Why choose the Interdisciplinary Minor in Philosophy in the Catholic Tradition?

Every student in the College of Arts and Letters finds themselves taking courses in a number of very different disciplines. Sometimes this may provoke you to ask the question: How do these various forms of intellectual enquiry – historical, scientific, literary, philosophical, theological – relate to one another? And then the puzzle is: Where to go for an answer to the question? One place to go is this Interdisciplinary Minor.

If you are a theology or philosophy major, you will already have encountered a number of Catholic philosophers in your courses. But what you may not have come across is the thought that many of these thinkers worked within a tradition, a philosophical tradition concerned with the question of how the findings of the various secular disciplines relate to Catholic theology and the Catholic faith. Each of these disciplines has its own specialized understanding of what it is to be a human being in the natural and the social world. Human beings are, among other things, objects subject to the law of physics, sites of chemical reactions, products of the biological evolution of their species, neurologically and psychologically organized individuals, formed in key part by their social and economic interactions, participants in political societies, writers, readers and performers of poetry, music, and drama. How are these different aspects of our humanity related? Most importantly, how does what we learn from theology about our relationship to God bear on each of them and vice versa?

One distinctive aim of the Catholic philosophical tradition had been to provide answers by giving an account of human nature and the human condition which integrates our theological understanding of ourselves with the understanding provided by each of the secular enquiries. The particular secular discipline with which we will be concerned in this Minor is Political Science. (At some future time we hope to be able to consider other disciplines as well.) The Minor is designed for philosophy and theology majors who wish to build on what they have already learned. And the courses required include courses given in both the Philosophy and Theology Department on major Catholic philosophers, as well as courses in the Political Science Department. (Note that no course can satisfy a requirement both for this Minor and for the philosophy or the theology major.)

Among the required courses are an introductory course, Philosophy 326 cross-listed as Theology 326, “God, philosophy and universities,” and a capstone seminar, Philosophy 426D cross-listed as Theology 426D, “God, philosophy, and politics.” In the first of these we read texts by the thirteenth century Aquinas, by the seventeenth century Catholic thinker Arnauld (friend of both Descartes and Pascal), and by the nineteenth century Newman, each of whom has his own distinctive answers to the questions with which we are concerned. The Catholic philosophical tradition is one of continuing arguments and debates, arguments and debates in which we too will participate. In the capstone seminar, we will be concerned to consider both the relevance of thinks such as Augustine and Aquinas to political enquiry and the different perspectives on modern political life of contemporary political scientists, such as Robert Dahl, and of Catholic philosophers, such as Maritain and Simon.
The requirements for the minor are: 15 credit hours, beginning with Philosophy 326/Theology 326. Students also have to take two appropriate courses in political science and one course on a major Catholic philosopher or set of Catholic philosophers, either in the Theology Department (for philosophy majors) or in the Philosophy Department (for theology majors). They must finally take the capstone seminar, Philosophy 426D/Theology 426D. In semesters when there are too few students taking the Minor for a seminar to be possible, this requirement can be satisfied as a Directed Readings course that will cover the same ground as the seminar. A list of the courses currently approved as satisfying the requirements for the Minor can be obtained from the director, Professor Alasdair MacIntyre, who will be happy to answer any questions you may have. Please leave a message on his voicemail, 631-4537, letting him know how to reach you, so that he can set up an appointment.