

CEFT 2000: Confessional Ministry

DSPT: Fall, 2023

Welcome! The purpose of this course is to develop the pastoral competence necessary for a priest effectively to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation with an individual penitent, and in particular to foster appropriate application of the principles of Christian living to the concrete situation of the penitent. It thus presupposes that substantial courses have been completed in fundamental moral theology, justice, sexual ethics, pastoral counseling, canon law, sacramental theology and celebrational style (the actual liturgy and rubrics of the sacrament), and in particular that the student has a thorough understanding of the basic principles of Roman Catholic moral theology in the teleological tradition of Aquinas, including the dynamics of the virtues, of intentionality, and of the "objectivity" of moral action.

The course will regularly involve "role-playing" in which the student will confront paradigmatic situations relevant to social justice, justice in the workplace, restitution, healthcare ethics, marriage and the family, and sexuality as well as these and other situations involving cooperation with and appropriation of evil; discussions which will unfold the principles operative in the role-playing scenarios; and discussions of more general issues bearing on successful celebration of the sacrament. The role-playing will be presented by myself (and perhaps others) who will act as penitents.

The one requirement for the course is: *the desire to learn* as manifested in

- 1) Attendance at each and every class session;
- 2) a palpable willingness to participate fully in the role-playing and discussions.
- 3) *the ability to discuss controverted issues with openness and with respect for those who express opinions with which one may disagree;*
- 4) the ability to integrate into the discussions the readings that will be assigned in preparation for some of the sessions;

- 5) *the ability to maintain strict confidentiality of the role plays and the discussions that follow;*
- 6) willingness to participate in a short evaluation session with the instructor during the last week of the semester (if the instructor believes that such a session may be useful).

With successful completion of this course, the student will be able to serve as an effective sign of Christ's merciful judgment as you celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, which will involve, among other skills, knowledge of the proper role of the confessor in the formation of conscience; the ability to help the penitent prudently apply the principles of Roman Catholic moral theology to, and to assess subjective responsibility in, his or her concrete situation (as well as to suggest appropriate penances); the expertise to recognize the difference between religious scrupulosity and psychological obsession, and to respond to both appropriately; the power to create a safe setting for the penitent, and to listen attentively and with discernment; a sensitivity to the penitent's cultural location; knowledge of important canonical issues as they apply to the sacrament; and awareness of the necessity of absolute discretion with regard to all things pertaining to the sacramental revelation of conscience. This course will also foster your ability to collaborate with others in this learning process, as we jointly discuss the role-plays and learn from the insights of others. It will foster your ability as well to think integrally, as you bring to bear your theological studies on complex practical situations.

Instructor Fr. Michael Hurley, O.P.

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Office Hours: By Appointment

Class Times: This class will meet both in person and virtually as we are able. **The first class is September 1, 2023 from 1-3pm at St. Dominic's Parish** (2390 Bush St. SF, CA 94115). At this first meeting we will set the class time for the rest of the semester.

Please check your email on a daily basis; this is the primary way in which we will communicate with you regarding changes of reading assignments or in the event a class

has to be canceled due to illness. If your email address changes during the semester, please notify the instructor immediately.

Content of the Course

The various topics of the semester are summarized in general headings below:

THE ABSOLUTE INVIABILITY OF THE SEAL OF CONFESSION

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SACRAMENT OF CONFESSION AND SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

MORTAL AND VENIAL SIN / ASSESSING RESPONSIBILITY

Discussion of the classical distinction / sins of weakness versus sins of malice / discussion of issues surrounding "modifiers of responsibility" that diminish subjective responsibility (including awareness of psychological and sociological factors) / finding balance between rigorism and denial of freedom/responsibility / how to supportively and compassionately push "people" forward and recognize the degree to which they are capable of being pushed / the dynamics of habit and vice, and pastoral response to freely rejected habits

PARTICULAR CHALLENGES OF THE CONFESSOR: Psychological or unconscious:

1. Pelagianism: an inordinate emphasis upon the will power and the effort of the confessor to bring resolution to problems and peace to the penitent
2. Gnosticism: an over-reliance on the confessor's knowledge of principles of theology: moral, spiritual, canon law or his own pastoral experiences and knowledge, or the chronic fear that he does not have sufficient knowledge to serve penitents with the care he perceives that they deserve.
3. Agnosticism: in confessional ministerial situations when not only does there not seem to be an answer the situation could be (or has been) long going and no resolution seems in sight or available in the immediate future. The penitent is simply spiritually at the Cross and asks, as does the confessor in his heart: why? Where is God in this situation?

QUESTIONS OF SCRUPULOSITY, COMPULSION, AND DEPENDENCE

How to recognize and approach these patterns of behavior / how to differentiate psychological pathology from religious scrupulosity, and deal with both / the irony of the

exercise of unquestioned authority in these situations. The larger context of the grace/nature relationship and the effects of personality and pathology on responsibility.

THE PROCESS OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE GRADUAL NATURE OF CONVERSION / CULTURAL INFLUENCES OF PENITENTS / Grace-nature relation and limitation inherent in nature.

AUTHORITY, CONSCIENCE AND THE ROLE OF THE CONFESSOR / CULTURAL FACTORS

The role of the confessor with regard to the formation of conscience / caution with regard to confessors imposing their personal views, theologies, interpretations or spiritualities on others in the name of Church / invincible ignorance as an aspect of contemporary secular culture / how to approach penitents who disagree with the teaching of the Church / levels of authority and the hierarchy of truths / Examination of conscience in light of virtues or Decalogue?

MORAL PRINCIPLES USEFUL TO THE CONFESSOR

The indirectly voluntary / the appropriateness of traditional "reflex principles" / principles of toleration, cooperation and appropriation / discussion of counseling the "lesser evil"

PENANCES AND THEIR APPLICATION

The role of penances / how should the penance "fit" the sin? / understanding and acceptance of penances / prayer as a "penance"? / the "temporal punishment due to sin"

DSPT

Institutional Goals and MDiv Program Outcomes

DSPT Institutional Goals

Pedagogical Goal: Deep Learning

Motivated by a thirst for truth, the disciplined inquirer is a life-long learner who recognizes fundamental principles in a given field of inquiry and applies them in creative or innovative ways to broader contemporary issues which are of importance to Church, the academy, and/or society. Disciplined inquiry includes the following characteristics:

1. *Integrative Thinking*: the ability to recognize, understand, retain, integrate, and apply the fundamental principles operative in a field of inquiry, and use them to make synthetic judgments.
2. *Intellectual Humility*: an orientation of mind and heart that fosters intellectual collaboration, precludes both rigidity and passivity of mind, and recognizes that contrary opinions are not a threat, but provide the opportunity to test and deepen one's own grasp of the truth.
3. *Self-Direction*: the disposition to take primary responsibility for one's own education, manifested in a keen intellectual interest in the topic of studies, and the ability to teach oneself through a habit of skilled and responsible research and resilient exploration.

Vocational Goal: Collaborative Leadership

A collaborative leader inspires within others the desire to realize the common good by articulating to academy or society a coherent vision rooted in the mission of the Church, all the while leading by example.

4. *Ability to Collaborate*: expressed in good listening and communication skills which foster decisions stemming from and leading to an open, transparent, and mutually enriching dialog with others in order that the gifts of all can be appropriately acknowledged and utilized.

DSPT MDiv Program Outcomes

By the end of the program, students will demonstrate ministerial and pastoral competency through the ability:

1. to communicate simply, accurately, and effectively the theological tradition of the Roman Catholic Church through preaching, teaching, and writing;
2. to preach in a manner that is grounded in scholarly methods of biblical interpretation, and is doctrinally sound, pastorally focused, and rhetorically effective;
3. to analyze, assess, and critique theological perspectives through scriptural, historical, and systematic theological methods, and to assist others in doing the same;

4. to fulfill their responsibilities with the moral, intellectual, psychological, and emotional maturity that grounds vigorous discipleship of Christ and priestly service to others;
5. to lead a faith community in prayer, worship and theological reflection, centered on the Eucharist, respecting both the liturgical tradition of the Church and the pastoral needs of the local community;
6. to apply the principles of the moral theology of St. Thomas Aquinas to pastoral situations in general and confessional situations in particular;
7. to both lead and work collaboratively with others in a just, charitable, and generous manner, respecting the relevant cultural, social, and ecclesial circumstances, all the while maintaining professional, ethical boundaries;
8. to foster Church communion, demonstrated through personal and liturgical prayer, regular observance, and life in community.