Course Description from Catalog:

“An examination of the stages, processes and methods of Christian moral development. Topics include: how ethical norms are known; relation of faith to ethics; the concept of habit and the development of theological and moral virtues; the effect of culture on morals; the role of myth, symbol and identification in moral development; academic subjects and moral development.”

Course catalog descriptions are their own literary genre. They are often enough designed to cover as many as a dozen or so different courses that might fit different parts of the catalogue description. The problem is that if we tried to cover all of those topics in one course, we’d probably end up doing nothing particularly well.

So the question you should ask in any course is not “What does the course description say?” but “Is there any relationship between the course description in the catalogue and what we’ll actually be doing in the course, and if so, what?”

What We Will Actually Be Doing In The Course:

Theology is supposed to be “faith seeking understanding,” that is to say, a search for the meaning provided by faith. One doesn’t have to share the Christian faith to participate in that search for meaning. And simply because one repeats certain propositional, creedal statements traditionally repeated by Christians doesn’t mean one is participating in that search either.

We’ll have more to say on this topic below, but for the time being, let’s just say that in this course, we will be following the inspiration of Pope John Paul II who in his encyclical Fides et Ratio characterized human beings precisely as those who ask the fundamental questions of meaning — questions such as, “Where am I from? Why am I here? Where am I going? What is true happiness? What makes life meaningful?” Those are questions everyone must ask, whether they are religious believers or not.

One of the questions we will be asking in this particular course has to do with the issue of development, a topic that has been all the rage in the modern world.

One of the fundamental premises of this course, by contrast to these modern notions, is that developing the moral virtues and living the moral life are precisely the things that lead to our ultimate end and goal as human persons, which Thomas Aquinas (following Aristotle) identifies as happiness, or what I sometimes describe as “true fulfillment as a complete and whole human person.”

Sins, on the other hand, are precisely those things that, although they promise greater freedom and happiness, rob us of the freedom and happiness they promise.

Given this view of the relationship between the moral life and sin, our question is this: How do human beings become morally good, and thus happy? If we are living what St. Paul calls “the life of sin and death,” how are we to be transformed so that we may "have life, and have it abundantly"? (cf. Jn 10:10)
The answer, according to the great moral theologians such as Thomas Aquinas, has much to do with developing the virtues: both the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, as well as the four cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance, and a number of auxiliary virtues related to these basic four.

**Thus our goal in this course is to gain a more profound understanding of the virtues that lead us to God and to true human flourishing and happiness.**

It is not enough, in my view, merely to study “moral development” as a disinterested (and largely uninterested) observer. The question of personal moral development (What is it? How do I do it?) is one we must all take seriously within ourselves, if our study is not going to be relatively pointless — “pointless” because there would be no point to making the study if we weren’t going to consider seriously where we are in our own moral development and where we want to be. Thus we return once again to the fundamental questions: Who am I? Where am I going? What will lead to true happiness and authentic human flourishing?

Rest assured, however, that your grade in this course is not based on my evaluation of your “moral development.” In core classes, we want our students to take the fundamental questions seriously and engage with them personally. By the same token, grades are not assigned on that basis.

You all know this, but it bears repeating: a grade in this course is not a judgment on your moral character or (heaven help us) your faith. I can’t test that; only God can test that. What I can test is how well you’ve read and understand the assigned material. Your performance on those exams and other writing assignments related to the reading will determine your grade, not any guessing on my part about the status of your faith or moral character. You could be a saint morally and spiritually and still get a D if you don’t write good exams and competent daily reading summaries. The devil himself would get an A if he did a good job on the various assignments. That’s just the way school is. We can’t test the really important stuff. That’s why success in school doesn’t equal success in life.

But here’s the thing: If the Christian moral tradition is right, then success in life comes from developing the virtues. And thus a semester spent reading and thinking about the life of virtue might not be a bad investment of your time and energy.

**Structure of the Course**

If you will glance at the course web site, you will notice that the course is divided into three sections. In the first section, we will be discussing personal “moral development” by using a biblical paradigm. What do I mean by that? The full relevance of that statement probably won’t be clear until we’re well into the course, but let me preface what is coming simply by suggesting two things. First, Christians have long believed that one of the most important keys to moral development involves reading the Christian Scriptures. But the Christian Scriptures contain books of various types — law, prophecy, wisdom literature, Gospels, and epistles — and thus the character of the moral development they provide can be wide, varied, and deep. And yet one must be aware of the genre of text one is reading in order to understand fully how it intends to teach us.

Second, as we’ll see, there is also a “development” of sorts going on in the Scriptures themselves. God does not reveal everything all at once. Nor does He do everything He intends to do for us all at once. We are creatures who exist in time and thus God’s grace works most often in
the manner in which we can receive it. We get a little at first, as much as we can stand, and then a little more, and a little more, and we tend to grow spiritually the way plants grow in the field. It doesn’t happen all at once or even overnight. You can’t really see it if you sit there watching. In His own time, God gives the growth. Our job is to plant and to till and to water as best we can in accord with what God and Nature has taught us about healthy development.

Our first section is entitled: “Moral Development: In the Bible, In the Church, and In Us.” In this section and the next, we will be using some recorded lectures given by a mentor of mine, a wonderful Dominican priest by the name of Fr. Benedict Ashley.

In our second section of the course, we will be learning as much as we can in the time we have available about each of the three theological and the four cardinal virtues. In this section, we will again be using lectures by Fr. Ashley, as well as reading material from his book Living the Truth in Love: A Biblical Introduction to Moral Theology. Fr. Ashley’s book will be our guide especially when it comes to the theological virtues and the relationship between the theological and cardinal virtues. When we come to our more explicit treatment of the cardinal virtues, we will be using a well-known book by the German Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper on The Four Cardinal Virtues.

These first two sections of the course will be, by necessity, more systematic and analytical. It’s hard to know how to apply something to your life if you don’t really know much about it. A lot of people talk about “courage,” for example, but fewer people actually know what it entails. And when it comes to “justice,” there are dozens of different interpretations of that difficult-but-important concept. So too what most modern people mean by “prudence” has nothing whatsoever to do with what Aristotle or Thomas Aquinas meant by prudence. And of course if you mention the word “temperance,” most people think you’re talking about abstaining from alcohol and of course given that stilted understanding of the term, most people are determined to just run away as fast as they can. Ignorance of and misunderstandings about the virtues are a common occurrence. So we’ll need to do our “prep” work and take it seriously.

In the third and final section of the course, however, we’ll want to start thinking more seriously about how we might begin to develop these virtues and how developing the virtues might help us change our lives in important and positive ways. In this section of the course, we’ll be making use of a wonderful book by Fr. Romano Guardini, a man quoted no fewer than three times in Pope Francis’s most recent encyclical Laudato Si. The book we will be using has the English title Learning the Virtues that Lead You To God. The entire final section of the course will be devoted to reading and reflecting on this wonderful book.

Procedures and Requirements:

A) Reading, Quizzes, 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 either an on-line quiz or a written executive summary of the day's readings which must be completed before 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.

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

The on-line quizzes will be available on Blackboard the evening before class. These quizzes are usually no more than ten to fifteen questions long.

The “executive summaries” 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. These are due at the beginning of class.

B) 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.

**Grading:**

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

- Executive Summaries: 15%
- On-Line Quizzes: 15%
- Mid-Term Exam: 25%
- Final Exam: 30%
- Class Participation: 15%

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

- A  95-100
- A- 90-94
- B+ 88-89
- B  83-87
- B- 80-82
- C+ 78-79
- C  73-77
- C- 70-72
- D+ 68-69
- D  63-67
- D- 60-62
- F Anything below 60

**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.

**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:

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, “whet 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.
C) 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.

D) 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. In any worthwhile endeavor, the joy and freedom that comes with attaining excellence demands work and discipline on the front end.

Contacting Me:

My office phone number is (713) 942-5059, but it’s not really worth remembering because I’m almost never in my office, and I never check my messages there.

It’s much better to try to contact me by e-mail at rsmith@stthom.edu. 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. 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.

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.
* Come see me after class if you have any questions.

Most importantly: A very warm welcome to you all!