

**Proposal for the Fall 2005 Center for Ethics and Culture Conference at the
University of Notre Dame
Christianity and the Liberal Arts: Intellectual Community as a Foundation for Faith
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Since the time of the early Church, the project of theology – of engaging in what St. Augustine called “faith seeking understanding” – has always taken root in the soil of the liberal arts. Early Church Fathers such as Augustine, Martianus Capella, John Damascene, and Cassiodorus wrote extensively on the liberal arts and recommended their study as the necessary prerequisite for the rigorous study of the faith. Having been engaged in the teaching of theology to undergraduate students over the past six years, concerned constantly with the question of how we can bring the Christian faith to the center of our students’ lives, I have come to the following two conclusions. First, if we are to have a true renewal of theological learning within the University setting, it must begin with a renewal of philosophy and, in particular, a renewed openness to what Pope John Paul II termed the “sapiential dimensions of human knowing”: that is, this must be a philosophy that is not afraid to ask the fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of life. Second, if our students are to become capable of this kind of philosophical reflection, I believe we must also have a widespread rededication to the liberal arts in Christian colleges and universities. Without this firm grounding in the classic arts of the trivium – grammar, rhetoric, and perhaps most of all, logic – as well as a contemporary equivalent to the arts of the quadrivium – a firm grounding in mathematics, geometry, the natural sciences, natural philosophy, and the history and philosophy of science and technology – I fear that all attempts at Christian intellectual “renewal” will come to nought.

In this paper, I reflect on the continued relevance of a contemporary understanding of the classic liberal arts education. I am not, rest assured, proposing a return to the liberal arts as they existed at the time of Augustine, Cassiodorus, or even Thomas Aquinas (as interesting as that would be). Rather, I will be proposing a contemporary, absolutely practical curriculum, organized along the lines of the classical liberal arts, that could be instituted in any institution of higher learning immediately, if they had the will to do so. I have, in fact, along with my colleague Ed Houser, proposed just such a curriculum at my own institution, the University of St. Thomas.

At the end of the paper, then, I will suggest that this entire educational project – no matter how well we do it – will only become relevant to our students to the extent that it can be related to the fundamental questions, such as: Who am I?, Where am I from?, Where am I going? What is the meaning and purpose of my life? Therefore, if we are to provide an authentically “Christian” liberal arts education – and not merely produce a clique of scholarly dilettantes – we must strive always to challenge our students to ask these fundamental questions about themselves and about the world. So, for example, our graduates ought to be able to say something meaningful about their identity, goals, vocation, and vision of life. And although they might not know what “job” they will pursue, they ought to know their own strengths and weaknesses, their own desires and goals, so that they can make for themselves a meaningful choice about their future “vocation” – as an individual, as a family member, as a member of a community and society, and as a Christian in today’s world. If our students have not made any progress in thinking about the questions, “Who am I, who am I becoming, and why?”, then we have in large part failed them in our ultimate obligation as Christian educators.