

ABSTRACT

A Franciscan Foundation for a Contemporary Catholic Curriculum Michael Chiariello, Dean of Clare College

In 1994, St. Bonaventure University embarked upon a major curriculum revision. The long established curriculum, a combination of English composition, theology, philosophy and distribution requirements in the arts and sciences was typical of many Catholic institutions past and present. Our regional accreditors had suggested it be reviewed for coherence, while our professional programs asked that it be more clearly justified. Further, we needed to address the call within Catholic higher education for a more focused religious identity and mission. How could we respond to these influences while supporting liberal education, preserving academic freedom, and remaining relevant in the pluralist culture of contemporary America?

Coincidentally, an informal and diverse faculty seminar, formed to study the Franciscan intellectual tradition proposed the idea of a curriculum modeled on St. Bonaventure's *Itinerarium Mentis in Deum*, or *The Journey of the Mind to God*. In response, we created Clare College, our liberal arts core curriculum (named to honor Clare of Assisi), and joined, in the words of an external reviewer, "a select group of schools that are leaders in higher education in realizing a mission-focused curriculum. (AALE Site Visit Report, 9/03)

I will present the story of Clare College as a case study of current curriculum development in Catholic higher education, and an occasion for serious dialogue regarding the relation of curriculum to mission and identity.

Our experience poses the question of how a thirteenth century philosophical and theological system can support a curriculum for the twenty-first century by addressing three issues: (1) Could such a curriculum encompass modes of inquiry and expression not yet envisioned in the thirteenth century? (2) Could such a curriculum prove sufficiently flexible and open-textured to connect to new and emergent human problems and concerns? (3) Is this text sufficiently open to a curriculum inclusive of other voices, traditions and human experiences?

The immediate focus of my presentation is our first year seminar, *The Intellectual Journey*, which employs several strategies, including problematizing Bonaventure's views, to create a dialogue with classical texts and contemporary culture.

Whether other central Catholic texts would prove as adaptable, other institutions so determined, and other faculties so ingenious, are the practical questions around which I hope to encourage the searching discussion and continued efforts that the current moment demands of our Church and its institutions of higher learning.