**Catholic Liberal Education – Leading Our Students to Transcendence**

**by Lisa Rochefort, EdD doctoral candidate**

The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for. … But this search for God demands of man every effort of intellect, a sound will, ‘an upright heart’, as well as the witness of others who teach him to seek God (CCC 27, 30).

In this opening quote, we see *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* formulate a truth about man in his relation to God which cements how the Church’s approach to education will go. Catholic educators are called to lead others to find truth and happiness by seeking God, man’s true *telos*—his ultimate end. The Second Vatican Council, in its Declaration on Christian Education, affirms that “a true education aims at the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end and of the good of the societies of which, as man, he is a member, and in whose obligations, as an adult, he will share” (*GE* 1). Thus, the Catholic intellectual – or liberal arts -- tradition respects the dignity of the human person, connects its students with their full inheritance, and leads young people toward the rich realization of their true potential in becoming more and more like Christ, thereby more fully human and more fully alive. Such an education offers a shared understanding with regard to the nature of the human person and the meaning of life as it develops habits of mind and character that allow students to flourish as free, intelligent, responsible, successful, joyous, faith-filled, and productive citizens striving for a free and just society.

Conversely, the plight of modern education stems from what is missing at its core—a real understanding of young people and the true nature and purpose for which they were created. Modern education offers a utilitarian, pragmatic approach which neglects to share the desirability of education for its own sake, but rather for what it does—as a mere means to an end. As a result, often subjects are presented as discrete, fragmented entities of unrelated information while test scores and grades are overrated. Likewise, faith and reason are both vilified such that students emerge from educational institutions spiritually confused and uninspired in addition to lacking the ability to discern that which is essentially true from that which is fundamentally false. Moreover, in modern educational institutions, the general emotional, spiritual, and moral well-being of these students is relegated to a lower rank of educational priority.

The Second Vatican Council fathers explain that “mighty attempts are being made to obtain education for all, even though vast numbers of children and young people are still deprived of even rudimentary training and so many others lack a suitable education in which truth and love are developed together”. Today when so many educational institutions fail to fully educate, the Catholic school community shines forth with its “…special atmosphere animated by the Gospel spirit of freedom and charity, to help youth grow according to the new creatures they were made through baptism as they develop their own personalities, and finally to order the whole of human culture to the news of salvation so that the knowledge the students gradually acquire of the world, life and man is illumined by faith” (*GE* 8). A Catholic education animates the subject matter by teaching eternal truths and by integrating the building of moral character and personal virtue even as it inspires students to become all God created them to be. Properly forming the whole human person in pursuit of his ultimate end (by harmoniously developing the moral, intellectual, spiritual, and physical faculties of each individual that he may live out a life of true freedom by leading an exemplary apostolic life) remains the fundamental objective of Catholic Christian educators.

Since the word “education” derives from the Latin *ēdūcō* (which means “to lead or draw out of”), education implies a movement away from something; in this case, education leads students away from ignorance and captivity toward the transcendence and freedom of Truth, Beauty, and Goodness. Catholic educators are called not merely to inform students in the practical goals of college and career readiness, but rather to teach them wisdom and virtue. By offering students a glimpse of the divine by way of the *via pulchritudinis*, the way of beauty, Catholic liberal education “can open the pathway for the search for God, and dispose the heart and spirit to meet Christ, who is the Beauty of Holiness Incarnate, offered by God to men for their salvation. It invites contemporary Augustines, unquenchable seekers of love, truth, and beauty, to see through perceptible beauty to eternal Beauty, and with fervor discover Holy God, the author of all beauty” (Pontifical Council for Culture plenary assembly, 2006, II.1) Preparing students to become, as it were, “a saving leaven”, a transforming influence, in the human community who seek the good of society denotes the primary end of Catholic education.

Nevertheless, inviting a contemporary Augustine is one thing; convincing him is another matter entirely. How exactly does one induce, say, a middle school student to walk “the way of beauty?” How does one persuade an 8th grader to choose freely to pull up Plato on her i-Pad? First and foremost, Catholic teachers must realize their singular role in this process. In *Gravissimum educationis*, the Council proclaims the following:

But let teachers recognize that the Catholic school depends upon them almost entirely for the accomplishment of its goals and programs. They should therefore be very carefully prepared so that both in secular and religious knowledge they are equipped with suitable qualifications and also with a pedagogical skill that is in keeping with the findings of the contemporary world. Intimately linked in charity to one another and to their students and endowed with an apostolic spirit, may teachers by their life as much as by their instruction bear witness to Christ, the unique Teacher…. The work of these teachers, this sacred synod declares, is in the real sense of the word an apostolate most suited to and necessary for our times and at once a true service offered to society (GE 8).

Thus, it follows that teachers must speak from a credible life-experience, inspire the thirst for knowledge in their students, tap into the great fountains of knowledge in the human condition, use competent teaching methods, and love the students with a sure witness to Christian charity. Let us examine each of these categories.

To present the past in a suitable form to students, one must approach from within the context of a life-experience that highlights a correspondence with the heart’s deepest needs; in other words, from the context of a life experience that speaks for itself (Giussani, 2001, p. 8). But this witness must also flow over into a response from the students. Arousing interest and encouraging the student to use what she already knows by way of background knowledge to connect it with the new truth, idea, skill, or art to be learned leads a student to mastery. A common language must be used, and the unknown must be explained by the known—the lesson to be learned must be explicable in terms of truth already known by the learner (Gregory, 1884, p. 11). Encouraging students to become discoverers by teaching the skills of how to learn rather than by teaching subjects stimulates their minds to action.

In general, this means that teachers should feed students’ intellects from the abundant feast of human knowledge that creates cultural literacy. References to the history and literature of the classical Greek, Roman, and Hebrew cultures permeate Western culture. Allusions abound, so an audience must acquire competency with the concepts and symbols characteristic of the classical era. What is more, each of these cultures was instrumental in forming this Western culture’s thought, politics, and ethics. Since many modern students are unable to grasp the significance of these allusions in poetry, literature, or cinema, they miss out on a much deeper intellectual and richer emotional encounter with these works; hence, the teacher must ensure that she captivates the imaginations of her contemporary Augustines. In his work, *On Christian Teaching*, Augustine asserts “a person who is a good and true Christian should realize that truth belongs to his Lord, wherever it is found, gathering and acknowledging it even in pagan literature, but rejecting superstitious vanities and deploring and avoiding those who 'though they knew God did not glorify him as God or give thanks but became enfeebled in their own thoughts and plunged their senseless minds into darkness’” *(II, 75).*

Of course, it goes without saying that, on the part of the teacher, knowledge and a clear understanding of the material to be taught are prerequisites—one cannot teach that which one does not know. A teacher who knows the material possesses the power to elucidate, demonstrate, illustrate, and relate the richness of the topic to his students’ experience. And a teacher aflame with enthusiasm for a subject can ignite the interest of her students as a result of her own passion for the matter while readily guiding her students to competency and confidence.

Similarly, a love of teaching and a love of children is fundamental to the vocation of a teacher—reciprocal love and respect are engendered when the students are loved and know they are loved. Building relationship meets a basic societal and personal need, and teachers must connect with their students in order to assist them to see the things they had not seen before—to illumine their intellects and lead them to an appreciation of truth. In *The Risk of Education*, Giussani insists:

It is brotherhood, the giving and taking of affection, that builds the walls that enable us to live in God’s mystery and in his church. . . . If we live out our own nature as an image of the mystery that created us and participate in this mystery, if we understand that this mystery is both mercy and goodness, then we will try to live that mercy, goodness, and brotherhood as if it were our own nature, no matter how difficult or challenging the task (p. 40).

Accordingly, the question of a teacher’s character arises. Because teaching and learning classically necessitates nurturing the soul on truth, goodness, and beauty, indeed, it follows that the educator must live a virtuous life. Like beauty, virtue is inherently compelling. As a result, the person of the teacher is a most critical aspect of Catholic liberal education. One’s moral life, the good life, and one’s intellectual life, the teaching life, are inextricably bound—each informing the other, and both forming one’s self-identity and one’s approach to teaching. “Because the acquisition of knowledge is a significant part of human experience and the communication of knowledge is a significant activity of human society, all virtue will be seen to touch on it” (Cummings & Allen, 2012, p. 280). As a result, that ongoing reflection and reflective practice, self-examination, study, and growth which are requisite to the flourishing of a teacher both individually and professionally should inevitably nourish and engage his or her students. Consistency and continuity between talk and action in a teacher’s manner of living and teaching can compel a student to follow and attend. Looking to Christ as the ultimate teacher guides educators in their vocation as teachers and in their charism as evangelizers. In John 13:12-20, after he has washed the feet of his disciples, Jesus tells them that He is their Lord and Teacher, Whose example they should follow; moreover, in receiving those He sends, they are receiving God Himself. So it is with the Catholic teacher that, in joyfully receiving those students who arrive in the classroom, that teacher also welcomes Christ.

So what does Catholic liberal education look like in the classroom? Because it is based on the traditional classical content and practices which strive to form and develop students’ natural cognitive capacities and ground them in the moral, theological, and intellectual virtues, this model of education pursues excellence in the form of the true, the good, and the beautiful with Christ as its focus. Its structure follows the classical model of the *Trivium* (grammar, logic, and rhetoric stages), the *Quadrivium* (arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy), and it integrates a study of the liberal arts (literature, poetry, drama, philosophy, history, art, and languages).

In the grammar stage, students study the grammar, the inherent structure, of things (e.g. math facts, phonics, spelling, and grammar rules, and academic vocabulary)—those concrete concepts for which children at this stage of cognitive development are ideally suited. Teaching students how to learn, enriching their minds with ideas while showing them the coherence of these ideas, and allowing them to explore these ideas though hands-on activities and books are the primary principles upon which to focus at this stage.

Then, after mastery of the basics, the task begins in the next two stages of Catholic liberal education of teaching them to think (via the mimetic method of instruction in the Logic stage) and to do (via the Socratic method of instruction in the Rhetoric stage). In the Logic stage, the mimetic method draws upon types (paradigms or models) to engage and guide learners by presenting ideas in concrete form thereby allowing students to learn inductively by deriving truths from the types. The teacher allows the student to begin with what he already knows, then leads him to an understanding of a new idea or truth by means of models. As the learner explores the types, he compares and contrasts while discovering the patterns. Once he is cognizant of the patterns, then he can learn to employ the correct vocabulary for the concept and begin to practice and apply it. Research suggests “that students learn by fitting new information into existing cognitive structures and are unlikely to learn if the information has few apparent connections to what they already know and believe” (Prince & Felder & Prince, 2006, p. 2). Consequently, learning how to reason correctly using the body of knowledge learned in the grammar stage is the goal during this period. Asking why and attempting argument at every turn in an attempt to understand the facts learned at the previous stage and relating them together in substantial ways is natural for children at this cognitive level of development. Empowering students with the science of logic provides the tools they need to question accurately to arrive at valid conclusions.

Finally, in the rhetoric stage, learners learn the science of communication and the art of expression. Whereas the capacity for abstract thinking was just emerging in the logic stage, it reaches its peak in the rhetoric stage. Leaping from the concrete to the abstract, from the practical to the theoretical, and from the natural to the spiritual are now cognitive possibilities for these students. Self-discovery and self-expression are the primary goals of learners at this stage of cognitive development.

These instructional stages of the trivium correspond loosely to the related stage in a learner’s cognitive development—elementary, middle, and high school. As students mature from concrete thinking to analytical thinking to abstract thinking, they are provided with the tools of learning appropriate to that stage of their cognitive development. Each stage represents a distinct way of teaching and learning and thinking. By means of this gradual process, a Catholic liberal education empowers its students to know, to think, and to do in any arena: not merely developing college and career readiness (as the current secular educational standards demand), but also producing wondering, literate, intelligent, self-disciplined students who possess a comprehensive view of human endeavor (as the broad and deep curriculum fosters). These authentically “liberal” (or truly liberated) students have an ability to analyze and draw conclusions and a wide range of interests which they have the ability to pursue.

So it is that Catholic liberal education offers a unique educational opportunity to its students. Having been exposed to the great treasures of Western tradition and imbued with the guiding tenets of Catholic theology, the student now possesses a firm foundation from which to begin critiquing the myriad mores and perspectives cast his way by his contemporary culture. Inspired by eternal truths, he is free to become all God created him to be. She has studied human history in order to learn how to live more virtuously by looking to the people and nations who displayed distinction thereby proving themselves worthy of emulation while discovering the flaws and faults of those people and nations who failed. He now holds the capacity to enjoy the freedom that comes from the ability to discern and to judge that which is true, good, and beautiful. In *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, Volume II,* Hans Urs von Balthasar writes,

…one both can and must consider the revelation of the living God, as the Christian understands it, not only from the point of view of its truth and goodness, but also from that of its ineffable beauty. If everything in the world that is fine and beautiful is *epiphaneia*, the radiance and splendor which breaks forth in expressive form from a veiled and yet mighty depth of being, then the event of self-revelation of the hidden, the utterly free and sovereign God in the forms of this world, in word and history, and finally in the human form itself, will itself form an analogy to that world beauty however far it outstrips it (p. 11).

By means of the divine revelation of ineffable grace, a transforming gift freely manifested in Christ Himself, one becomes free to enjoy the beauty in the world that leads to the divine and transforms the whole of human existence. A young person need not fall victim to that mental slavery of conformity to public opinion because she has been shown the rationality of faith throughout her years of schooling, and she has read and seen how faith lived out truly answers those innermost needs of the human heart—truth, goodness, beauty, and love. Education remains an investment in the future—a looking beyond that which is immediate. Authentic Catholic education lies in honoring and learning from the past, in challenging the present, and in looking toward the future. Education is a community issue for the Catholic Christian insofar as growing the mystical body of Christ by inviting others in remains our mandate. By connecting students with the world-view of the ancients, we open the door to the pursuit of knowledge and truth. By providing them with a Catholic liberal education, we unite them with the Truth and allow them to live up to their full potential. By being hospitable and welcoming them into our own lives, we welcome them into His own. We Catholic educators will do well to heed and practice the exhortation of Blessed Basil Anthony M. Moreau in his piece, *On Christian Education*,

To what end would it serve the students to know how to read, write, calculate, and draw, or to possess some notions of history, geography, geometry, physics, and chemistry, if they were ignorant of their duties to God, to themselves, and to society, or if, while knowing them, they did not conform their conduct to that knowledge. It is up to you, then, after the pastor and the parish, to teach all that to your students and to get them to practice it as much as is in your power. . . . This is what you can and should do for your students, if you really are zealous for their salvation. Hurry then; take up this work of resurrection, never forgetting that the special end of your institute is, before all, to sanctify youth. It is by this that you will contribute to preparing the world for better times than ours; for these students who now attend your school are the parents of the future, the parents of future generations, each one of whom bears within them a family. Influence them, then, by all the means of instruction and sanctification that have just been explained. Then, and only then, can you hope to attain the end of your vocation by the renewal of the Christian faith and piety. May it be so! May it be so!

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