

TESP 23 - THE CHURCH IN THE WORLD  
Summer 2009 (July 27 – August 27) Online Course  
Dr. James Nickoloff (email: jnickoloff@scu.edu)

## **COURSE DESCRIPTION AND AIMS**

In 1965 the Second Vatican Council of the Catholic Church promulgated a document called “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.” This course takes its title from that document. However, because some parts of the world today consider themselves “post-modern” while others remain “pre-modern,” it seemed best to modify the title to fit reality. As we well know, the world is very diverse and so is the church.

Two questions arise about the church: What is the church meant to be, and what is its proper mission in the world? The questions of the church's identity and its mission are as old as the church itself, and they continue to be widely debated by Christians today. The debate concerns many practical issues of Christian living such as what prayer should be like and what discipleship ought to entail. At the same time it reflects differing, even opposed, theological concepts, for example, who God is and what Jesus' life was about. The discussion concerns such intra-ecclesial (“in-house”) issues as the role of the laity, of women, and of theologians in the church. But Christians also debate extra-ecclesial (outside the church) matters such as the church's stance toward individual rights; modern, pluralist, democratic societies; and social justice. One particularly important issue today concerns the church's role in profoundly oppressive societies such as some in Latin America and Africa.

This course aims to prepare students to be able to participate intelligently in current discussions about the church's identity and mission. While our focus will be the Catholic Church, the course will also touch briefly on other Christian denominations.

The course sets three goals for class members: (1) to understand the theological foundation of the church, as articulated by the Second Vatican Council and by contemporary theologians; (2) to understand how distinct socio-political contexts shape the debate about the church; and (3) to begin to develop one's own ecclesiology—which refers to one's concept of church—in a way which is faithful to tradition, reason, and lived experience. This is a tall order; the course requirements are designed to accomplish the task.

## **INSTRUCTOR PROFILE**

Under “Lessons” for our course on ANGEL, you will find a video-taped “**Welcome**” which I have posted. It lasts about 10 minutes and consists of me introducing myself and explaining to you how I approach this course—and why. Please watch the video in conjunction with this written profile. (It can be seen in Quicktime or in Windows Media.)

I have been a teacher of Catholic theology for nearly three decades. The reasons for my choice of work are simple. **Teaching** is one of the best jobs in the world, as nearly all teachers will tell you, because of the meaningful relationship that can grow between teacher and student. **Theology**—the attempt to put religious experience into words—is ultimately an impossible task but worth the effort just the same. It gets at some of the most important questions of human life. And for me, the **Catholic** tradition is like a well from which I drink. While the water may sometimes contain impurities, it can nevertheless quench my thirst for inspiration, challenge, and community. Studying and teaching Catholic theology have introduced me to fantastic people over the years.

I am Associate Professor Emeritus of Religious Studies at the College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts where I taught undergraduate theology courses for twenty years. I am currently a Bannan Fellow at Santa Clara University; the fellowship gives me time to complete several theological projects I have been working on for a long time. The focus of my teaching over the years has been contemporary Catholic theology and in particular ecclesiology (theological meaning of the church) and the various theologies of liberation. Among the latter are the Latin American, feminist, African-American, and gay and lesbian theologies of liberation.

I was born and raised in Los Angeles, California, but my approach to theology has been profoundly shaped by living and working for extended periods outside the United States. These include three years in Andong, Korea as a Peace Corps Volunteer; two years in Kingston, Jamaica as a Jesuit (I was a member of the Society of Jesus from 1975 to 1990); and two years in Lima, Peru where I did the research and writing of my doctoral dissertation. The subject of my thesis was the ecclesiology of Gustavo Guti rrez (which refers to his concept of church), considered by many to be the founder of Latin American liberation theology. I would have to say that I learned as much about life as I did about theology from Gustavo. I have remained a close associate of his, and we co-teach a course on liberation theology every other summer at Boston College.

Besides Holy Cross and Boston College, I have taught at Weston Jesuit School of Theology (in Cambridge, MA), Santa Clara University, Incarnate Word University (in San Antonio, TX), and the Jesuit Theological College in Melbourne, Australia. I am the editor of *Gustavo Guti rrez: Essential Writings* (Orbis Books, 1996), a reader covering many of Gustavo's major writings, and I am co-editor with Orlando Esp'n of *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies* (Liturgical Press, 2007), a resource for undergraduates and general readers in the area of religion.

I lived in Boston, Massachusetts most of the past thirty years but have just moved to Miami, Florida where I will begin teaching at Barry University in the fall of 2009. I was married to my long-time partner Robert McCleary in 2007 (thank you, Massachusetts!). Besides theology, I love opera (though I can't sing) and am a competitive swimmer. I look forward to participating in this on-line course with you.

## **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

1. Mastery of the material covered in assigned readings, films, and on-line class discussions.
2. Informed participation in weekly online class discussion will allow students to learn from each other.
3. Four weekly one-page position papers based on assigned readings. Late written assignments will be penalized one letter grade.
4. Two 90-minute exams will provide an opportunity for synthesizing course material.
5. Diligence, humility, and humor are essential for this course just as they are for Christian living—diligence because the course material is challenging; humility because the course ultimately deals with the mystery of God who is unknowable; and humor because sometimes it alone can break through the paralysis of discouragement which afflicts us all. Thank God for friends who can make us laugh!

**COURSE EVALUATION:** Position papers (40%); two 90-minute exams (40%); class participation (20%).

**REQUIRED TEXTS** (The readings are listed in the order in which they will be treated in the course. The books should be bought before the course begins. The documents of the Vatican Council, the publications of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and the article by James Brockman are available on-line.)

Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Image, 1987). [To be purchased.]

T. Howland Sanks, *Salt, Leaven, and Light: The Community Called Church* (Crossroad, 1992). [To be purchased.]

The Second Vatican Council, *Lumen gentium* (1964); *Gaudium et spes* (1965). [Available on-line.]

James R. Brockman, "Pastoral Teaching of Archbishop Oscar Romero," *Spirituality Today* 40:2 (Summer 1988), available at [www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/884022brockman.html](http://www.spiritualitytoday.org/spir2day/884022brockman.html)