The Aquinas Seminar (3.0), spring 2018  PHIL 3353, Section A

(This course is specifically designed and intended for junior-year philosophy majors.)

Instructor: Theodore P. Rebard, PhD; office: Sullivan House, room 103; telephone: (713)525-3953; e-mail: rebard@stthom.edu or tprebard@yahoo.com; office hours: MW 10:00-1:00; TuTh 11:00-2:00, and other times by appointment at mutual convenience.

Texts: The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas, Etienne Gilson; Aquinas, Edward Feser; A Summa of the Summa, Peter Kreeft, ed.; and, of incomparable importance, St. Thomas Aquinas, G. K. Chesterton. The Gilson book will provide the architecture for the course; the Feser book is a simpler introduction and may help you to the extent that you are a beginner; finally the Chesterton book is an essential read for any amateur philosopher, to say nothing of a literary jewel.

Requirements: Attendance and promptness. Daily preparation according to assignments. Readiness for oral recitation daily. Active daily participation via e.g. questions, comments, objections, et huiusmodi. Proper dress and deportment are expected, and indeed should be taken for granted. (T-shirts and jeans are not proper dress, nor are flip-flops. Collared shirts and blouses are suitable. Clean and tidy shorts (e.g., Bermuda shorts, chino shorts, but not basketball shorts are fine.) The reason of this is that proper dress exhibits self-respect, respect for others, and respect for the serious nes of our academic work. Of course, I cannot enforce this dress code, nor penalize anyone for failure, but I seriously encourage it, and attach a short explanatory essay.

Examinations & grading: There will be essay-format mid-term and final examinations. A 10-12 page philosophical essay, to be submitted at least three weeks before the final examination. The four elements of course evaluation are, then: preparation/participation, two examinations, and the essay. Each is worth 25% of the final grade.

Methods: Each day will begin with an invitation for questions and comment anent prior work and preparation. Then there will follow a lecture presentation apropos of the reading, e.g., a selection from Gilson and pertinent primary texts. Each meeting should conclude with a brief summation, if and to the extent possible. It may, even often, be the case than a question or comment at the beginning or during class with pre-empt our attention; this is to be expected in a seminar, and I earnestly encourage it.

Objectives of the course: A) This is primarily a philosophy course, not a history course. Therefore, its great and over-riding principle is that 'the study of philosophy is not about knowing what individuals thought, but about the way things are.' (De Caelo et Mundo) In other words, as Feser cites Christopher Martin, 'Aquinas cared very little for Aquinas, while he did care for God and science.' B) The issues we address will be the perennial life-affecting issues of philosophy, e.g., 'Who am I?' 'Where do I come from?' and 'Where am I going?' These questions are embedded in metaphysics, and find their human answers only in that context – the realm of
what is rea. C) While Gilson expertly handles numerous themes in the work of St. Thomas, we will try to keep a focus on these mainly: 1) The act of existence as the object of metaphysics; 2) God and, divine attributes, and human knowledge of God; 3) Nature and man in his own life and in the order of the universe; 4) The nature and continuity of ethics and politics.

It is my fervent hope that we can approach this veritably herculean task with great humility, and more particularly, docility.

We begin daily with a prayer to the Holy Spirit asking his divine help in our work. At the very minimum, ask your respectful silence, and note that it has never been known that prayer before study has had a deleterious effect on learning. (The prayer can be found on an attached page, both in English and in Latin.)

I regret having to include this in the syllabus, but . . . A basic rule here as in all social life is courtesy, that is to say politeness and good manners. This precludes the use of devices such as cell-phones. Further, courtesy requires careful listening to one another in discussion, prepared by keeping current with assignments. It ought to go without saying that any form of cheating (‘academic dishonesty’) is alone grounds for failure of the course.
Etiquette! (#10 of 'lost ideas' series)

Many men and women of my generation recall from childhood the lessons of good manners. Many do not. Where do the knife and fork and spoon belong on the place setting? Never fail to say 'please' and 'thank you' and 'excuse me.' Whom ought I introduce to whom first? Thank-you notes? Condolences? Congratulations? Proper attire? At minimum, how do I avoid being gauche or boorish; at best, how can I handle awkward moments gracefully? Collectively, these lets and leaves are of course, etiquette.

It saddens me that even among my own generation, many if not most of these lessons lie forgotten or have been deliberately cast aside. A deliberately folksy and casual era has destroyed all this; what is 'casual' has demythologized the divinity of social grace in favor of what is putatively 'more human,' and ordinary. In large part, this is the withered fruit of the radical individualism launched at the dawn of the modern age, but to consider etiology is a digression.

This is a serious loss; it has generated a serious deficiency; the present trend suggests worse conditions threatening in the future, as forecast from the already Gadarene slide into barbarity.

While there is of course social room for casual manners, there is also and more largely a demand for etiquette as I’ve described it. To call this demand ‘large’ is to say that it is both profounder and more extensive than the rather small arena of the casual. We face a behavioral equivalent of Gresham’s Law, where the lower social ‘currency’ has driven out the more noble.

The very word ‘etiquette’ is the French diminutive for ‘ethics,’ and etiquette really is ‘little ethics.’ It is an often non-verbal language that expresses interpersonal respect, honoring the dignity of human persons; the language of etiquette tacitly implies and simultaneously is built upon the truth that human persons are entities whose proper nature demands respect. It also expresses and enhances legitimate self-respect, and thus has a role even when one is alone. This language, as also all verbal languages, is in any given place different from others, but it is understood in its place, and is subject to translation. Thus, while Americans shake hands, and the Japanese bow, so also many South Americans hug, and in many places there is a kiss. All express respect for persons. Ultimately, this is because every human person is created in the image and likeness of God; this links etiquette not only to justice, but thereby to religion – justice owed from man to God. Because all moral virtue follows from prudence, and because prudence follows from speculative wisdom, and because speculative wisdom is the highest of the human virtues, etiquette, in in small things, is connected by its nature with human excellence and with God Himself.

The demand for overt and visible mutual respect is universal; it is coextensive with human nature. This demand is not met by the present supply.

While the roots of well-behaved and socially graceful men and women lie chiefly in childhood – in breeding – it must also be always reinforced and, further, grow into its adult state, when it is supple and adaptable to the always varying circumstances of place and time. Among aspects of human growth, age is obligatory, while etiquette is optional; growing in age is forced upon us; growing in social propriety must be chosen and cultivated. A profound consolation here is that one is always young, even though
not always chronologically, and God has rendered youth joyful. ‘Deus ... laetificat juventutem meum’ is true for all.

It must be carefully and thoughtfully noted that even what is often the mundane routine of executing the knowledge of greetings and introductions and table-setting, even these things are openings to transcendence, and invitations to spiritual prosperity. Learning civility of manners is part of learning to participate in civil and civilized life. Partly for these reasons, and partly because of the complexity of our social lives, etiquette is not altogether reducible to a set of rules – which is why Miss Post’s instruction manual from the 1940s is so frequently just comical. Rather, etiquette is, as it were, a bit flexible, and so demands adaptability; every social situation is in some way, after all, unique.

For all of this, and because of all of this, the denial or neglect of etiquette, the decline of good manners, and the reduction of good manners into an ersatz ‘just-us-folks-come-as-you-are’ version, is as earnestly to be deplored as its practice is to be honored.
A traditional prayer asking for the grace of the Holy Spirit. It has been used for centuries as a prayer of private devotion. The texts appear in the propers for the feast of Pentecost in both the Mass and Divine Office, and also in the votive Mass of the Holy Spirit. The first part, which has a partial indulgence attached to it, is the antiphon for the Magnificat for Pentecost. The vericle and response are associated with the readings for the feast. Lastly, the collect is found in the votive Mass.

VENI, Sancte Spiritus, reple tuorum: corda fidelium, et tui amoris in eis ignem accende.

COME, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of Thy faithful and kindle in them the fire of Thy love.

V. Exite Spiritum tuum et creabuntur;
R. Et renovabis faciem terrae.

V. Send forth Thy Spirit and they shall be created
R. And Thou shalt renew the face of the earth.

Oremus:

Let us pray:
O GOD, Who taught the hearts of the faithful by the light of the Holy Spirit, grant that, by the gift of the same Spirit, we may be always truly wise, and ever rejoice in His consolation. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.