

[New Catholic Studies degree program a first for Western Canada](#)

Newman Theological College has launched a new three-year Bachelor of Arts in Catholic Studies degree, targeting students who want a classical education combined with intellectual rigour and faith tradition.

It's a program that's unique in Western Canada, and meets a demand from students and families.

"The terms we use are that it is 'Great Books' in orientation, Socratic in pedagogy and faithfully Catholic in spirit," said Ryan Topping, vice-president and academic dean of Newman Theological College.

"We're planting a flag where Catholicism has something beautiful to offer the world. The Catholic intellectual tradition has been 'thinking about thinking' longer than anyone else."

The program was approved by Alberta's Ministry of Advanced Education in late August. The new liberal arts program is distinctive from the theology degrees offered at Newman Theological College, and is the first of its kind in Western Canada. A similar program is offered in Ontario at Our Lady Seat of Wisdom, a private university.

The [Bachelor of Arts in Catholic Studies](#) program is open to any student, although the initial impetus was to provide a three-year degree program for seminarians who don't have an undergraduate degree.

"We want 18 to 22-year-olds, including seminarians," Topping said.



Newman Theological College president Jason West says the degree accreditation process helped strengthen the college community. Alan Schietzsch, Grandin Media

College officials say research and modelling shows that there's an interest in the program.

"This would be an alternative for those families and parents who want kids to be involved in an accredited, but explicitly Catholic, classically oriented program," Topping explains. "Any student or any families who are interested in classical education, or in perhaps homeschooling, or schools that are offering more rigorously-based intellectual formation, they are interested in these kinds of programs."

"Universities have become extremely hostile to faith in ways they weren't even 20 years ago," Topping said. "We're among the first among institutions that are explicitly trying to rebuild a common curriculum based on classical models, as opposed to secular models of learning."

The first cohort of 11 students – seminarians from [St. Joseph Seminary](#) and [Holy Spirit Ukrainian Catholic Seminary](#) – will begin the program when the fall term at Newman Theological College starts Sept. 9.

Newman Theological College officials say the goal is to have 20 to 25 new students enrolled in the program each year, starting in September 2021. The college also plans to hire an additional faculty member to teach philosophy as part of the program.

The 93-credit Bachelor of Arts in Catholic Studies program uses a 'Great Books' model in which students study the original texts (rather than summaries in textbooks) of Athanasius, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Augustine and other philosophers, in addition to dealing with contemporary issues. It also follows what academics call the Socratic method: a question-and-answer format rather than a lecture.

"The courses also have a breadth that I think is noticeable," said Jason West, president of Newman Theological College. "It's not just philosophical or theological works, it's also literary and artistic works that reflect engagement with these themes. The student gets really a holistic vision of how our culture has wrestled with these problems."

West noted the students will be taking the same courses together.

"The courses are selected in a way that is integrated, so what is being taught in one course builds upon and is related to what they're learning in all of their other courses," West said.

The first year includes a course called Way of Beauty, focusing on the Catholic tradition in the arts. It includes a practical component in which students create their own art – religious icons, for example.

The study of sacred music will be led by Roderick Bryce, the music director of [St. Joseph's Basilica](#).

Topping and West will teach the introductory courses of philosophy and Catholic studies.

"You'll have the president and the dean teaching the first courses that the students get," West said, "which I think is helpful both symbolically – it signifies this is institutionally an important priority – and it signals a little bit of a difference in how we approach things that we're placing a priority on the introductory foundations."

The degree program was approved after a two-year accreditation process. This marks the first time in many years that a private institution has gone through the provincial accreditation process in Alberta.

"In our strategic plan, we were exploring the possibility of developing an undergraduate degree," West said, adding the accreditation process brought the college community together towards a common goal.

"One of the challenging things, although it was a joyful thing, was building a common mind around how we want to proceed in the program. I think it's also helped build the college community going through that."

Now that the new degree program has been officially approved by the provincial government, Newman Theological College is expected to launch a marketing plan

later this year to advertise it.