

## QUESTIONS OF FAITH

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**FOR VIRGINIA RYAN, THE STUDY AND TEACHING OF RELIGION INVOLVES SEEKING ANSWERS TO SOME OF LIFE'S MOST COMPLEX ISSUES.**



Photo by Jodie Andruskevich

**I**t would be an understatement to describe religion as “complicated.” Even those who have built careers around the study of religion admit that they may never truly understand everything about it. But for some, that continued exploration is the most rewarding part of the journey. Virginia Ryan, Associate Professor of Religious Studies, remains wholly committed to that pursuit, and takes it a step further through her work at Rivier. “I find that teaching fulfills two directions in my life, intellectual inquiry and pastoral connection,” she says. “In a sense, teaching is my ministry, and certainly my vocation.”

A lifelong Catholic, Ryan became interested in theology as an undergraduate at Boston College. “My faith is a questioning one,” she says, “and theology gave me the opportunity to learn what the questions were for me and for so many others before me, and to pursue them doggedly.” She earned a master of divinity degree to broaden her perspective not only on the Catholic faith but on other religions. “Genuine seeking of knowledge and truth cannot help but lead us to a deeper understanding of God,” she says.

Ryan’s students learn quickly that she expects them to pursue their own answers. “I want students to think about the source of their values,” she says. “It is only very recently—if you consider a few hundred centuries ‘recently’—that we separated religion from morality; our Western tradition and history show us that to ask basic questions of meaning brings us to the realm of religion.” She finds this

particularly important in teaching ethics, introducing a focus on social justice and human flourishing. “What is important for me as a teacher of ethics is that students learn to see problems from the perspectives of all involved, but particularly from those whose voices are faint or silent.”

Bioethics classes, in particular, present opportunities for Ryan to challenge her students’ previously held beliefs on such sensitive topics as stem-cell research and assisted suicide. “The issues are often difficult in that they raise emotional responses to what are often complex problems,” she says. Her class discussion “ground rules” require students to offer informed and reasoned opinions, no matter how strongly they feel about the issue; and she is always listening for places in the discussion where direct application of learned theory is applicable, so her students see the real-world connections.

She feels so strongly about bioethics as a discipline that she is currently working on a proposal for a bioethics textbook that would be geared toward undergraduates planning careers in healthcare professions. By combining the theological and philosophical perspectives with the social dimensions of healthcare, Ryan hopes to guide students’ thinking on the issues with a focus on “the poor, the marginalized and the vulnerable. These are the ones who have little to no voice in the direction we take in healthcare policy,” she says.

Ryan considers some of her greatest teaching experiences as those in which students identify themselves as non-believers. “It is often these students who challenge me and their fellow students the most because they ask the crucial questions that bring us to deeper class discussions,” she says. Rather than seeing her role as an advocate for belief, she prefers to encourage students to be open to other perspectives. “Because my own religious experience has been deepened by doubt and questioning, I have a genuine appreciation for students to do the same. Yet, for a teacher, this too can be an on-your-toes experience!”

A resident of Worcester, Mass., Ryan participates in activities outside Rivier that enrich her both personally and professionally. She serves on the board of directors and ethics committee for Notre Dame Health Care, Inc. in Worcester, and serves as a Eucharistic minister for her parish, bringing communion to Catholic men and women in assisted living facilities. She also plays guitar and sings with her parish folk group, continues her karate training—she’s a black belt—and has recently returned to horseback riding after nearly 40 years. “It was my greatest passion as a young person,” she says. “It is thrilling to ride again!” And always, Ryan cherishes her family. Her husband, Neil Castronovo, Ph.D., is dean of student development at Assumption College in Worcester; daughter Elizabeth, 22, is a graduate student in counseling at Assumption, and daughter Annie, 16, is a student at Marianapolis Preparatory School in Connecticut.

Ryan will undoubtedly continue to inspire her students as they contemplate their own definitions of faith and values—and continue to question what they know: “I count some of my great successes as a teacher with those students who not only absorb the content of a course, but also have come to understand themselves as lifelong thinkers and learners who have a responsibility to reflectively engage in the world.” ■

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