



The Dominican House of Studies

Founded in 1905 • A Pontifical Faculty since 1941

PhD in Theology (Thomistic Studies)

Brief Description

Thomistic theology has been perennially important since the Common Doctor's lifetime. The Dominican House of Studies, a world leader in Thomistic thought, is launching a new PhD program that will sustain and advance Thomistic scholarship and teaching at the highest levels.

The PhD in Theology (Thomistic Studies) program helps students to develop a comprehensive understanding of theology according to the mind of St. Thomas Aquinas, with attention to his sources, historical context, later development in the Thomistic tradition, and applicability for the questions and needs of today. Students may specialize in Thomistic dogmatic theology or moral theology, although both will be expected for coursework and comprehensive examinations.

The PhD program at DHS offers candidates a terminal degree that is widely accepted in Catholic and secular academia. It draws upon the professorial and research strengths of the school, which has offered an ecclesiastical Doctorate in Theology (STD) since 2012. Students would also benefit from the activities and dynamism of our Thomistic Institute (TI), the school's research institute.

The program envisions five years of full-time work: four semesters for coursework, one semester for comprehensive examinations, and five semesters for the dissertation. The student must be resident for the first four years. It is presumed that students will spend the summers in full-time doctoral work but need not be resident during that time.

Full scholarship opportunities, with living stipends, are competitively available.

PhD students in the program must have previously completed an MA in theology (or its equivalent) and eighteen credit hours of philosophy.

The PhD in Theology (Thomistic Studies) program will be introduced with the fall 2026 semester. The application process for prospective students opens with the fall 2025 semester.

The program has been approved by the Commission on Accrediting of the Association of Theological Schools.

For questions about the program, please contact the director of the doctoral program, Fr. Andrew Hofer, O.P., at ahofer@dhs.edu. For questions about the application procedures, please contact the registrar, Mrs. Elizabeth Kimes, at registrar@dhs.edu.

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Learning Objectives

Upon the successful completion of this degree, students should be able to:

- 1) Demonstrate an overall understanding of what St. Thomas Aquinas contributes to dogmatic and moral theology, through coursework and comprehensive examinations.
- 2) Produce original research in a chosen field within either dogmatic theology or moral theology of Thomistic Studies, as demonstrated by the dissertation.
- 3) Be prepared for further research and teaching in theology on the university and seminary levels of higher education.

Degree Requirements

The program consists of three parts: coursework, comprehensive examinations, and dissertation. First, the student must complete a specialized two-year program of courses consisting of 38 credits. Second, the student must draw up ten approved themes, inclusive of bibliographies, within defined areas of Thomistic studies, and will be given both written and oral comprehensive examinations. Third, the student must write and defend a dissertation of original work within Thomistic Studies. After successfully completing the comprehensive examinations, the student becomes a PhD candidate who must submit a dissertation proposal. Once that is approved, the candidate needs to pass a midcourse review before the dissertation board, after submitting approximately half of the dissertation work. The candidate completes the program after submitting the defended dissertation, with any revision, to the Pontifical Faculty as a matter of record. The total expected time from beginning the program to graduation is five years, inclusive of full-time work in the summers. Of course, there would be no obstacle to graduating from the program more quickly if a satisfactory dissertation were completed earlier.

Admission

The PhD program is open to all qualified students. The following prerequisites for admission will be evaluated by the Committee on Thomistic Studies, which serves as the admissions board for this degree. The committee may, in individual cases, recommend to the academic dean that the student remedy particular deficiencies during the first two years of the program. The academic dean has the final authority for admitting an applicant to the PhD program and may not admit an applicant without the approval with a simple majority vote of the Committee on Thomistic Studies, headed by the director of the school's Thomistic Institute.

The applicant must have the following prerequisites.

- 1) At least 18 credit hours in philosophy (at the undergraduate or graduate level) drawn from the following areas: history of philosophy, logic, metaphysics, ethics, philosophical anthropology, natural philosophy, and philosophy of knowledge. Applicants with only 12 credit hours in philosophy may be considered for admission. If accepted, they must complete the full 18 credit hours before completing the PhD coursework, which would be considered additional to the PhD coursework.
- 2) An MA in theology (or its equivalent), with a GPA of at least 3.25.
- 3) Three letters of recommendation by persons who are in a position to judge the applicant's ability for doctoral studies in theology.
- 4) Current photo and completed application form.
- 5) Curriculum vitae.
- 6) Results of the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) indicating aptitude for doctoral studies. The PFIC is listed under Dominican House of Studies, code 2498.
- 7) A writing sample, such as an essay or published article, that demonstrates the applicant's writing skills.
- 8) A statement of intent [1200–1500 words] regarding one's reason for doctoral study in theology (Thomistic Studies).
- 9) A demonstrated reading knowledge of Latin, French, and one additional modern language for academic study. If a student does not demonstrate reading knowledge in all three languages at admission, that student must prove reading knowledge through proficiency examination before the end of the second full year of the PhD program.
- 10) An interview, normally in-person, is required as part of the application process.

Scholarship Possibilities

Candidates to the doctoral program may apply for scholarships. Such scholarships, when available, normally consist in a waiver of tuition fees. Candidates may also apply for a Thomistic Institute doctoral fellowship, which awards a stipend to cover some living expenses in addition to a tuition waiver each year of study up to four years. If a fifth year of funding is needed, the student may apply for a one-year extension of the fellowship. These doctoral fellowships are dependent on satisfactory and timely completion of the program requirements, as detailed in the fellowship agreement. All students receiving a tuition waiver (whether as recipients of tuition scholarships or of tuition and stipend doctoral fellowships) are to be research assistants for faculty for the four semesters of their second and third years of the program. Typically, they are expected to work about 8 hours per week during a semester.

Language Requirements

If the student has not yet demonstrated reading proficiency in Latin, French, and one additional modern language before beginning coursework, that student must normally demonstrate reading proficiency in all three languages by the end of the second full year. This can be done by written examination or six credits of graduate coursework. Language proficiency exams are offered twice per semester.

Coursework

A minimum of 38 semester hours of credit is required in twelve three-credit courses and two one-credit pass/fail courses. The twelve three-credit courses include three specialized sections: historical context of Aquinas's thought, Thomism in modernity, and special topics in dogmatic and moral Thomistic thought. The director of the doctoral program serves as the advisor for PhD students during the stages of coursework and comprehensive examinations, and the student requests from this director a mentor who may be considered to become the dissertation director after the successful completion of the comprehensive examinations. If the student has graduate coursework in theology beyond the MA before entering this PhD program, the director of the doctoral program may recommend to the academic dean that the student be excused from no more than six credits of coursework. The director of the doctoral program may also recommend to the academic dean to allow up to six credit hours of graduate studies in disciplines ancillary to theology on the graduate level (such as in philosophy, Church history, paleography, or advanced language study beyond what is already necessary for admission to the PhD program), whether those courses are the same as those counted for previous coursework beyond the MA requirements or done concurrently with theology in this PhD program. At least 18 of the 36 credits must be done on the doctoral level (800-level). These courses could run as seminars or tutorials. In order to advance to the stage of comprehensive examinations, the student must maintain a grade point average of 3.5 in the two-year program of coursework. Two one-credit pass/fail courses, each of four meetings per semester (with each meeting 90 minutes), assist the doctoral students in research and writing as well as in learning and teaching.

Model Curriculum

Year I (Fall Semester)

- Aquinas and the Fathers (3 credits)
- Faith and Reason (3 credits)
- Elective (3 credits)
- One-credit pass/fail course: Research and Writing Methods (four meetings)

Year I (Spring Semester)

- Aquinas and the Masters of the Medieval University (3 credits)
- The Shape of Modern Theology (3 credits)
- Elective (3 credits)
- One-credit pass/fail course: Learning and Teaching Methods (four meetings)

Year II (Fall Semester)

- St. Thomas and the Thomists (3 credits)
- Elective (3 credits)
- Elective (3 credits)

Year II (Spring Semester)

- Thomism in Modernity (3 credits)
- Elective (3 credits)
- Elective (3 credits)

Comprehensive Examinations

The comprehensive examinations cover ten defined areas of Thomistic Studies, and the student must draw up particular topics, supported by bibliographies, that expand what the student has learned during the two years of coursework. No topic addressed in a course paper may be proposed as a topic for the comprehensive examinations, although there may be some overlap between the examination topic and previous coursework.

The ten areas of Thomistic Studies follow generally the plan of St. Thomas's *Summa Theologiae* and are the following: (1) sacra doctrina (2) the divine essence; (3) the divine persons; (4) creation; (5) general moral principles; (6) law and grace; (7) virtues and vices; (8) the graces freely given and states of life; (8) Christ; (9) sacraments; (10) the last things. In developing the particular topics and bibliographies, the student must designate:

- At least one of these topics must be attentive to Aquinas's use of Scripture and his scriptural commentary work
- At least one to Aquinas's use of patristic sources
- At least one to Aquinas's use of philosophical sources for his theology
- At least one to Aquinas's historical context of comparable scholastics in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries
- At least one to the development of the Thomistic tradition between the death of Aquinas (1274) and the Second Vatican Council (1962-65)
- At least one to the significance of Aquinas's work in dialogue with a theologian or for a theological discussion after the Second Vatican Council

Each bibliography must include at least two different works by Aquinas and at least eight other significant sources. The director of the doctoral program communicates from the student the proposed topics and bibliographies to the Committee on Thomistic Studies, and from the committee to the student any necessary revisions that need to be done. Normally the topics and bibliographies need to be submitted by July 1 after two years of coursework, and the director should communicate to the student the committee's decision within one month.

The comprehensive examinations normally take place early in December of the third year of doctoral work. This consists of two stages: written and oral. The director of the doctoral program chooses three faculty members, at least two of whom must be on the Committee on Thomistic Studies. One of these will be designated by the director to serve as the praeses of the comprehensive examinations. The praeses is responsible for drawing up written examinations and presiding at the oral examinations.

The written examinations will take place over two days in a total of four sessions, each session of two hours in length. Each session will have two questions drawn by the praeses in some way from the proposed topics, and the student will choose one of the two questions to answer within the allotted time. The entire board will read all four essays. In order for the student to pass the written comprehensive examination and advance to the oral comprehensive examination, the student must receive at least 10 passing grades of a total of 12 from the board of three examiners. If a student does not receive at least 10 passing grades, the complete written examinations must be taken again no sooner than two months and no longer than six months, with new questions based upon the same topics that had been approved. Failure a second time means that the student must withdraw from the doctoral program.

After the student passes the written comprehensive examinations, the praeses assembles the board for a 90-minute examination, again based on the topics and bibliographies, within one week of the completion of the written examinations. The student must receive a passing grade from all three board members for the oral examinations. If the student fails the oral examination, the oral examinations must be taken again no sooner than two months and no longer than six months. Failure a second time means that the student must withdraw from the doctoral program. Based upon both the written and oral examinations, the praeses may announce that a successful student has passed, passed with honors, or passed with highest honors. In addition, rubrics on the comprehensive examinations are filled out by each board member for the Pontifical Faculty's assessment but not given to the student.

PhD Candidacy: Doctoral Dissertation

Once the student has completed the comprehensive examinations, he or she petitions the director of the doctoral program to be a PhD candidate, with either a major in dogmatic theology or moral theology (and the minor in the other subfield) and to have a dissertation director in the proposed subfield of theology named for that student. The student submits a proposal for the doctoral dissertation, which must be approved by the dissertation director, and then submitted to the Thomistic Studies Committee members. They discuss the proposal and must approve it by a two-thirds vote. The wider faculty of this institution is then sent the proposal for their comments. The director of the doctoral program, after having heard from the candidate and the dissertation director, appoints two readers, one of whom may be external to this Pontifical Faculty. The dissertation director is responsible for communicating all comments from the faculty to the candidate. The student is to be accorded until June 30 of the student's fifth year of the PhD program for completion of the dissertation, although a student may finish earlier. The student may petition the Thomistic Studies Committee for a one-year extension, which may be repeated once more. Normally, it is expected for the student committed to full-time study to complete the dissertation within two years after approval of the proposal. A student may also petition the academic dean for a leave of absence from the program in exceptional circumstances.

A midcourse review is necessary for the student to receive feedback. Normally within one year after the completion of the comprehensive examinations, the student submits the dissertation work (typically nearly half of the dissertation's length) to the dissertation director, who has been assisting the student throughout this time of candidacy/dissertation writing. With the agreement of the dissertation director, the student must give the dissertation work in hard and electronic copies to the entire board. The director calls for a midcourse review discussion in which the student must present the work and answer questions about its progress before the board. This review should normally take place within two months of the work's submission and should be no less than one hour and no more than one and one-half hours in length. In order for the student to pass the review,

the two readers must formally agree with the dissertation director by signed statement of confidence in the student's work to proceed to completion of the dissertation and defense. If not all agree, another formal review may be held no sooner than four months. If all three do not agree after another midcourse review, the student may appeal to the director of the doctoral program to appoint a different reader. That director hears from both the dissertation director and the reader(s) in question regarding this dispute. A student has the right to appeal to the academic dean, whose judgment is final. A rubric is completed at the time of a midcourse review.

In addition to the midcourse review, readers must communicate written comments on the work of the students through the medium of the director of the dissertation. That director should be made aware of any ongoing communications between the student and the readers.

Normally, the dissertation will be 85,000 to 110,000 words (inclusive of footnotes). Any divergence from this standard must be approved by the academic dean, if the dissertation director supports that proposed exception. This measure does not include the obligatory bibliography. The dissertation must conform to the Pontifical Faculty's style guide and demonstrate an original project in Thomistic Studies. After completion of the writing, the student can submit the thesis for acceptance only when the director has approved the thesis for submission. After that, the student must give the dissertation to the two readers. The director and readers must each sign a form testifying that the dissertation is worthy to be publicly defended before a defense date is set, normally not more than one month after submission of the completed dissertation. A rubric for an evaluation of the dissertation is filled out by each board member for the Pontifical Faculty's assessment but not for the candidate's consideration.

The dissertation must be defended in a public defense consisting of a synopsis of the dissertation that lasts 20 to 30 minutes, with the candidate answering questions from all the board members. The defense must last between a total of 75 and 90 minutes, based upon the discretion of the dissertation director, who serves as the praeses. In order for the defense to be successful, all three must agree that the PhD candidate has passed this final stage of the doctoral program and should be awarded the PhD from the Pontifical Faculty of the Immaculate Conception. A student who fails may appeal to the academic dean of the Pontifical Faculty, who has the authority to re-constitute the board and to set a new defense, but not within four months of the previous defense. If a student fails again, the degree is not awarded. No honors are ever awarded for a dissertation and its defense. A rubric for the defense is filled out by each board member for the Pontifical Faculty's assessment but not for the candidate's consideration.

A candidate normally has up to two months to complete any revisions requested by the defense board, but no revisions may also be necessary. The student must email a document in PDF format to the academic dean, director of the doctoral program, and head librarian, with a page signed by the director and two readers testifying to its completion, in order to be awarded the PhD.

After the defended dissertation has been submitted to the school as a matter of record, the candidate petitions the academic dean to be awarded the PhD in Theology (Thomistic Studies).

Residency and Timeline

The residency requirement for the PhD is a total of eight semesters:

- four semesters for coursework,
- one semester for comprehensive examinations, and
- three semesters for the dissertation.

It is presumed that the student is spending the summers in full-time doctoral work, but need not be resident during that time. The program of doctoral studies would normally take five years. Of course, there would be no obstacle to graduating from the program more quickly if a satisfactory dissertation were completed earlier. Here is the typical timeline:

- Four semesters of coursework.
- Language requirements must be satisfied by the end of the second full year, if not completed before the student enters the PhD program.
- Normally July 1 after four semesters of coursework, comprehensive examination topics and bibliographies due to the director of the doctoral program.
- By one month after comprehensive examinations submitted, the student receives feedback from the examination board, established by the director of the doctoral program.
- Written and oral comprehensive examinations, normally in December of the third year.
- After successful completion of the comprehensive examinations, request to be considered a PhD candidate with the naming of a dissertation director.
- Submission of the dissertation proposal to the Committee on Thomistic Studies and full faculty. Appointment of the two readers.
- Midcourse review normally within one year of the completion of the comprehensive examinations. Feedback from the dissertation board with testimony of expectation of possible successful completion.
- Dissertation defense normally occurs before April of the student's fifth year, and any further requested revision must be done before submission of the dissertation to the Pontifical Faculty's library and approval for graduation.
- After all requirements are completed, the student petitions the academic dean to graduate.

Contact Information

For questions about the program, please contact the director of the doctoral program, Fr. Andrew Hofer, O.P., at ahofer@dhs.edu. For questions about the application procedures, please contact the registrar, Mrs. Elizabeth Kimes, at registrar@dhs.edu.