

## About the St. John's College Seminar

**What is the Seminar?** It is a conversation among participants and one or two faculty members about a text they have all read beforehand (note, by the way, that at St. John's, all faculty members are called "tutors"). The purpose of the conversation is to explore the ideas raised by the text. There is no agenda, no attempt to reach some preconceived end, no ultimate "answer". Participants explore the issues as ideas occur to them. The values of our conversation include openness, reason, clarity, respect, and civility.

**The Role of the Tutor.** A tutor opens the seminar conversation by asking a question based on the reading. From then on, the tutor keeps the conversation moving, clarifies issues when necessary, and raises questions helpful to the conversation.

**The Size of the Seminar.** Seminars are made up of 15-20 participants, including one or two tutors.

**How to Prepare.** Read the assigned text in advance. No previous knowledge of the subject or author is required. Outside research is not expected. It is your own ideas that are important in the seminar. If you have time to reread the text, you will find that more ideas present themselves and that ideas from your first reading become clearer.

### Guidelines for Participants

- You don't need to raise your hand or be recognized by the tutor to speak. You may begin as soon as someone else has finished speaking. However, we ask you to please not interrupt when someone else is speaking, even to agree. Wait until he or she has finished. One way to keep to this guideline is to concentrate on what the other person is saying, rather than concentrating on what you want to say next. This is a discipline, by the way, that every one of us has to learn and re-learn. Practice active listening.
- Be mindful of everybody in the group. In connection with the first guideline, above, please do not speak for an extended time. Remember that others may wish to speak, especially if they have been hesitant to enter the discussion. Speaking succinctly is also a discipline that every one of us has to practice.
- When you are speaking, try to focus on one idea at a time. This makes it easier for you and for the others to build on your idea.
- Feel free to ask questions that come to you, and remember that there are not any unimportant questions. They all have value in the discussion. Be morally present.
- Try to discuss the issues raised in the reading, rather than "giving information" or telling personal anecdotes (which are meaningful to you but perhaps not to others). "Information" and anecdotes often distract everybody from the issues being discussed.
- It is perfectly in order to challenge the ideas of others or offer modifications, when it is in the service of seeking truth. On the other hand, remember that we are exploring together, not debating one another.
- A sense of humor is a wonderful thing, even in serious conversation – and perhaps *especially* in serious conversation!