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## Father Spitzer's Genius

**Former Catholic University President Diversifies Skills**

BY ANTHONY FLOTT  
REGISTER CORRESPONDENT

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IRVINE, Calif. — There are those who wonder if Jesuit Father Robert Spitzer is biting off more than he can chew.

Not Timothy Busch, president emeritus of the Magis Institute of Faith and Reason, a sort of spiritual think tank Father Spitzer founded in Irvine, Calif.

"He can chew a lot," Busch said.

Indeed. During Father Spitzer's tenure at Gonzaga University, enrollment jumped from 4,507 to 7,300 students, annual gifts received nearly tripled to \$15.4 million, 18 buildings were constructed, liturgies and retreat programs tripled, and student community service exceeded 100,000 hours annually. He also wrote extensively, was chaplain of Legatus, spoke 300 times a year and hosted an EWTN series.

"He works seven days a week, 16 hours a day," said Busch. "He is a genius. He thinks bigger than most people and gets the end answer before anyone can catch up."

Father Spitzer retired as Gonzaga president in July, but the 57-year-old priest is anything but idle. He is transitioning from higher education to education of the masses, trying to change the culture in boardrooms, classrooms and anywhere else he can find a place for God.

With Magis, he is striving to build a stronger intellectual foundation for the faith life of high school and college students facing "pop-culture atheism." With the Ann Arbor, Mich.-based Spitzer Center for Ethical Leadership, he aims to change the way ethics and leadership are instilled in secular and faith-based organizations.

The two institutes are independent but will share staff, technology, Web-based curricula — and Father Spitzer. Fortunately, he said, he has assistance.

"God's helping me out a whole lot," Father Spitzer said.

### More With Magis

At Magis, one of the chief aims is to convince young people there even *is* a God. To do so, they're not starting with theology.

Busch said youth want science to prove that God exists.

"The believers of the past trusted in faith," said Busch. "Students today want reason to explain their faith."

Too often, though, science is used to argue against God as what Father Spitzer calls "pop-culture atheism."

It's a charge, he said, being led by atheists such as Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins.

Young people hear their science-oriented arguments and, believing that science and faith are irreconcilable with each other, start to have "really terrible doubts."

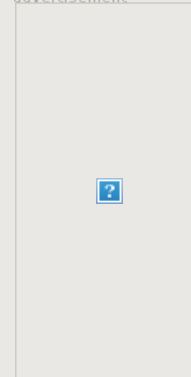
Magis aims to fight fire with fire on different fronts, beginning with science.

The institute is developing five Web-based curricula on faith and reason: astrophysical and contemporary philosophical responses to atheism; historical evidence of Jesus; suffering and the love of God; and moving from materialism to transcendent purpose in life.

The curricula are inspired by three of Father Spitzer's soon-to-be published books.

"Catechesis is really, really important," Father Spitzer said. "But ... if kids do not have a strong sense of the existential presence of God and the historicity of Jesus, if they don't have a strong, solid grounding of the faith, catechesis is just a turgid, abstract process. Whereas if they have a strong sense of the presence and reality of God, then catechesis, they'll just thirst for it. They'll wolf it down."

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Professional presentation also is key.

Pop-culture atheists — “darlings of the media,” said Father Spitzer — get premium media and bookstore placement and produce slick multimedia presentations that spread virally across the Internet.

Magis will use professional Catholic Hollywood writers and directors to produce four documentaries to deliver its curricula to seminaries, Newman Centers, university campus ministries, high schools and adult education programs.

Busch said Magis has discussed distribution through the Knights of Columbus, Fellowship of Catholic University Students, Newman Centers and others.

The first DVD could be available within eight months, provided first to seminarians.

Content will incorporate video, visual effects and interactivity.

“It is way ahead,” said Busch. “It has extraordinary content, and we are modeling it with great graphics.”

The first DVD will be an hour-long documentary that includes interviews with 12 of the world’s top astrophysicists who, Father Spitzer said, will talk about “a Creator being pointed to by contemporary astrophysics, not vice versa.”

“In other words,” he said, “science is not pointing away from faith; science is running full blast toward faith.”

Links will connect to extended video with each scientist, various supporting materials, YouTube clips, Facebook pages and more. Much of it will be available for free via the Internet.

“Catechesis will take off like a rocket ship because they will be hungry to know everything about God,” Father Spitzer said.

### Spitzer Center

The Spitzer Center, established in 2006, envisions becoming “the world’s premier source for ethics and leadership education.” Clients range from Boeing to Jack in the Box.

Unlike other ethics programs, which Father Spitzer said focus on compliance and “10 major commandments” of organizational ethics, the Spitzer Center instead focuses on three things:

Personal transformation to overcome the four core reasons for ethical problems: fear, hubris, greed and people-pleasing.

“We offer solutions of alternative identities, namely contributive identity, instead of an ego-comparative identity,” Father Spitzer said. “In religious terms, you might call it a conversion.”

Culture transformation from passive/aggressive or defensive modes to constructive modes that are more “ethically able,” creative and profitable. “If the culture is with you, it’s so much easier to make the right ethical choices,” Father Spitzer said.

Making right judgments. “Reflection is very much discounted in this culture,” Father Spitzer said. “We tend to overvalue administrivia, getting all these little things done, and we undervalue contemplation, reflection, thinking about the big issues, thinking about who I am, thinking about what my allies are thinking about.”

All of which should lead to “noble” visions and missions that engage the “contributive spirits” in people.

“It makes their own contributive agenda, their own contributive spirit come alive, and people like doing things that are essentially positive,” Father Spitzer said. “There’s only so long you can get a high from beating the competition. But you can really get a high continuously from making a difference to whatever it is.”

### Leveling Out

The Spitzer Center curriculum is based on a model Father Spitzer calls the “Four Levels of Happiness,” reflecting the Aristotelian idea that happiness is the one goal people pursue as an end in itself. Happiness can be sought on levels moving from pleasure, to status, to contribution and service, to the ultimate good that comes from encountering God.

He didn’t discover the levels, said Spitzer Center’s executive director, Jim Berlucchi. “You see them throughout history. You see it in Aquinas, see it in Augustine, in a variety of different psychological and philosophical models,” Berlucchi said. “But he’s the one who dubs them the ‘Four Levels of Happiness’ and the one who brought about a kind of analysis and description that is extremely helpful for people who would otherwise kind of dismiss the subject as maybe being superficial.”

The lower levels should serve the higher levels, said Father Spitzer.

But when the lower levels become the dominant focus for a person or organization, they’re debilitating.

It’s why some organizations have oppressive, politicized cultures while others are creative and contributive.

Father Spitzer, Berlucchi said, operates at the top levels. “His leadership style, that’s Level 3, leaving a legacy and calling people on to the greater goal of making an optimal, positive difference with his life, a phrase he uses,” Berlucchi said. “Level 4 is really giving one’s whole self to God. Father Spitzer is consummately a man of faith and a priest and a Jesuit. His whole life is predominantly centered around his call as a Catholic priest, and the Mass is really the center and focal point of his every day. The fulfillment of his priestly ministry is really the thing that most drives him, and he literally feels part of the communion of saints. That gives him a great charge.”

The Spitzer Center hopes during the next three years to train 25,000 organizational leaders and

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administrators as well as 10,000 clergymen, seminarians and lay leaders, while building working relationships with 25 dioceses.

That already includes the Diocese of Phoenix, which is completing the center's "Journey to Excellence" program.

So is all of it too big of a bite — even for Father Spitzer?

"There isn't a request or proposal that Father [Spitzer] doesn't like," Berlucchi said. "He's very generous. Maybe generous to a fault. That can be a bit of a worry that he's got to prioritize, and we work with him to help sort through what he can and can't do, but I think he's getting much better at that.

"He's a slacker if he works 60 hours. He's a tireless worker, and he works very quickly. In terms of his writing, a lot of it he dictates. He has a prodigious memory. He's one of those who walks the talk. He's a very good talker; he's an even better walker."

And that's saying a mouthful.

*Anthony Flott writes  
from Papillion, Nebraska.*

### **A Man in Black Helps Companies Get Back on Track**

Can a man in black help a company get into the black?

Yes, said the Spitzer Center's executive director, Jim Berlucchi, who points to the center's work with Caterpillar to help it overcome "tensions internal to its workforce."

"It brought about some very good changes in the management of the organization in terms of being more servant-leaders, being more emphatic with their employees, being better communicators in terms of the vision of the organization and trying to live out that Level 3 set of commitments," Berlucchi said.

Employees were more cooperative, peace came, and "they enjoyed significantly more productivity in the organization."

So how do secular organizations react to the collar?

"Usually, we raise it in advance," said Berlucchi, who notes that lay staff with the Spitzer Center also work with clients. "For the most part, because of Father Spitzer's credentials and because of the very respectful way in which he works in a secular environment, they receive him very well.

"Now, initially the collar ... could for some people be an issue, but they very quickly get over that. He's a Ph.D.; he's a philosopher. He has been a president of a university, and he's worked with Tony Blair's Cabinet. He's worked with secular leaders in big organizations like Costco and Toyota, Caterpillar, so he has a track record that is very, very respectable, very credible."

Don Western, a retired vice president with Caterpillar, understands the apprehension. He brought Father Spitzer to work with a few Caterpillar divisions and its plants in 2003.

"There was some fear from my boss, but he trusted me," said Western, a Catholic who attends St. Vincent de Paul Parish in Peoria, Ill. "I was a little concerned how people might view this, but it melted away when they were exposed to it. They could see the value themselves, and from there it sold itself. People started asking when they were to be scheduled for the material."

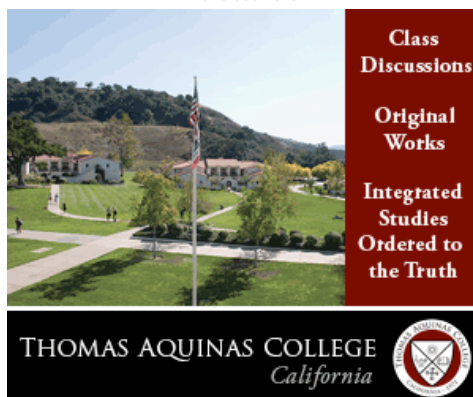
Senior leaders used Father Spitzer's materials up to 2008. Their spouses took part, too. Western said the curriculum reinforced Caterpillar's values of mutual respect, trust and teamwork.

"Father Bob has a unique way of touching your heart, and he did that even on DVDs that helped us underscore the message and the desired behaviors," Western said. "The Christian message is getting lost in this world today, and it shows in the way companies are behaving. Father Bob's curriculum brings back what truly makes us Americans great: living our faith. So it was quite different, like nothing ever done before. It was continued by succeeding managers that were not so much grounded in faith, but more because they could see that it worked. It was tremendously effective."

— Anthony Flott

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