Catholicism 101
An Introduction to the Catholic Tradition

Fr. Dennis Tamburello, O.F.M.
ASACCU Conference
College of St. Benedict
St. John’s University
July 29, 2010
Mission: Impossible?

- Basic organization
- Teachings
- Worship practices
- Basic principles of Catholic Intellectual Tradition
- Introduction to Catholic Social Teaching
- *Ex corde ecclesiae*
- Current issues impacting Catholic higher education
- Time: 1 hr 15 minutes
- Are you kidding me??
Ninian Smart’s

Dimensions of the Sacred

- The ritual or practical dimension
  - worship, personal prayer, meditation, pilgrimages
- The doctrinal or philosophical dimension
  - doctrines, philosophies, theologies
- The mythic or narrative dimension
  - stories, history
- The experiential or emotional dimension
  - conversions, visions, enlightenment
- The ethical or legal dimension
  - laws, values, virtues
- The organizational or social dimension
  - institutions, clergy
- The material or artistic dimension
  - art, architecture
The experiential dimension: faith

- For Christians, experience of God’s presence centers in Jesus.
- God’s revelation is above all *personal*: the Incarnation.
- We respond *primarily* to a personal God, not to propositions.
- Two models:

  - God reveals Truths — We assent
  - God reveals Godself — We respond in faith/hope/love — We reflect: theology and doctrine
The mythic/narrative dimension: Scripture

Catholic understanding of Scripture:

- It is the Word of God
- But not the literal word of God: opening up the stories
- Catholicism accepts modern biblical criticism: in order to understand a text, we need to know about
  - Literary genre
  - Historical and social context (*Sitz im Leben*)
- Scripture does not stand alone. We need Scripture *and* Tradition.
  - Catholicism as a both/and religion
The doctrinal/philosophical dimension:

Theology and doctrine

- Stories of scripture do not answer the more critical, logical questions
- Myth and narrative therefore give way to more systematic thought
  - This didn’t take long; already happening in first century!
- Theology: reflection on faith
- When a theological explanation becomes normative: doctrine
- Example: Nicene Creed – a turning point
Central Catholic beliefs

- Monotheism
  - God is love
  - The Trinity
- The Incarnation
  - God becomes human
- Grace/salvation
  - Cooperation with grace
- The Church/people of God
  - Sacraments
  - Mission and morality
The organizational dimension: church

- Note: This is the dimension that a lot of young people want to leave out.
  - “I’m spiritual, but not religious.”
  - “I believe in God/Jesus, but not in the church.”
- Why is this a problem?
  - Jesus calls individuals to be part of a community
  - Community is a “non-negotiable essential” to the Christian life.
- On the other hand, institutional issues are real.
  - Power
  - Listening
The ritual dimension: worship and prayer

- Catholic notion of sacramentality. Grounded in
  - Creation: mirror of God’s glory
  - Incarnation: Christ as sacrament of God
- Sacraments: “symbols arising from the ministry of Christ, and continued in and through the church, which when received [celebrated] in faith are encounters with God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Worgul, *From Magic to Metaphor*
- Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium* 11)
- Personal prayer and devotion
Spirituality: “the lived experience of Christian belief”: embraces all the dimensions

*Ex corde ecclesiae*: The university as integrating faith with life. (section 38)

Non-negotiable essentials:

- Personal morality:
  - Formation of conscience
  - Moral life informed by teaching of the church
- Social justice (no apology to Glenn Beck)
Catholic Social Teaching:
The Church’s best kept secret?

**Direct Social Services**
(helping people address present needs)

**WORKS OF CHARITY**
- Supporting food pantries
- Providing food baskets
- Promoting clothing centers
- Visiting the elderly, prisoners, shut-ins
- Helping women who face a crisis pregnancy
- Supporting hospitality houses
- Sponsoring a refugee family
- Volunteering for projects such as Meals on Wheels, transporting elderly, tutoring children, providing cultural opportunities

**Social Change**
(removing the causes of social problems)

**WORKS OF JUSTICE**
- Being politically active
- Volunteering for voter registration drives
- Supporting political platforms that are pro-life and support “people” issues
- Starting a diocesan or statewide legislative network
- Organizing community-based self-help projects
- Starting a co-op or credit union
- Monitoring government agencies — getting them to change administrative policy that causes problems
- Educating the public
- Raising funds for needed projects
- Facilitating reflection on Catholic social teaching and its call to action in everyday community life
Key points from *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching*:

- CST is a **central** and **essential** element of our faith.
  - It is not “optional” or tangential. Thus, it should be a “core part of teaching and formation.”
  - An education that neglects this dimension is “not fully Catholic.”
  - *Ex corde ecclesiae*: “The Christian spirit of service to others for the promotion of social justice is of particular importance for each Catholic University.” (34)
- Many Catholics (and others!) do not know the specifics of CST, nor are they aware of its being essential to Catholic teaching.
  - Sad to say, many priests have not preached CST.
  - And when they do, it is not always well-received.
Key principles of CST

- Life and Dignity of the Human Person
- Call to Family, Community, and Participation
- Rights and Responsibilities
- Option for the poor and vulnerable
- Dignity of Work and Rights of Workers
- Solidarity
- Care for God’s creation
- The common good
The artistic dimension

- Appreciation of beauty in the Catholic tradition
- A rich heritage of
  - Art
  - Architecture
  - Music
  - Literature
- Example: liturgy’s appeal to the senses
  - Incense, candles, vestments, bread and wine, music, sign of peace . . .
  - Yes, we like “smells and bells”