"I do theology, not catechesis."

I have heard this phrase and many variations on it for the entirety of my teaching career, which now spans 27 years in three different Catholic colleges. I have to confess that I do not know what it means. I actually think it means different things to different people. I have spent a long time in academic administration, one way or another, and therefore, spent a lot of time evaluating people’s teaching. One shocking discovery I made is that some instructors who make this claim, are, from my point of view, among the most catechetical of teachers of theology. Others are hardly hostile to theology as an ecclesial enterprise of some sort. So, it’s my fault that I do not know what people mean when they say, “I do theology, not catechesis,” because I have never asked them what they meant. I have never asked, because it seems to mean different things to different people, and therefore, in some ways, to examine it closely may be to engage the proverbial red herring.

I believe the phrase most often arises from a defensive reflex. If you are a theologian at an institution which has any ambition to be recognized as academically excellent in the American academy at large, I guarantee you will know what I am talking about. This ambition creates a pressure that afflicts theologians in particular. I am not pointing fingers as to the origin of this pressure (though, to be fair, a lot of it comes from Catholic parents who want their kids to get some kind of Catholic education which at the same time is recognized as prestigious in the eyes of the very non-Catholic world of business, politics, the professions, and academia itself). In this context, “theology” is increasingly a discipline that seems to academic administration, most members of which no longer have any theological formation, and to colleagues in other departments, to be a parochial discipline, no matter how high the level of academic excellence it achieves. In that context, to say, “I do theology, not catechesis,” is a defensive way of saying, “I belong here, at the university. Theology is an academic discipline.”

The conversation usually stops there, because to complete it would require that the other person actually take a theology course. However, most people who use this phrase, if pressed to speak further, would not understand themselves to be saying that theology is an academic discipline just like all other academic disciplines, but that it is special, because, following Thomas Aquinas’ famous distinction in the first article of the Summa Theologica, it considers God and everything else that exists in the light of revelation. As such it is sacra doctrina, a “sacred” kind of learning that seeks to understand the meaning of all human experience in the light of revelation,
and seeks to understand revelation ever deeper from the perspective of questions asked from human experience. At the university, this experience is not simply the personal experience of students, but it is represented specifically by the other disciplines, whose insights, following methodologies peculiar to themselves, may pose “questions” for revelation, and therefore, for theology.

Most people who say, “I do theology, not catechesis,” intend all of this. It’s just a shorthand way of saying, “I belong here,” with the implied, “Take a theology course – you will discover that my discipline is not “special” because it is not academically rigorous, but because it proceeds from a starting point that reason cannot arrive at on its own.” And – it is also implied – “If you were to think more carefully about it, our university offers American higher education a paradigm for inquiry that includes faith in God’s self-revelation as a legitimate and indeed crucial starting point for an academic conversation that includes all of the disciplines, and on their own disciplinary terms, and yet transcends them by providing a wider conversation than each of them could have on their own, or than each of them could have simply side-by-side, an “interdisciplinary” conversation that implies, but actually has, no meta-level.” A mouthful to be sure, but that is why we often resort to shorthand. For purposes of brevity here I am skipping over the meta-level provided by philosophy, but my point is unaffected by it.

The person who defensively says, “I do theology, not catechesis,” is saying, if he or she is saying it without reducing theology simply to the interdisciplinary study of religion, that my discipline, Theology, is just as academic as any other. In fact it offers an invitation to a paradigm for inquiry, “faith seeking understanding,” which provides for a richer, wider and more interesting conversation than what is available either at secular universities, from which faith has been exiled as a structural element, or at Bible colleges that regard faith itself as sufficient “understanding” without the further serious inquiry that comes from the sometimes awkward questions posed by the results of all of the other discipline, not to mention its own results.

Even the most rigorous academic departments face unsympathetic scrutiny from academic administration, however unstated it may go, because, no matter how academically excellent one’s reputation, no matter how high in the rankings one climbs, theology is not a discipline recognized by the secular academy and therefore brings no prestige overall. It seems like prestige in something like spitting contests or baton twirling, real skills but one would especially not want ranked excellence in these skills to be known too widely if you want to be recognized as a bona fide American institution of higher education. I am exaggerating, but nevertheless on point.

To put it less provocatively, theology is perceived as “mission related” as oppose to “academic.” What is the use, then, from this point of view, of having a theology department and teaching theology to undergraduates as a required subject? As administrators lose sight of the nature of theology as a discipline and its place in the
curriculum and conversation, they may begin to think that the function of theology courses may in fact be what they would think is “catechetical.” At least, this is what many theologians fear. I placed the word “catechetical” in quote marks because administrators who think in the way I have indicated do not usually understand what the word means. It is simply a cipher for something like, “handing on basic Catholic teachings in a way that is (and must be) intrinsically less academic than the other disciplines, but which is accepted to provide the Catholic part of the education.” The response to this move, one to which I am sympathetic understood as such, is, “We do theology, not catechesis.”

I have heard this stated by people who nevertheless insist that in theology, we are indeed “handing something on,” not engaging in an inquiry disconnected from the living tradition we are handing on. I would like to offer a gentle admonition, however, that the more we repeat this rather defensive phrase, with perfect justification, for all the reasons I have already mentioned, in the contexts I have mentioned, the more we theologians can begin to forget that it is only a shorthand which takes its meaning from this context, rather than having any real intrinsic or precise meaning of its own. In other words, we can, without really thinking about it, accept the caricature of “catechesis” implied in the contrast between something which is “not an academic discipline” and something which is, forgetting that, even though this is true, still, catechesis is not characterized primarily by a negative, the negative, “not an academic discipline.”

But since catechesis (as opposed to the study of catechetical theory) is not an academic discipline, it is tempting to keep using it to express what theology is not, especially since many of we theologians do not know the Church’s literature on catechesis, nor the academic literature in which theories of catechesis are discussed. Many of us do not realize that the post-Conciliar renewal of catechesis and the post-Conciliar renewal of theology went hand in hand, and only a careful study of the period could say with any authority which renewal came first and how they were related. It is not unthinkable to claim that a renewal in catechesis contributed to a renewal in theology. One could begin to study this connection by reading back issues of the journal Concilium where some of the acts of the catechetical “study weeks” that were held both in North and South America in the 15 years following the Council, were published. By the time we reach Pope Paul VI’s Evangelium Nuntiandi, John Paul II’s Catechesi Tradendae, the 1997 General Directory for Catechesis, and the Catechism of the Catholic Church, we find the richness of the post-Conciliar renewal of catechesis, expressed in the 1971 General Catechetical Directory, carried forward, developed and articulated anew, even if with some modulation of emphasis.

For example, in CT John Paul II refers to the “broad meaning of catechesis” as he understands this, one which “in no way contradicts but rather includes and goes beyond a narrow meaning which was once commonly given to catechesis in didactic expositions, namely the simple teaching of the formulas that express faith.” He notes that through such catechesis, “the Gospel kerygma ... is gradually deepened,
developed in its implicit consequences, explained in language that includes an appeal to reason, and channeled towards Christian practice in the Church and the world” (CT 25). In many ways, all of this could be equally well said of theology. Again, “catechesis will always draw its content from the living source of the word of God transmitted in Tradition and the Scriptures ...” (CT 27). So will theology.

Further, with regard to the ecumenism,

Catechesis will have an ecumenical dimension if, while not ceasing to teach that the fullness of the revealed truths and of the means of salvation instituted by Christ is found in the Catholic Church, it does so with sincere respect, in words and in deeds, for the ecclesial communities that are not in perfect communion with this Church. In this context, it is extremely important to give a correct and fair presentation of the other Churches and ecclesial communities that the Spirit of Christ does not refrain from using as means of salvation ... Catechesis will have an ecumenical dimension if, in addition, it creates and fosters a true desire for unity (CT 31).

Surely this is equally true of the teaching of theology in college classrooms. Chapters 29-30 of CT give a catalogue of the “essentials” which catechesis should cover, including what can be known about God naturally; the Incarnation and the Paschal mystery and the sacraments of Christ’s continuing presence; the Mediator, divine and human; the mystery of the Church; demands of the Gospel, virtues, integral liberation, the fight for justice and the building of peace, as well as the drama of sin and redemption. All of these topics are treated in courses that fulfill theology requirements at Notre Dame and, I am sure, at many other Catholic schools.

Of course, there is the most famous passage in CT. Reading it, one could, for these sentences, replace the word “catechesis” with “theology” and the passage would remain equally true as is, even if not an exhaustive description of either catechesis or of theology:

In the first place, it is intended to stress that at the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, the only Son from the Father ... full of grace and truth, who suffered and died for us and who now, after rising, is living with us forever. ... The primary and essential object of catechesis is, to use an expression dear to Saint Paul and also to contemporary theology, the mystery of Christ. Catechizing is in a way to lead a person to study this Mystery in all its dimensions: To make all men see what is the plan of the mystery ... comprehended with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth ... know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge ... (and be filled) with all the fullness of God (Eph. 3.9, 18-19). It is therefore to reveal in the Person of Christ the whole of God’s eternal design reaching fulfillment in that Person (CT 5).
I can’t imagine any Christian theologian disavowing this statement as crucially pertinent to theology. This is why I say the shorthand contrast between theology and catechesis is not very helpful, the more you examine it.

Perhaps the next sentence in the text, however, will give some pause: “Accordingly, the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ” (CT 5). In other words, catechesis presupposes faith in Jesus Christ, and intends to deepen it, to the point of “intimacy.” Later, the text makes this explicit: “The specific aim of catechesis is to develop, with God’s help, an as yet initial faith, and to advance in fullness and to nourish day by day the Christian life of the faithful, young and old” (CT 20). Catechesis develops understanding of the mystery of Christ in the light of God’s word, “so that the whole of a person’s humanity is impregnated by that word” (CT 20).

Does the teaching of theology in classrooms share this aim? I think it can, but whether I think it can or not, in fact, it does. One could easily find examples of this from serious, academically grounded theological texts intended for classroom use, but here is one, taken from the recent book, Treasure in the Field, by one of my colleagues, Robert Krieg. In his preface, he describes the “aim” of his book using as an analogy an account of a trip he took to the Grand Canyon. The park ranger on duty made a distinction between knowing about the Grand Canyon, and “knowing” it in a more direct, and, I would use the word, intimate and experiential, way. He goes on to comment:

Treasure in the Field has a similar aim. It is meant to heighten our awareness of God’s love in our lives as well as to teach us about the biblical witness to God’s salvation. It invites us to experience anew Jesus’ parable about the person who finds “treasure hidden in a field” (Mt. 13.44). To what extent do we regard ourselves to be God’s “treasure?” … While this book conveys information and ideas about the Bible, it also is written to promote fresh discoveries of God and of our true selves” (Robert Krieg, Treasure in the Field [Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2013, p. vii).

The book ends with a quote from Romano Guardini on the sign of the cross, followed by a doxology of gratitude for the Trinitarian gift of salvation in Christ, “In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (159). Our undergraduates have several times successfully nominated Bob Krieg for teaching awards, so that this approach is not only possible, it has succeeded in capturing the imaginations of undergraduate students for decades!

Is the text, then, theological or catechetical? I hope you can see at this point that the question does in a way present a red herring. It can be answered in a number of different ways, including either “theological,” “catechetical,” or “both,” depending, I think, on what the responder wanted to emphasize in the context he or she were speaking.
Have we come to an impasse? Have we really discovered a red herring in the shorthand expression? Or, can we find a more precise way of speaking about this issue?

We can take a step forward by noting that CT itself distinguishes catechesis from theology in at least three places, so, even according to John Paul II, they are not the same. For example, though they share a lot of ground and cover many of the same topics, though they both appeal to reason and seek to “develop understanding of the mystery of Christ in the light of God’s word” (CT 20), catechesis “must deal with the essentials, without any claim to tackle all disputed questions or to transform itself into theological research or scientific exegesis” (CT 21), a passage echoed in the General Directory (#68), with the addition that theological instruction may in fact enhance catechesis (#71). It would seem from this hint that catechesis, though it may use theology, is distinct from theology and so only accidentally, and not intrinsically, theological, where it coincides with theology. But what about theology itself?

If we now turn to the General Directory for Catechesis to study it a little more closely, I think we can make a little more progress. CT, following and developing Paul VI’s Evangelium Nuntiandi, situates catechesis within the broader framework of evangelization, as one “moment” within evangelization. The GDC develops this point, following up hints from both apostolic exhortations (EN and CT) very methodically by going all the way back to the conciliar constitution, Dei Verbum, beginning with its description of revelation: “It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself and to make known the mystery of his will [to human beings] in order to invite and receive them into communion with himself” (DV 2, GDC 36).

Further, according to Dei Verbum in a passage cited in full by the GDC, Jesus Christ “completed and perfected revelation. He did this by way of his presence and self-manifestation – by words and works, signs and miracles, but above all by his death and glorious resurrection from the dead, and finally by sending the Spirit of truth” (DV 5 cited at GDC 40). Also according to Dei Verbum and the CCC following it, the invitation that is revelation is an invitation specifically to faith, and faith is the adequate and appropriate response to revelation. But since the Church “transmits revelation through evangelization” (GDC 45), for all practical purposes, the invitation that revelation extends to faith in Jesus Christ, is extended by means of evangelization (see GDC 46, n. 28). As we know from Evangelium Nuntiandi, evangelization takes many forms, recounted in the GDC: “proclamation, witness, teaching, sacraments, love of neighbor” is one list given (GDC 46). Thus, “those who evangelize have a ‘global vision’ of evangelization and identify with the overall mission of the Church” (GDC 46, with reference to EN 24d).

The GDC develops these insights by referring to the ministry of the word as a “fundamental element of evangelization,” and it identifies five “functions” of the ministry of the word: the primary, initial proclamation; initiation; continuous education in the faith; the liturgical function, including, especially, preaching; and
the theological function (GDC 51). The text also distinguishes four “forms” of the ministry of the word: missionary preaching; pre-and post-baptismal catechesis; liturgical forms, including liturgical homilies; and the theological forms” (GDC 52). The latter “seeks to develop understanding of the faith and is to be situated in the dynamic of ‘fides quaerens intellectum.’ “Theology,” it continues, “in order to fulfill this function, needs to confront philosophical forms of thought, various forms of humanism and the human sciences, and dialogue with them. It is articulated whenever ‘the systematic treatment and the scientific investigation of the truths of the Faith’ are promoted” (GDC 51, citing the earlier, 1971, General Catechetical Directory 17).

Significantly, the text goes on to note that “for pastoral reasons … important forms of the ministry of the word must assume more than one function, [my emphasis]” and it gives the example of a homily which may serve in one context --“depending on circumstances” -- as initial proclamation and in another as initiation, or, catechesis, whose initiatory form may also have to take on the function of initial proclamation.

I believe that it is in this way, that is, in the spirit of one “form” of the ministry of the word serving a function that is not its intrinsic function, but a kind of “circumstantial” extension, that later on the GDC notes that catechesis can include a “systematic deepening of the Christian message by means of theological instruction, so as to truly educate in the faith, encourage growth in understanding of it and to equip the Christian for giving the reason for his or her hope in the present world” (GDC 71, already briefly mentioned above, here with reference to CT 61 and the CDF’s Instruction, “Donum Veritatis” 6b). In other words, we could say that theology is intrinsically evangelizing and accidentally catechetical, that is, it can function catechetically in certain circumstances. Or, both catechesis and theology are intrinsically evangelizing, but they are distinct “forms” of evangelization, not reducible one to the other. So, if one means to emphasize the distinctness of the form, one can legitimately say, “I do theology, not catechesis.” However, if one means by that, “I do theology, but do not engage in evangelization,” or even, “I do theology, but separate myself from the Church’s mission of evangelization,” then one is uttering a contradiction in terms, and basically saying, “I don’t do theology, but something else … intellectual history, religious studies, philology, cultural history … etc.”

If this is hard to understand, we might take a brief excursus into the thought of a major twentieth century Catholic theologian to find a kind of analogy. For example, I believe it is fair to say that for Walter Kasper, theology is intrinsically ordered towards preaching, even though at the same time, it is not itself preaching. With regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, Kasper wants to make the point, in The God of Jesus Christ, that the God who is Trinity is the “Christian answer to the situation created by modern atheism.” He goes on to comment that,

As a result, the proclamation of the triune God is of the greatest pastoral importance in the present-day situation. It is obvious that the complicated
exegetical, historical and speculative questions with which the theology of the Trinity must grapple are not the direct object of the proclamation of the trinitarian mystery of God. The discussion of such questions is necessary in order to defend the confession against challenges, to make it at least possible to discuss the doctrine with its ‘cultured despisers,’ and, more important still, to open up the doctrine to those who venerate it in faith. Such discussions are therefore of fundamental importance for the proclamation of the doctrine, even if only indirectly (The God of Jesus Christ, New Edition [London and New York: T&T Clark, 2012], p. 315).

And, though the relation is indirect, it is nevertheless so fundamental that one criterion of good theology is whether it is “kerygmatically meaningful” (p. 287), that is, whether or not it is oriented towards, understanding, and not replacement of, biblical image, story and prayer, and thus oriented towards preaching or proclamation. In this vein, Kasper criticizes both Barth and Rahner for attempting to replace the word “person” in Trinitarian doctrine with another phrase, in the case of Rahner, “three distinct manners of subsisting.” Kasper’s comment:

Independently of its philosophical use and its ‘technical’ definition the term ‘person’ immediately conveys some sort of meaning to every human being, whereas ‘distinct manner of subsistence’ is an exclusively metalinguistic concept which as such is antecedently unsuited for use in preaching. Furthermore, it is not enough that the trinitarian confession should be marked by logical clarity; this confession is also to be fit for doxological use. But no one can invoke, adore and glorify a distinct manner of subsisting (p. 288).

Finally, and perhaps closest to our specific topic, although theology, here again as faith seeking understanding in the systematic explication of the doctrine of the Trinity, is not itself initiation, nevertheless it is ordered towards deepening initiation:

What is meant [by intellectus fidei] is not a rationalistic understanding, an understanding according to the criterion and in the framework of the human reason, which would then, by comparison with faith, be the greater and more comprehensive power that could serve as measure and standard. The ‘understanding of faith’ is rather a conceptualizing on the basis of faith and an understanding in faith; it is an understanding that does not lead away from faith to a supposedly higher knowledge. The aim is a deeper initiation into the faith itself, a faith-filled understanding of the mystery as mystery, and specifically as the mystery of an unfathomable and for that very reason convincing love (p. 310).

In these examples, theology remains itself as “faith seeking understanding” through the use of systematic conceptual distinctions, philosophical clarifications and historical research. And, it is no longer itself if it works regardless of its ordering
towards proclamation, preaching, prayer, and initiation. If theology leaves behind these intrinsic orientations, it is no longer theology. On the other hand, one can see from Kasper’s text that theology remains distinct from that towards which it is ordered, however intrinsically. If it did not preserve its character as theology, it would not be of any special assistance in preaching, proclamation, etc. As Kasper famously and somewhat provocatively, put it, “It is possible for theology to develop the anthropological relevance of what it says only if it remains theology and does not turn into anthropology” (p. 316), that is, something which leaves behind its essential character as exposition of revelation.

Teaching theology then, will involve introducing students to a discipline that treats something – revelation -- which is itself intrinsically ordered towards sharing, towards preaching, and towards faith, an “invitation,” in the words of Dei Verbum, and this invitation is not exposited or explained or interpreted unless it is exposited, explained or interpreted as such. This is why theology is itself a “form” of evangelization, to use the words of the GDC, or, to use the vocabulary of Walter Kasper, this is why it is fundamentally oriented towards kerygmatic proclamation. Theology will not perform this work at a university, where the conversation is always elevated, and characterized by the sophistication of making fine distinctions, of using and interpreting terminology that reflects those distinctions, of differentiating among the different ways that various disciplines at the university ask questions and seek answers, etc., if it forsakes the academic idiom. But it ceases to be, and thus to teach, theology, if it does not use this sophistication to allow the invitation that is God’s Word to speak as such, to allow its intrinsic persuasiveness to be heard ever more compellingly, and to allow its unimaginable, unreasonable, and even shocking beauty to be ever more fully offered in speech that is yet recognized as reasoning even at a University. In fact, that is the supremely evangelizing moment at a University, when students can see that faith can hold its own and more even in the most exacting discussion at the highest level of learning.

But if it really is theology, and not “anthropology” as Kasper puts it, or history or cultural studies, it is a distinctive form of the ministry of the word within evangelization, as the GDC puts it. In a college classroom, it will only be evangelizing if it retains its own distinct form.

This means, that in a class composed of the mixture of students with which we are all familiar, from zealous Catholics actively seeking to understand their faith more deeply, to agnostics, to atheists from other countries, to believers in other religions, Protestants of various kinds, lukewarm or lapsed or hostile Catholics – yes, that impossible mix we find in a required theology course – the instructor, to succeed in presenting this particular form of evangelization, must have the explicit intention of “seeking understanding” of the mystery of revelation in a way that makes this understanding available to all of these different kinds of students. The instructor cannot have the formal intention of converting those who are believers in other religions, and cannot be said to be catechizing them. The instructor cannot have the
formal intention of preaching or proclaiming the word. Those are different forms of
the ministry of the word.

However, since theology is a ministry of the word in evangelization and these
ministries are related according to circumstance, for students in the class who are
baptized believers and seeking to understand more, the class will accidentally, but
truly, have a catechetical character. For students who are lapsed or hostile Catholics,
the class will have the character, one could say, of the new evangelization, which is
specifically addressed to such persons. For students who are atheists or otherwise
unchurched, but who have taken the class as a way of thinking, or half-thinking,
about conversion, the class will have the character of the initial, missionary
proclamation of the faith. For those to whom such proclamation would be
unwelcome, including many believers of other religions, the class has the character
of informing them of what Christians believe in a way that is sympathetic and from
the inside. If the class is done well, without the formal intention of converting
anyone, the intrinsic invitation to faith that is Christian revelation will be present, at
least, as a kind temptation to faith. Anyone who participates in interreligious
dialogue will recognize the temptation of which I am speaking. But for every single
student the course will be an exposure to a mode of inquiry which is unique, “faith
seeking understanding,” which is intrinsically evangelizing without being
proselytizing.

So, where are we now with saying, “I do theology, not catechesis?” We have seen
that there is a correct way of understanding this way of speaking, and, perhaps as a
shorthand to administration which would like to reduce theology to a caricatured
form of catechesis, or to colleagues who instinctively do the same, it is an OK
shorthand answer. But, at the same time, we have to be careful, if we say this, to say
it precisely and not to internalize the caricatures to which we are often responding.
For, although it can be formally true, if one is truly teaching theology, it is often if
not always materially untrue. If one is teaching theology, one is inevitably engaging,
materically if not formally, accidentally if not intrinsically, in catechesis, unless one
never has any Christian believer in class who would like his or her understanding of
the faith deepened. And, if it is said in a way that is intended to distance the speaker
from the evangelizing mission of the Church, then, as I’ve already mentioned, the
statement is incoherent, because it simply means, I do not do theology -- always
remembering, of course, the specific and distinct “form” of the ministry of the Word
that defines theology.

I would like, in closing, to mention another way of incorrectly saying, “I do theology,
not catechesis.” I mentioned earlier that one caricature of catechesis that may be in
the minds of those who would also caricature theology by tagging on to the original
caricature of catechesis, is that of the simple handing on of formulas and doctrines
of the faith. As mentioned above, this is a very diminished understanding of
catechesis, and it certainly is not theology. However, there is a danger that in
rejecting a caricature, we also reject something proper to theology and, in fact, a
great opportunity for our discipline as a teaching discipline. I am talking about
introductory courses that offer explorations of the basic, core doctrines of the Catholic faith, especially courses that offer an overview of the system of core doctrines, those, for example, presented in the first pillar of the CCC. The kind of course is especially beneficial because it helps students to see the "system" of Catholic teaching, that is, the way the core doctrines cohere with and presuppose each other. The example of Walter Kasper’s book on the Trinity shows that the exploration of the basic Christian doctrines are properly theological, and this would be especially true for an exposition of the central doctrines where part of the exposition of each was the articulation of how they all hang together.

I myself am learning to teach such a course. I use as a text the CCC, with readings drawn mainly from the first pillar, on the doctrines of the Creed, extending into some of the second pillar on the sacraments. I intersperse these readings with readings on each topic from primary theological sources, from Irenaeus and Origen to Rahner and Ratzinger. I use the CCC because I want the students, from a variety of levels of interest and commitment, to know what the Church teaches in her own authoritative words, not in my personal paraphrases. I use the primary sources to engage the students in the depth of the reflection, the struggles and debates, out of which a synthesis such as the CCC arises. I tell the students I want them to “know stuff,” and that sometimes just “knowing stuff” is underrated in the humanities and in theology and in all university courses. So, I want them to know, for example, that the Church teaches that God created the world. But I also ask them, when do you actually know what the Church teaches? You do not really know it unless you have paused to “seek understanding” in the way that is proper to theology. If you “know” that the Church teaches that God created the world, but think that requires you to reject scientific accounts of the origin of the universe, then you do not really know what the Church teaches. Do you know (maybe not!) that the Church teaches that God is three persons? Do you think this means the Church asks you to believe in an intellectual puzzle, how three things can be one thing, for its own sake? Or, do you know that, “In the final analysis, the divine Trinity is the interpretation of the statement that God is love,” as Walter Kasper states (p. 265)? Do you know what this means? Are we aware of what the sign of the cross means, as it invokes the Trinity?

As Bob Krieg comments in Treasure in the Field, very much in the line of Walter Kasper, “As we make the sign of the cross, we declare that we are God’s works in progress and that our life stories receive their full significance only in relation to God’s story of salvation in creation and redemption” (Treasure in the Field, p. 159). Bob Krieg organizes his book, around the doctrine of salvation and proceeds to examine it biblically, in full conversation with historico-critical methods of exegesis but leveraging its results into a larger conversation that comes from the theological tradition and extends to the “spiritual sense” (see p. viii). He ends up treating the core doctrines of creation, redemption, Incarnation, Trinity, sin, the problem of evil and suffering, atonement, and eschatology both personal and general. Here is another way of offering a kind of overview of Christian doctrine, which is essentially and distinctively theological, and not, in the first and formal sense, catechetical, even though I am sure it has functioned that way for many students.
The benefits of these kinds of courses, offering in one way or another a theological overview of the basic doctrines of the faith, are immense, and surely these benefits are more than enough to establish their place in the general curriculum. They do serve catechetically, materially if not formally, for intelligent students looking to understand their faith better. They also serve to inform non-Christian students about what Christians believe. They dispel caricatures, retrieve beauty where it had been unlooked for, expand awareness of the kinds of questions that can be asked and the sources and methods from and with which one would answer them. They provide everyone with a deeper acquaintance with God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. They supply and nurture a sense of mystery in a culture that has lost its ear for mystery, and believes that the only job that reason has with respect to mystery is to dispel it. They give Catholic students ballast to be able to resist the drift into secularism, or, equally attractive according to recent studies, into evangelicalism, which proselytizes Catholics by trading on subjective experience more than rationally elaborated understanding. They give those who had given up on religion altogether a sense that there might be something worth looking at. Maybe religion is more than a source of violence or discord. Maybe religion is more than blind faith.

Finally, our students can easily look at the Church, divided as we seem to be, and reduce it to less than the sum of our disagreements and scandals. Why bother with it all? The study of the basic doctrines of the Church provides the answer, for these doctrines are basic not in the sense that they are beneath us as elements of a higher science, but rather they are the great mysteries of God's love for us in Christ, above us, as the perpetual source of renewal, inspiration and unity. “Everything That Rises Must Converge,” is the title of a story by Flannery O'Connor. Contemplating these mysteries is the contemplation of a space, not exactly above the fray, but taking a little vacation from it to remember why there is even anything worth arguing about, to teach people where the point of convergence is, to help them “rise” and find that point. Evangelization, it turns out, goes hand in hand with healing.

I am not saying that we should avoid controversial topics in theology classes, or that we should not try to help people sympathetically understand the teaching of the Church. But what is most needed in my view is the renewal of faith and the healing of the intellect that can occur when one realizes, through theological reflection, that God is love (1 Jn. 4.8, 16), that this love is that which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands (1 Jn. 1.1-2), that this love may still be seen with our eyes and touched with our hands in the Church, and insofar as we are configured by the sacrament of love, the Eucharist, to that which was from the beginning, we also see and touch that love everywhere as we encounter the risen Lord in the poor and in anyone who needs us. For God did so love the world, that He sent His Only-Begotten Son (Jn. 3.16) whom we find at the heart of theology, catechesis, and all of the other ministries of God’s Word.