I. Course Description:

This is an introductory course dealing with the foundations of the Church’s moral teaching based on the Catechism of the Catholic Church. The chapters of the Catechism will provide the basic structure of the course, but we will be fleshing out each of the topics with additional readings from other primary sources.

Before each class period, students will be responsible for taking an on-line quiz on the reading from the Catechism. Students will also be required to turn in an “executive summary” of the day’s on-line reading at the beginning of each class. The length of this “executive summary” should be no fewer than 600, but not a word more than 800, words. For more on these two requirements, please see below.

II. Procedures and Requirements:

A) Reading and Executive Summaries

This is a theology course, and theology has traditionally been defined as “faith seeking understanding.” The means to our goal of an increased "understanding of faith" will involve both reading and reflection. Reading assignments are posted on the course web site. Please be forewarned that there is a substantial amount of reading for this course; but then again, that only makes sense, given that this is a college course. You’re paying for quality, right? Here’s where you get it. Quality means we challenge you to accomplish more than you ever thought possible before you came here. The amount of reading is not impossible, but it’s also not a lazy afternoon’s walk in the park. It’s meant to challenge you. If you are having trouble with the reading, it’s best to see the instructor as soon as possible for help.

In order to encourage serious, analytic reading of the assigned texts, there will be an “executive summary” of the day's readings due at the beginning of each class. Given the explosion of information available to people in the “information age” in which we now live and work, many jobs require employees to be able to do something like an “executive summary” of material. An “executive summary” involves giving a useful summary of the information in dozens, sometimes hundreds, of pages of material, boiling all of it down to one or two very readable, easy-to-review pages.

Scoring on these executive summaries will be very simple: You will get a 4, 3, 2, 1, or 0. If you miss the class or forget your “executive summary,” you get a zero. There are no late submissions. Businesses are increasingly pleading with us not to send them graduates who are not prepared for the world of work. If you miss a meeting or show up without the executive summary you were assigned, you get fired. There’s no “I left it at home; can I bring it next time?” in the business world, so it’s our responsibility to wean you from these “high school” tendencies you may have mistakenly fallen into.
Schooling is a process, however, in which you should be able to improve as you learn. At the end of the semester, therefore, I will drop your four lowest “executive summary” grades. This will allow you some leeway to get better, or to engage in some “hit-and-miss.” If you do not turn in an executive summary on time, you can simply take that zero as one of your low scores. It goes without saying, however, that you’ll undoubtedly be better off at the end of the semester statistically speaking if you don’t miss turning in any of the summaries during the semester.

B) On-line Quizzes

Students will be required to take a roughly ten-to-fifteen minute on-line Blackboard quiz on the reading from the Catechism for the day before the beginning of each class period. Once you begin the quiz, you must finish it, and you will not be allowed to re-take it. These will be open-book quizzes. But please note, the quiz will not become available until 6 a.m. of the day of the class and will be available until noon. After that window closes, it will not open again. So, here is the bottom line: You have to find a place where you can have reliable internet access at a time when you will not be interrupted so that you can finish this quiz.

What about possible technical problems? Don’t have any. If your computer crashes, get yourself to a reliable one. If your internet access is spotty, go someplace where it’s not. And yet, what about ....? We can’t reliably guard against every possible problem anymore than we can guarantee that the power won’t go out during class or that a hurricane won’t hit Houston during the semester. I have, however, built in a “cushion,” as it were, to take care of any potential problems. As with the “executive summaries,” I will drop your four lowest scores at the end of the semester, so that should take care of any individual technical glitches.

Please note, however, that I am not going to distinguish between “legitimate” and “non-legitimate” technical glitches. If you have technical trouble with a quiz, find a way around it. Talk to the IT people. Find a more reliable connection. Do whatever you need to do. Deal with it as though you worked for Fed Ex, and you were making good on the advertisement that says: “When it absolutely, positively must be there overnight.” People sometimes have to pull out some very serious stops in order to make good on that promise.

C) Exams

You will also be asked to demonstrate your knowledge of the course material on two major exams: a mid-term and a comprehensive final exam (note the adjective “comprehensive”). These will be essay exams with questions on both the reading and the in-class lecture and discussion.

It has often been my practice in the past to offer review sessions to help students prepare for the exams. I am not required to give these review sessions, but students have often told me in the past that they found them extremely helpful. Be that as it may, there is no reason to schedule them if students aren’t interested. Thus, review sessions will be offered by request only and only if there is enough of a demand for them. Otherwise, questions can and should be handled during my regular office hours. Students should make a request for a review session no later than two class periods before an upcoming exam. There will be no review session for an exam if there is no demand for one.
D) Writing Assignments:

First, the good news: there will not be a large research paper for this course. The daily “executive summaries” that you will be doing will be sufficient writing for the semester. It's worthwhile noting, moreover, that doing the “executive summaries” as you go is undoubtedly the best way to prepare for the exams. That’s why I have you do them.

The “executive summary” should summarize the major points of the day’s reading. It should be no fewer than 600, but no more than 800 words long. It must be typed, printed out, on white paper, with one-inch margins, single-spaced, with your name written at the top. No name, no credit. It’s due at the beginning of class. As for technical glitches on these printouts, see my comments above with regard to avoiding technical glitches when you take the online quizzes. If you mess up, you may take it as one of your four “dropped” grades.

III. Grading:

Please note that your final grade will be calculated according to the following formula:

- Daily On-Line Quizzes: 10%
- Daily Executive Summaries: 25%
- Mid-Term Exam: 25%
- Final Exam: 30%
- Class Participation: 10%

Please note as well that I assign letter grades based upon the following standard scale:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>95-100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>90-94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>88-89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>83-87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>80-82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>78-79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>73-77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>70-72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D+</td>
<td>68-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>63-67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D-</td>
<td>60-62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Anything below 60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

IV. My Policy on Attendance:

I will take attendance daily at the beginning of each class. If you are late, it is your responsibility to see me after class to make sure you are marked present (but late). If you haven’t informed me of your presence, then you didn’t attend.

Please be forewarned that more than three absences will result in a decrease of one-third of a letter grade. Further absences will result in further proportionate decreases. After six
absences, you will be excused from further attendance in an official way (by which I mean, you'll suffer the academic equivalent of being fired).

Please also take note that I make no distinction between “excused” and “un-excused” absences. You may excuse yourself for whatever reason you deem important enough to miss class. I realize that there are certainly times when attending class is not the most important thing in your life. On the other hand, since you are enrolled, attending class is not unimportant if you are to get the educational benefit for which you are paying. Quite frankly, my experience has been that when a student exceeds three absences, his or her grade is headed downward precipitously no matter what I do.

V. Required Readings:

There are two places to go for each class’s reading assignments. One place is the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which can be purchased at the University Bookstore or from many publishers on-line. The second place to go is the course web site, which can be found here: http://t4.stthom.edu/users/smith/christmorallife/

Check to be sure you’ve typed it in correctly; there are two “l’s” in there.

As I mentioned above, you will be asked to take an on-line quiz before class on the material from the Catechism. In addition, you will be required to bring in a typed-out “executive summary” of the day’s on-line reading. You must print out the reading, on real paper, and bring it to class. I will check each day to see that you have both your Catechism and the print-out. If you don’t, you get a zero for the day. Come prepared.

VI. Some Important Comments Concerning Your Participation in the Class:

A) On Class Etiquette:

It should go without saying (but let me say it anyway) that respect for your fellow students in the class demands the following:

1. If you should (heaven forbid) come in late, please take your seat quietly.
2. Once you have arrived and class has begun, please don’t leave the classroom unless there is a dire physical necessity. Buying a coke or making a phone call is not a dire physical necessity.
3. In this class, you are permitted to bring food, drink, or any other legal stimulants to keep you awake and alert during the class period. But please keep slurping and gurgling to a minimum. And above all, please, clean up your own mess before you leave. The University’s hard-working janitorial staff should not have to clean up after lazy, slovenly students.
4. All cell phones and pagers must be turned off (or you will be turned out).
5. That means no text messaging on your cell phone during class. If you have something to say, say it out loud to everyone.
6. NB: It has also come to my attention that many students use their computers not to take notes during class, as they should, but to surf the web or check e-mail. This distracts other students greatly. Therefore, because of the many abuses that I
have seen and others have mentioned to me, no computers will be allowed in this class. You'll have to take notes the old-fashioned way: with a pen or pencil.

7. Bottom line: All electronic devices must be turned off and stowed for the duration of the class. Seat backs and tray tables must also be in their upright and locked position.

B) On Lecture and Discussion:

Students will take note, I hope, that this is a rather large class — something that makes discussion more difficult, or at the very least, much more unwieldy. While it is this instructor's view that learning should be an active process on the part of the students, he does not, unfortunately, determine class size. In short, we're screwed. The result of all this is that I will have to do a lot of lecturing. Students should be prepared, therefore, to take part in this type of class for the most part.

On the other hand, please believe that I am always open to earnest and serious questions. So although I tend to plunge through material rather madly, please be assured that I do welcome your questions and comments.

One caveat, however: This is a big class, and we do have to keep things moving along, so I can't necessarily call on everyone every time. I have found in the past with classes this size that discussions often tend to veer wildly off into other interesting, though perhaps only tangentially related, topics. There is only one answer to this problem: Please listen to your classmates (this is an absolute requirement!), and try to respond to what's being said.

Above all, you should be self-aware enough to realize that it as difficult for everyone else as it is for you to make a point clearly and concisely in front of thirty or so classmates. So please be patient with yourself and with everyone else – especially the people you consider to be annoyingly stupid. (Here’s a hint: They’re not.)

My experience from past classes suggests that while students often find class discussions interesting, they also find them a bit frustrating. There is simply no way of discussing important issues thoroughly in the kind of time we spend in class. My conviction is that education either goes on outside of the classroom, or it does not go on at all. What discussion in the classroom can do (at its best) is merely pique your interest — “wet your appetite,” as it were. The real conversations must take place after you leave the classroom: with your friends and family, late at night in coffee shops or bars, over a glass of red wine, good beer, or strong, dark coffee. Here the time is too short and the surroundings are too sterile for real philosophy to take place. But we can at least begin the conversation.

Please be aware that I will often ask questions at random during my lectures about the reading material. You should be able to demonstrate some knowledge of the text, or at least some ability to think about the questions involved. If it is clear to everyone that you have not done the reading at all, then don't be surprised if this fact ends up being reflected in your final grade. I won’t necessarily say, out loud, in front of everybody: “Well, I guess I can give you a big F for class participation.” But just keep in mind, that’s what will be happening.
The good news, however, is this: Regular and prompt attendance, coupled with a good faith effort to understand the text, can do wonders for your grade. That 15% for class participation is an easy “A” if you show up on time and do the reading.

**C) On the Amount of Reading:**

There will be plenty of reading for this class, so please be prepared to do it. This is an upper-level college course, therefore it is entirely appropriate for me to assign you upwards of 40 to 50 pages of reading between class periods. That is not a lot. You simply have to pace yourself. If you can read 20 pages per hour (with good understanding and retention), then you will need two hours or so to do the reading. If you read much more slowly, then you need longer. Budget your time accordingly.

Yes, I know you have other classes. They should be assigning you plenty of reading as well. For every class you take at this University, you should expect to put in between two to three hours of work for every hour you are in class. That’s a standard college work load at good colleges across the country. (Note that I said at “good” colleges, so please don’t tell me how your friends at A&M spend half the time studying you do and the rest of the time drinking with their frat buddies or sorority sisters. Besides, I’ve known plenty of serious students in serious majors at A&M, and they do just as much work as I assign my students.)

I always read the comments students make on their evaluations at the end of the semester, and I take them all very seriously – except for this one: “Too much reading!” Here’s a hint: No, there’s not. You have asked us to teach you and prepare you to do first-rate work in business or professional school. And that is what I intend to do. I know how much reading you should be able to do. If you’re not interested in that sort of formation, then you want another class.

You need to be building muscles for excellence as opposed to getting yourself accustomed to mediocrity. In any course you take at this University, even if you are not particularly interested in the subject matter of the course, you should still take it as an occasion to develop the habit of excellence rather than the habit of mediocrity. Our successful students always – and I mean this very sincerely – they always thank us for having challenged them and, in particular, for having forced them to read and write more than they thought possible. But in any worthwhile endeavor, the joy and freedom that comes with attaining excellence demands work and discipline on the front end.

**D) On the Modus Operandi of the Instructor:**

Please note that you are responsible for all the reading material, even though we will not necessarily have time to cover it all in class. We will only cover highlights and the more difficult sections in class. Class lecture and discussion are merely parts of the process by which you educate yourself. The goal of a liberal arts education is to teach you how to teach yourself. You need to learn how to learn. There is no way we can teach you everything you need to know in four years. There is no way we can cover all the relevant points about the kind of important questions we will be covering in fifty or sixty minutes. That is the work of a lifetime. These four years are meant to prepare you for a lifetime of education. The end of the class period is when the real learning begins.
Note also that there are a number of different ways of running a class. One way would be for the professor to step back and merely facilitate a discussion between students. This class is too big for that. Another way would be for the professor to lecture in an orderly, point-by-point fashion, using PowerPoint slides or overhead projections. Some professors come into a class with five points to make, lay them out in order and are done. This method works with material for which you don’t need to have much context in order to “get” the points the speaker wants to make. That makes this method appropriate for communicating discrete bits of information, but not as good, in my view, for areas that require thinking. Ideas do not happen in isolation; they arise in a context, and their full truth can only be appreciated by understanding them within that context.

The process of acquiring this context may feel at times as though we’re wandering the circles around the center of the labyrinth. We eventually reach the center, but the process might make you wonder, “If our destination was here, why did we walk in all those circles? Why didn’t we just walk in a straight line and get to the point?” Because with me, the journey is often as important as the destination. I want students to see the center from a number of different angles, perspectives and points-of-view. I want them to begin to see the connections between the ideas. And I want them to begin to enter into a conversation: a conversation not just with me or with the other students in the class, but with a number of the greatest thinkers of the past and present: a conversation of interconnected ideas that is meant to extend beyond the classroom and into their everyday lives.

There is something else as well. Often in the process of learning, it is good to become comfortable with being uncomfortable; with not knowing exactly where you’re going for a while; with struggling through the twists and turns in order to find your way, trusting that if you take the coaching and do the work, the whole picture will eventually become clear, in fact much clearer than if you had just walked from Point A to Point B and said to yourself, “There, now that’s done.”

There are many truths that require something more than a five-point summary or that can’t be captured in a sound-bite. Most things worth knowing must be approached as you would approach a great work of art. You don’t just glance at it the way you glance at a stop sign. Great works of art require time: time to walk around them, to look at them from various angles, to mull them over, and sometimes just to sit and be in their presence, so that their truth and beauty can overflow into you. So prepare yourselves to listen, to take copious detailed notes, to engage with the reading material, and enjoy the ride.

VII. Movies Required for the Course:

My plan is to require the students to view several movies during the course of the semester, movies related to the content of the course. The movies are required, and there will be test questions asking you to relate the movies to the themes of the course.

Let me add just one more thing about the movies. In the past, when I have required movies, my experience has always been the same. Students complain more about having to watch the movies outside of class than about any other thing. And yet, all of them, without exception, have said after the semester was over that they learned the most about the readings from watching the movies. So watch them.
VIII. Contacting Me:

My office phone number is (713) 942-5059, and my e-mail address is rsmith@stthom.edu. Please feel free to use either. I must, however, warn you of the following. After literally dozens of hours playing phone tag with people, I no longer return phone calls, and quite frankly, since I’m almost never in my office, I almost never check my voice mail. And because like most people who have an e-mail account in America, I am constantly being besieged by literally hundreds of e-mail messages, I don’t always return e-mail messages either.

I’m sorry about this, but information overload has simply resulted in the break down of the electronic communications systems at many businesses. There are executives in major corporations who send automatic replies to each and every e-mail message that reads: “If you haven’t heard from me by the end of the day today, you will have to try again, because I simply delete all untouched e-mail messages at the end of each business day.” Experts estimate that businesses are losing as much as two hours of productive work per person per day while their employees are checking e-mail.

What does one do when the technology fails? My proposal is simple: that we revert back to one of the classic, tried-and-true methods of the past: namely, walk over and actually talk to the person. It’s not as though we live on separate continents. We are within a two- or three-block radius of one another nearly every day. And you will be seeing me in class at this time twice per week. It’s not as though I am unavailable, simply because you can’t always get in touch with me instantly with the touch of a button. So, you may need to plan ahead.

If you need to get in touch with me, the best way is to make an appointment after class, or come see me in Dirk’s Coffee Shop where I usually work in the late afternoons. But above all, please, please, don’t get personally offended if I don’t respond immediately to your e-mail message. It may be a technical glitch (my system has on numerous occasions filtered out student e-mails), or I may just be way behind in checking e-mail. Either way, I cannot guarantee that I will be able to keep up with all the e-mail traffic. So, for example, at different points in the semester, I may have to declare a moratorium on e-mail in order to be able to finish grading exams.

IX. Finally:

Finally, please be assured I want you to do well in this course, and I will do whatever I can to see to it that you get the grade to which you aspire. But for now, don’t forget to:

* Check the course web site.
* Be sure you can access the course Blackboard site.
* Read the syllabus (there will be a quiz next time on it) and the assigned readings for the next class.
* Be ready to take the five-to-ten minute on-line Blackboard quiz on the reading from the Catechism.
* Read the selection for Thursday’s class and write a 600-to-800 word executive summary of its main points.
* Come see me after class if you have any questions.
Most of all, a very warm welcome to you all!