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### Alumni Reflections: Was it Worth it?

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*We asked two prominent graduates — former Commonweal editor Peggy Steinfels and United States Senator Robert Casey — to reflect on their philosophy and theology Jesuit education and their impact on their careers.*

## WAS IT WORTH IT?

By Margaret O'Brien Steinfels

**I**n the last century when I began college, undergraduates at Loyola (Chicago) were required to take a theology and philosophy course every semester.

Business and pre-med students found this burdensome, but I was thrilled. What could be more serious, more important, more college than that? I was deeply eager for the intellectual demands this would require, but also a little anxious about whether I was up to the mark—as it turned out, a needless worry, at least about theology. In the days before Vatican II (we're talking the early '60s), the content was a dumbed-down version of seminary manual theology taught by any priest (and priest it was!) the university could find—from local pastors to retired seminary teachers; it must have seemed like KP duty.

This "higher apologetics" fell several notches below the religion courses I had already taken in high school. Fortunately, Sheed & Ward was then publishing John Courtney Murray, Yves Congar, and Henri de Lubac, which some of us read wrapped in plain brown paper (I exaggerate). The intel-

lectual dissonance between these "theology" courses and the Nouvelle Theologians and *Commonweal* and *Cross Currents* had the benefit of forecasting the ambiguity and ferment that flowed from the Council.

I might still take some pride in reciting the facts of the seven sacraments (matter, form, ordinary and extraordinary ministers, and Jesus' words of institution), if only they had as much truthiness now as they seemed to have in the second semester of 1961—though my grade suggests that I must have forgotten one of the sacraments on the final exam. The yellowing transcript also shows that I did rather poorly in "Christian Marriage." Still, steeped as it was in the canonical requirements for a valid marriage, the course warned me away from first and second cousins and married men; and finally, I pinned down the meaning of consanguinity.

Philosophy was another story. John Bannan's course on metaphysics was everything I had hoped for as a starry-eyed freshman: new ideas, intellectual suspense, and the dizzying effort to keep the one and the many aligned. He was an inspired and inspiring teacher. Theodore Munson's "Philosophy of God" course began with David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, and disabused us of childhood's lingering image of God as an unremittingly stern Santa Claus. There



was the idiosyncratic, "Rational Psychology," required by the philosophy department but taught by faculty in the psychology department—also KP duty. This scholastic version of epistemology did not much interest the behaviorist who taught our class (mice did not have phantasms—at least back then).

Two ethics courses fitfully followed a text by Austin Fagothy, S.J., while the classes themselves took on the rhetoric of Oxford Union debates. The resident conscientious objector (the draft being in effect) led the assault on our teachers and defender of the nuclear attack on Hiroshima and

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Nagasaki (first definitely okay; second probably okay). *Questiones disputatae!* Aquinas, Ockham, and Abelard would have been pleased.

Notably missing from those long-ago requirements was a course on liturgy. So too, Old Testament and church history, which were upper-level courses in the history department. Social justice haphazardly fell into a course on "Papal Social Encyclicals," which could have been a trudge through densely written

documents, except that in 1961 Chicago was entering the civil rights era. Our professor, Father Bob Reichert, convinced a group of Franciscan nuns in the class to picket our very own university for housing a segregated swimming pool operated by another Catholic organization. All hell broke loose and I counted it one of the top theological experiences of my college years.

Today, these requirement may seem onerous. But it was part of a tightly organized curriculum; theology and philosophy were no different than his-

tory, English, or biology. All of the students studied the same topics and read the same books. The uniformity rankled some, but it gave us endless reams of common knowledge to chew over.

Was it worth it? In spite of some tedium and dull teaching, we graduated at least as literate in religion and philosophy as in everything else. Such a regime could hardly work today, but it had its virtues including honing our critical thinking and debating skills. ■