A Brief History of the Philosophy Department at Villanova University for the Past 50 Years

In 1959 I entered the graduate Master’s Degree program in Philosophy at Villanova. The Chairman of the Philosophy Department was an Augustinian, Father Robert Russell, OSA. Father Russell was appointed Chairman by Villanova’s Augustinian President. Father Russell accepted the appointment dutifully. He chaired the Department in absentia. I never met him while getting my Master’s Degree as a part-time graduate student.

Two professors divided the department leadership. Professor Donald Gallagher supervised the Master’s program and Professor Benjamin Papparella, as Assistant Chairman, supervised the undergraduate program. Both were Thomists. Gallagher’s PhD was earned at the University of Toronto. Papparella’s PhD was earned at Catholic University.

Professor Papparella interviewed me and hired me. Father Russell was not involved in the process except for his official approval. This occurred in 1966 after I taught four years at Iona College and completed the Phd coursework at Fordham University in New York.

The situation for junior faculty in Philosophy at Villanova in 1966 was strange. Professor Papparella was always available. However, he could never make a decision on his own. The Philosophy Department was housed in the basement of Vasey Hall. The senior

faculty shared offices. Junior faculty (10 or 12) were lodged in one room. Each had a desk and one chair for a student if the student wished to talk with his/her professor. No partitions were in this room. One should note that the only female undergraduates were nursing students or daughters of faculty. Villanova was a male dominated college.

The departmental politics were unpleasant at best. Senior faculty were antagonistic to each other and condescending to junior faculty. By my fourth year I was wondering if I had made a mistake to come to Villanova; by my sixth year things had changed. Villanova decided to accept AAUP guidelines. Chairs were being elected. Father Russell was either surprised or overjoyed when he was not elected. His response was to clear all his belongings from the office he so rarely visited. He never set foot in the department again.

Michael Slattery was elected chair. Professor Slattery was, perhaps, the only senior Professor who avoided all the politics. He had to be cajoled to accept his election. Fortunately, he was persuaded to take the chair for the good of the Department. Professor Slattery was so much better than he thought he was. Some junior faculty, myself included, received a pleasant benefit. According to AAUP guidelines, any Professor who had six years of full-time employment was given tenure. I received tenure without applying for it.

Professor Slattery was the right man for the job. The department settled down and flourished. Twenty-one credits in Theology and twenty-four credits in Philosophy required by all students would change. Women would become an integral part of the population. The heavily weighted Thomistic philosophy would be replaced by a swing toward continental philosophy championed by the now seasoned junior faculty.

Dire consequences envisioned by some senior faculty with the reduction of required philosophy credits never materialized. The new courses in continental, social and political, and American Philosophy were popular undergraduate offerings. Service courses for the School of Business (Logic and Business Ethics), Nursing, and Engineering Ethics kept the Department very busy.

The visiting professor program has benefitted the department since its inception. Ken Smidth was our first but the list is impressive. We also enjoyed a semester with Daniel Berrigan the anti-war Jesuit whom the FBI could never find during the Vietnam conflict.

The six years that I served on the Arts and Sciences Curriculum Committee (the last three as chair of the committee) saw reductions in required core courses. Philosophy and Theology required courses were the main targets for reduction by the rest of the college. Even though Philosophy and Theology lost their required courses, the Departments continued to flourish. The reason for that is quite obvious: the hiring of outstanding faculty. This is singularly true in Philosophy and it remains true today.

The addition of The Doctoral Program has been a huge success in recent years and seems to get stronger every year. The future looks very promising. The Department claims that its Doctoral Program has “particular strengths in the philosophy of mind, epistemology, analytic aesthetics and social and political philosophy”. It is a little short in the virtue of modesty. However, at times, modesty can be unbecoming. After all as the poet reminds us “Truth is beauty and beauty is truth,” Quod Visum Placet!

With the retirement of several senior faculty in the past two years and others about to happen, it is nice to know that the Department is in good hands. Tennyson reminds us: “The old order changeth yielding place to new lest one good custom corrupt the earth.”

I wrote too glibly about the movement from the dominance of Thomism to the emphasis on Continental philosophy. This trend brought with it internal tension. In fact, Philosophy departments in all Catholic Universities were intellectual battlefields. The traditional historical courses of ancient, medieval, modern, and contemporary Philosophy were being reduced with the reduction of required credits. The ratio studiorum of Catholic Colleges, seminaries, and convents could not survive. Many mourned its fate. Many more welcomed the end of what many saw as a narrow view. Villanova was no different.

The Academic superstars of the 50s and 60s in our department - Jim Anderson, Charlie O'Neal, Father Don Burt, Father Russell, Larry Stepelevitch, Ted Kondoleon, Tom Busch - were replaced (with the exception of Tom Busch who remains a superstar) by wunderkinds Jack Caputo, John Immerwahr, John Carvalho, Jack Doody, Joe Desjardins, and John Fielder. The transition was not always amicable but never got too nasty.

More recently the department has lured some shining stars from other universities - Walt Brogan, Helen Lang, Jim Wetzel, Sally Scholz, Sarah Vaughn Brakman, Jim McCartney, Julie Klein, and William Desmond. At the same time the department has recruited a new crop of outstanding talent. They include Yannik Thiem, Gabe Rockhill, George Theiner, Steve Napier, Chaone Mallory and Farshid Baghai.

The Augustinian presence at Villanova has diminished greatly. The population of religious orders has been reduced and the Augustinians are no exception. However, the privileged position of Philosophy and Theology has been maintained. It remains an integral part of Villanova's mission. As the University restructures itself as a nationally prominent research university, it will lose its number one ranking in US News and World Report among regional universities. Nevertheless, its reputation as a university that emphasizes teaching and close contact between teacher and student will survive and the Philosophy Department will continue to be a forerunner in that commitment.

The succession of chairs after Mike Slattery did a wonderful job in maintaining the department's position as the finest in the university. If an administrative position in the college was not directed by a member of the Philosophy Department, it was an upset. Barbara Wall, Jack Doody, John Immerwahr and I founded/headed programs in the College of Arts and Sciences. Jack Caputo and Jack Doody held academic chairs. Some members of the department are Deans, Assistants to the President or the Academic Vice-President.

Philosophers will always disagree with their colleagues on what courses are essential for philosophy majors or which philosophers must be a part of the curriculum. It is the nature of the beast. The Villanova Philosophy Department has featured many such discussions. These exchanges of ideas have helped and will continue to help the vitality of the department.

The unfortunate and much too early passing of Helen Lang and the recent retirements of Professors Immerwahr, Betz, Busch, and Regan will soon allow for more rising stars to shine in Villanova's sky.

Respectfully,

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