**The Spirituality of the Catholic Teacher: Reading Gravissimum Educationis through Lumen Gentium’s “Universal Call to Holiness.”**

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**Introduction**

The present article focuses on the spiritual life of the Catholic teacher. This spirituality carries with it both an *interior*and an *exterior*operation. First, regarding the interior, the teacher must live out his/her calling as a path to holiness; second, flowing forth from this interior disposition, *and as an essential element to their special calling*, he/she must also embrace the exterior mission of leading others to holiness through education. The Second Vatican Council’s Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum educationis,* helps to illuminate the structure of this spirituality and, when read in light of the Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium)* and its *“*universal call to holiness*” (LG 39),* the calling of “teacher” is manifestly seen as both a personal path to holiness and a great service to the Church.

This article will have three parts. The first section will focus on the educator’s state in life as lived in union with God through his/her calling as “teacher”. In this calling, the Catholic educator acts in union with Christ in order to build up the Kingdom of God. This union is the source of all the teacher’s good works, and in it he/she is sanctified. The second section will address the *exterior*role of the Catholic educator as a participation in God’s providential care, i.e., that teachers help lead their students to the contemplation of divine things and to holiness in the classroom setting.1 The third and final section will address the teacher’s role as an aid to the parents, concentrating on the joy and grave responsibility that is associated with sharing the educational role of the parent. In this final section, I will show how embracing this aspect is key to living the call to teach.2

1. **The Calling to be a “Teacher” as a Path to Holiness.**

In 1 Corinthians, Ch. 12, St. Paul places the call of the teacher third after the call of apostles and prophets. Indeed, the vocation of the teacher is an admirable one; it is a gift from God. Yet, the role of the educator can only serve others well to the degree that it is lived out in union with the divine. One must remember that it is God, the Author of all goodness, Who calls teachers to their office, and *it is He* that works in them for the sake of their own sanctification and also for the sanctification of others.

The Second Vatican Council teaches us that the “holiness of the Church is unceasingly manifested, and must be manifested, in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful; it is expressed in many ways in individuals, who in their walk of life, tend toward the perfection of charity, thus causing the edification of others.”3 The Church as the Body of Christ reaches the world in a variety of ways; and so, since, as the Councilstates*,* “The classes and duties of life are many, but holiness is one … Every person must walk unhesitatingly according to his own personal gifts and duties in the path of living faith, which arouses hope and works through charity.”4This exhortation is not simply an invitation, because, *as the same document proclaims*, “all the faithful of Christ … have an obligation to … strive”5for holiness according to their state in life. This obligation is a sweet command from Holy Mother Church to embrace everyday life and sanctify it through the power of the Holy Spirit.

  Furthermore, Jesus “sent the Holy Spirit upon all men that He might move them inwardly to love God … and that they might love each other as Christ loves them [Cf. Jn. 13:34; 15:12]. The followers of Christ are called by God, not because of their works, but according to His own purpose and grace … [and] by God’s gift, they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness they have received.”6What this means is all that flows from the teacher is a gift from God. We, as teachers, are truly chosen by God, not because of our own abilities, but by His good pleasure. Therefore, in the accomplishment of our tasks, we must be abandoned to the influx of divine aid and cooperate in union with God to bring to perfection the work He is accomplishing in us. In being faithful to God in our work we are constantly being transformed from “one degree of glory to another”7 as we are conformed more and more to the image of Christ. Moreover, the working of the Spirit in our actions guarantees that “all Christ’s faithful, whatever be the conditions, duties and circumstances of their lives—and indeed through all these, will daily increase in holiness, if they receive all things with faith from the hand of their heavenly Father and if they cooperate with the divine will. In this temporal service, they will manifest to all men the love with which God loved the world.”8 We are beacons of God’s love to every student we encounter, and, through this loving, we ourselves are purified and led to sanctity. Among the many duties of our lives that contribute to our own personal holiness, our office as teacher indeed holds an important place in the ranks.

*Gravissimum educationis* takes up this theme found in *Lumen gentium* and gives it a practical application in the form of education. The document affirms that, “The work of … teachers [is] … in the real sense of the word an apostolate.”9 It thus links our own personal mission to that of the Church, as an extension of Her teaching office. This is not to be understood *as simply* the fruit of the curriculum, the school’s subordination to the diocese, or the internal order of Catholic institutions; rather, as the encyclical of Pius XI, *Divini illius magistri,* written 36 years prior, states, “Perfect schools are the result not so much of good methods as of good teachers” (DIM 88). As teachers strive for perfection in their work, they have a higher participation in the good, and this good is diffusive to the degree that it is united to Goodness Itself. So, what classifies this perfection? That same documentgoes on to define *good teachers* as those “who are thoroughly prepared and well-grounded in the matter they have to teach; who possess the intellectual and moral qualifications required by their important office; who cherish a pure and holy love for the youths confided to them, because they love Jesus Christ and His Church, of which these are the children of predilection; and who have therefore [because of these things] sincerely at heart the true good of family and country.”10 Teachers must live their charism by cultivating these perfectionsin their lives. Only through this cultivation can they can rise to the heights of sanctity through “ordinary” means.

As one can see, the holiness of the teacher is the fruit of pursuing excellence in a specific discipline and living it out in union with God, Who is, most certainly, the Author of that excellence. Therefore, in this union, every practical matter that relates to teaching is caught up by the Holy Spirit and sanctified, just as, all the while, He is sanctifying the teacher through these actions. The Council “exhorts [teachers] to persevere generously in the work they have undertaken and, imbuing their students with the spirit of Christ, to strive to excel in pedagogy and the pursuit of knowledge in such a way that they not merely advance the internal renewal of the Church but preserve and enhance its beneficent influence upon today’s world, especially the intellectual world.”11 The calling to teach is a calling to unite with God in a particular way. Just as a religious sister so bounds herself to the divine majesty through the evangelical councils, so, too, the teacher binds him or herself to God in a personal commitment to serve Christ and His Church in the mode of educator. It is a charism because God works in and through the teacher’s fidelity to accomplish His will; and for this reason the teacher must strive toward union with God in order to properly fulfill his/her duty.

1. **Participating in God’s Providential Care**

Flowing from this union with God, which is the principle of the teacher’s good action, is a certain participation in His providential care. God’s providence leads all things to Himself as the End of every living thing and the terminus of our own happiness. As the teacher has been chosen by God, likewise are the souls entrusted to each teacher given by God in order that He might lead students to His goodness. For this reason, the Council states that“true education aims at the formation of the human person in the pursuit of his ultimate end.”12

*Nothing* is outside of God’s providential care, and He uses a variety of secondary causes to bring about His will. Therefore, teachers must not view their work as merely leading others to live a better version of themselves, but they must understand that every moment in the classroom is an integral part of salvation history and that God gives grace in these moments in order to lead students to their everlasting home. True enough, our weaknesses and limitations might make this ideal hard to perceive sometimes; however, even in moments of weakness, Our Blessed Lord is acting and reassuring us that “to them that love God all things work together unto good.”13 And, if one pursues the path of perfection united with the Divine Master, *all human acts* are part of the continued conversion in the Christian life. This includes failings, shortcomings, ill-preparation, loss of composure, and the like — as long as these things lead to a humble realization of our utter dependence on God — for the one seeking His will continuously finds themselves being purified and strengthened. And the onewho strives for the accomplishment of His will*,* whether it is perceptible in every moment or not, bears much fruit. Remember no man is perfect, but God, in His wisdom and infinite perfection, “ordereth all things sweetly.”14

This operation of God in the teacher has the purpose of building up the Kingdom of God and leading all to eternal beatitude. Pius XIexplains that the “proper and immediate end of Christian education is to cooperate with divine grace in forming the true and perfect Christian, that is, to form Christ Himself in those regenerated by Baptism.”15 The Council reaffirms this teaching in stating that the Catholic school’s,

proper function is to create for the school community a 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. So indeed the Catholic school, while it is open, as it must be, to the situation of the contemporary world, leads its students to promote efficaciously the good of the earthly city and also prepares them for service in the spread of the Kingdom of God, so that by leading an exemplary apostolic life they become, as it were, a saving leaven in the human community.16

This atmosphere which is created allows the Spirit to move where He wills;17 it throws off adverse restrictive barriers, and it allows the soul to abandon itself to divine providence. If this is carried out, the school becomes a haven in which the Lord touches the hearts of students in a particular way, and the teacher becomes a conduit of that grace. If they cooperate with the divine motion, the teachers participate in God’s providential care.

This participation in providence, in a special way, carries with it a keen attention to the common good of society. The ultimate common good is God Himself, and all particular goods participate in His goodness. Following this order, all earthly goods (from personal goods, to the goods of the family, to the goods of the society, etc.) must be subordinated to this final End, *this ultimate common good*. The Council insists that teachers must be “willing to do their best to promote the common good”18 and must “work as partners with parents and together with them in every phase of education [to] give due consideration to the difference of sex and the proper ends Divine Providence assigns to each sex in the family and in society.”19 The teacher must embrace the building up of society through teaching others how to cultivate their own gifts and live according to the plan which God has for them. Moreover, teachers must abandon themselves to divine providence, learn to subordinate their own personal good to the common good, and to teach others, by example, to do the same.

Seeing this subordination of the societal goods to the ultimate common good of the universe, the teacher must be able to understand and show students how *all the parts of the whole* fit together and work towards that common End. This is an extension of the Church’s mission because, as the Council states, “The Church is bound as a mother to give to these children of hers an education by which their whole life can be imbued with the spirit of Christ and at the same time do all she can to promote for all peoples the complete perfection of the human person, the good of earthly society and the building of a world that is more human.”20

Since Christian perfection is carried out in each state in life, all disciplines must be cultivated for the sake of the Gospel message. The physics teacher is no less responsible for participating in this providential care than is the theologian. The supernatural heals and adds to what is natural; it does not replace it. Pius XI explains that “Christian education takes in the whole aggregate of human life, physical and spiritual, intellectual and moral, individual, domestic and social, not with a view of reducing it in any way, but in order to elevate, regulate and perfect it, in accordance with the example and teaching of Christ.”21 Thus, the interdisciplinary connections and all good pursuits of knowledge must be cherished as working together to form a symphony of the divine manifestation to the world. The educator has a specific duty to safeguard this venture and to lead others to contemplate divine things in all areas of life.

1. **Co-operation with the Parent**

Finally, teachers must embrace the reality that their relationship to their students’ parents must be one of co-operation. The Church teaches that “married couples and Christian parents should follow their own proper path (to holiness) by faithful love … They should embue their offspring, lovingly welcomed as God’s gift, with Christian doctrine and the evangelical virtues.”22 A crucial element in the vocation of marriage is the love and education of children. The Councilspeaks about it in this way: “Since parents have given children their life, they are bound by the most serious obligation to educate their offspring and therefore must be recognized as the primary and principal educators.”23 Seeing this primacy, one must intuit that, when the parent chooses to delegate that responsibility to another, immediately a grave responsibility is given to the educator. Institutional education is nothing else than an extension of the parents own teaching responsibility. As the document makes clear, “according to the principle of subsidiarity, when the endeavors of parents and other societies are lacking, to carry out the work of education in accordance with the wishes of the parents; and, moreover, as the common good demands, [the community has the obligation] to build schools and institutions.”24 Schools are primarily at the service of the parents; this also in turn serves society. The right of parents to choose where their child is educated rests solely on their fundamental obligation to provide that education.

This choice should not be arbitrary; it is a decision to delegate a duty to a worthy individual -- one who will handle the education of the children just as the parent would raise them. It is obvious that this is never a perfect match, but the teacher should at least share the same fundamental values as the parent, and the parent must trust the teacher to implement these values. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary that teachers view the students as their own children, loving them through education as the parents would. For, as the Council Fathers explain, “the parents *entrust* a share in the work of education.”25 Given this relationship, the teacher is a co-operator with the parent and must make every effort to work with the parent for the sake of the child.

The educator, thus, takes on a role which is profoundly beautiful and “of great importance” because it provides this aid to “parents in fulfilling their duties.”26 Moreover, the gravity of teaching “demands special qualities of mind and heart, very careful preparation, and continuing readiness to renew and to adapt.”27 This adaptation, which the Councilindicates, *is key* to the role of teacher as a parental extension. Only the true patience and love of a mother, *or father*, can handle the dramatic switch from a meticulously planned day to a particular unplanned need of the child that must be addressed. At any given moment, the parent is able to throw all plans to the wind and crouch in love to meet their children where they are and lead them into a place of rest -- *whatever it takes*. For example, the mother who cancels an important event for the sake of a sick son, or a father who puts off deadlines because his daughter is sad, or any parent who sees their child tense with frustration and knows that what they are doing, *whatever it is*, can wait. This attentiveness does not rise from having planned a meltdown (though that might help), it emerges from a heart that loves unconditionally; the teacher must possesses this heart if they are *to truly reach* even one child. If the teacher embraces this aspect of love, it is a love that pours forth from the divine goodness and creates a bond between the parent and educator. This bond of love helps to withstand all the difficulties in the classroom, provides the foundation for the teacher to give each student exactly what they need, and becomes the driving force for accomplishing all that their calling demands.

**Conclusion**

The three elements presented in this article propose a basic structure of the spirituality lived in the life of the teacher. In sum: the principle element of the teacher’s life and action is the divine operation; this participation in the divine life is then a gift to the students in the mode of knowledge as it helps to lead them to adore their Creator, and it is further enriched by a familial love in the teacher which is a likeness the parents’ own love. One might see in this a certain image of the divine missions of the Son and Holy Spirit — a manifestation of God’s mystery in the teacher. Just as the Word proceeds from the Father in order to reveal to the world the Truth, so, too, does the teacher proceed from Christ in order to lead the student to that same Truth. *And,* just as the Spirit is poured forth as Love in our hearts, so too does that same Spirit work in educators in order that they might love their students through the theological virtue of charity.

When the teacher is able to live his/her calling, as the charism it is, it becomes a beautiful expression of the divine goodness to the world. This can only be accomplished through a daily surrender to Christ and a constant awareness of one’s own mission. The spirituality of the teacher, therefore, must be a fundamental element formed in every Catholic educator. May God grant us all the grace to fulfill in our lives what He has begun and may He bring to accomplishment all the works He has given us.

*“And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues.” 1 Cor 12:28*

1 This section draws primarily upon: Catholic Church, “Declaration on Christian Education: Gravissimum Educationis,” in *Vatican II Documents* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), § 8.

2 This section will basically be an expansion on *Gravissimum educationis*§ 5.2.

3 Catholic Church, “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Lumen Gentium,” in *Vatican II Documents* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), § 39.

4 Ibid., § 41.

5 Ibid., § 42.

6 *Lumen gentium,* § 40.

7 Catholic Biblical Association (Great Britain), *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994), 2 Co 3:18.

8 *Lumen gentium,* § 41.

9 *Gravissimum educationis,* § 8.

10 Pope Pius XI, *Divini illius magestri*, <http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\_p-xi\_enc\_31121929\_divini-illius-magistri.html> (accessed June 30, 2016), § 88.

11 *Gravissimum educationis*, Conclusion.

12 Ibid., §1.

13 *The Holy Bible, Translated from the Latin Vulgate* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), Ro 8:28.

14 Ibid., Wis 8:1.

15 *Divini illius magestri*, § 94.

16 *Gravissimum educationis,* § 8.

17 See John 3:8.

18 *Gravissimum educationis*, § 1.

19 Ibid., § 8.

20 *Gravissimum educationis*, § 3.

21 *Divini illius magestri*, § 95.

22 *Lumen gentium,* § 41.

23 *Gravissimum educationis,* § 3.

24 Ibid.*,* § 3.

25 Ibid. Emphasis mine.

26 *Gravissimum educationis,* § 5.

27 Ibid.