The second flows from the first: prayer. For the teacher of religion, the “kneeling theology” of Hans Urs von Balthasar is the proper attitude and approach when imparting knowledge to others. During my last semester, if at all possible, I spent a short time before class in front of the Blessed Sacrament asking our Lord to bless my students and my efforts. By being open to the inspiration of the Spirit and placing oneself and one’s class in His hands, the chance for real success is far greater. Jesus is called a “man of prayer” because He prayed often -- and He did so most intensely before the greatest challenges of His earthly life. We are called to imitate Him.

The third point has to do with the value added by the teacher. Certainly a lecture portion is important as it utilizes the instructor’s educational background, research ability, and teaching skills to synthesize and distill material in a way that is, hopefully, interesting, understandable, and relevant. But it must go beyond that. Is critical thinking encouraged, and the means to do so well, taught? Are students provided with pointers on how to best study, learn, and research the material covered in the specific course? Does feedback provided on responses, assignments, essays, and papers congratulate students when their work is done well and when their insights are penetrating, while providing corrections to errors or probing questions when a thought is fuzzy, incomplete, or problematic? Are questions asked during class responded to clearly and completely, even if it requires further research and follow-up? These are important queries when attempting to gauge one’s effectiveness as teacher.

Fourthly, a focus on the students is indispensable. From the very start, being clear about expectations is vital. Of course, requirements regarding assignments, attendance, papers, and the

like are important. But, as the teacher, making oneself available is absolutely imperative. While this of course means keeping office hours and making oneself accessible via electronic communications, most importantly the teacher must be truly present in the classroom. Get there first and greet students by name – maybe even engage in some light banter. Be the last one to leave – some students are shy about asking questions in class or maybe this is the only time they can catch the teacher in person. Class participation must always be encouraged. This is often helped by the instructor's own openness, enthusiasm, and willingness to share, especially in matters of a personal nature that show how what is being learned has made an impact on his own life and outlook. This also helps to keep the class lively, the students engaged, and provides a very powerful opportunity to explore the impact of the subject matter on one's life (remember the first part of this talk!) and apply it in a practical way. Interaction between student and teacher, as well as among students, is greatly fostered by a mutual respect. The tone is set by the instructor. In all interaction, whether one on one, in small groups, or during class time, whether in person or electronically, each person taking the course must be treated with the respect that comes from their dignity as beings made in the image and likeness of God.

In conclusion, it is important to say that in my relatively brief career so far I have followed these directives with varying degrees of success as I gain experience and continue to work to develop a style that works best in the classroom. But by continuing to keep these crucial points in mind, I hope to keep my focus on providing the best learning experience for my students that I possibly can.

Thank you again for having me. I have appreciated your attention.

I will be happy to take any questions.