

July 2015

To whom it may concern,

Dr. Dugan was one of my religious studies professors at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her course, "Catholics in U.S. History," covered many topics including the Immigrant Church, the Second Vatican Council, and the emergence of the Millennial Catholics. Initially transitioning from a traditional Catholic high school to a more liberal college campus, I learned that there were many different ways to discuss the topic of religion and religious practices. Unfortunately, in many of my previous classes, religious-based discussions were one-sided, often in an unfavorable manner, and poorly facilitated. Yet for all the controversial topics we covered in Miss Dugan's class, my experience there was the complete opposite.

To begin, Professor Dugan often greeted the class warmly and had a general openness in her demeanor. This created a general feeling of safety, which eventually coaxed shyer students, such as myself, to share their opinions with the class. Comments of all varieties, be them serious inquiries, analytical observations, or humorous side comments were accepted respectfully by the professor, thus encouraging students to do the same to one another. As a result, she was able to facilitate multi-sided discussions on highly-debated subjects such as the priest sex abuse incidents. For the few times when discussion did turn to argument, she handled those situations, subtly, often with a humorous reply that both acknowledged the speakers' points, yet also diffused the tension they had created in the class.

Another admirable aspect of Dr. Dugan's teaching method was her sense of neutrality. Unlike my previous religious studies professor, she appeared comfortable with the class knowing her religious identity, yet when presenting topics such as birth control and Vatican II, she was fairly successful in concealing her personal opinion. She even volunteered information from both sides of the debate before opening topics up for discussion. As a result, students did not feel conditioned to respond in a certain way. In fact, I noticed that many students, including myself, who had previously been hiding their religious identities, began personally relating and contributing to these topics but in the same neutral manner. Overall, I came out of this class having learned much, not just about a particular religion but also how to discuss it. I learned how to be respectful of other's beliefs while staying true to my own, and I learned that how a professor teaches a class is just as important as what she teaches in it.