QUAERERE DEUM: WHAT IS EDUCATION AND WHY IS IT CATHOLIC?

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"It is precisely in being initiated into tradition that we are humanized, that what is most human in us—the capacity to see, attend, remember, understand, judge, and love—is cultivated and strengthened."

ON SECULAR EDUCATION

Until quite recently, the crisis of education in this country has been more obvious than the civilizational crisis underlying it. Bemoaning the failures of American public education has been something of a national pastime in recent decades, with the educational establishment routinely rolling out new initiatives in what has been a vain attempt to fix it, from programs like No Child Left Behind and Common Core to new methods of active learning, blending learning, flipped learning, inquiry-based learning, cooperative learning, differentiated instruction,

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culturally responsive teaching, and so on.[1] It is increasingly apparent, however, that the crisis in education is not simply about education. A society that is premised upon the systematic exclusion of fundamental and binding truths and that now wages war on reality itself, a society that cannot agree on what a human being is—or even whether men and women are real—a society that has lost faith in its founding myths and is now rejecting its own foundational premises, a society that scarcely seems to be "for" anything but is "anti" everything, can hardly be expected to agree on what education is or should be; nor can it be expected to offer children a compelling vision of why they should "desire to know" in the first place. It is a telling sign that these various educational fashions are applicable to any so-called "educational content" whatsoever, to use a detestable phrase.

Under such conditions of civilizational disintegration, the pragmatist bent that has characterized American public education from its origins in the Progressive Era has evolved into an activist bent in service of no obvious end except the continual overcoming of our civilizational past. Outside of highly technical fields, college applications at most universities show little interest in what students know or want to know. They function mostly to gauge the success of our primary and secondary education systems in cultivating students' activist potential, documented on the resumes that have been compiled for them since kindergarten. As a society, we have replaced education with conditioning, and thus confused education with ignorance, with rigorously *not* thinking about the meaning of our own history or the origins and implications of our own ideas, rigorously *not* asking the great questions that once animated Western and Christian culture, and, of course, rigorously *not* wondering whether God's existence makes any discernible difference in the meaning of life or the nature of things. Because the point of contemporary American education, to invoke the ghost of Karl Marx, is no longer to *understand* the world, but to *change* it.[2]

On top of this, American Catholic education faces its own crisis, which must be understood in the context of the broader

1. https://www.graduateprogram.org/2023/10/teaching-methods-for-the-21st-century/.

2. Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), 11, available at https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/.

ecclesial crisis, the profound crisis of belief or anonymous atheism, if you will, plaguing the modern Church. Statistics are a superficial measure of an unfathomably deep problem, but they tell a familiar tale.[3] Mass attendance, vocations, and Catholic school enrollments have all fallen precipitously over the past fifty years. Of those who go on to higher education, over ninety per cent will attend public institutions which operate—at best—as if God were not even a serious question and Catholicism did not exist. A recent Notre Dame study reports that roughly half of Catholic teenagers will lose their Catholic identity by their mid-twenties. The sociologist Christian Smith estimates this number at closer to sixty percent.[4] Nearly sixty percent of these former Catholics believe that the faith is incompatible with science. Sixty percent of so-called "nones," young people of no religious affiliation including many former Catholics, report that they stopped believing that the teachings of their faith were true.[5] Where the faith does survive, it is often in a radically reduced, diluted, or fragmented form: as a kind of therapeutic spirituality adaptable to the latest social and ideological fashion or an arbitrary morality having little to do with reality as our society conceives it.

It would of course be grossly unfair to blame Catholic schools for a crisis of such magnitude, a crisis centuries in the making. Without the devoted and heroic labor of generations of religious sisters and Catholic laity over the last hundred and fifty years, and especially without their service to the "least of these," the situation would almost certainly be much worse. Still, it is only stating the obvious to admit that Catholic schools have been largely unsuccessful in handing on the fullness of the faith, if by this we understand not just a collection of doctrinally correct

3. Michael Hanby, "The Crisis of Catholic Atheism," *The Lamp Magazine* 17 (June 26, 2023), available at https://thelampmagazine.com/issues/issue-17/the-crisis-of-catholic-atheism.

4. See Nicolette Manglos-Weber and Christian Smith, "Understanding Former Young Catholics: Findings from a National Study of American Emerging Adults," University of Notre Dame, available at https://mcgrath.nd.edu/assets/170517/icl_former_catholics_final_web.pdf. The sixty percent figure is from a Baylor University talk by Elizabeth Kirk.

5. See also Brandon Vogt, "New Stats on Why Young People Leave the Church," available at https://brandonvogt.com/new-stats-young-people-leave-church/.

propositions but a compelling proposal, a way of life, a cultural inheritance, and a coherent and comprehensive understanding of the world: the Catholic universe that is creation.

It is easy to point to schools that are "not Catholic enough" or that have succumbed to this or that educational fashion or ideology. That this is a problem besetting many kinds of nominally or formerly Catholic institutions suggests that it is symptomatic of a deeper disease that cannot be cured by doctrinal orthodoxy or piety alone. If Catholic schools have largely failed in their religious mission, it is because they have failed in their *educational* mission. And if they have failed in their educational mission, it is because we ourselves no longer possess—or rather are no longer possessed *by*—a Catholic vision of reality. Ours is a deeply secular world, but the secular is not merely the indifferent site of human flourishing imagined by the prevailing liberal order.[6] It is a metaphysical construct that defines our "social imaginary," offering a total interpretation of reality that systematically excludes the apprehension of God from our operative notions of being, nature, knowledge, and truth. God is banished from our most authoritative forms of knowledge, from our modes of social organization, and from our basic habits and patterns of life. The secular, in other words, is a comprehensive conception of reality devoid of God. It is, in the words of Charles Péguy, a metaphysical disaster, a fault of the Christian mystique.

This secular conception of reality dominates the modern world and thus influences all of us to greater and lesser degrees, not at the level of argument, but as an axiomatic, unconscious, and therefore unquestioned assumption permeating our apprehension of everything. The secular in this sense is not an argument against the rationality of belief, the sort one might have encountered in the nineteenth century; the so-called "New Atheism" was rather quaint in this regard, and now seems to have run its course. This is not only because a Christianity that is tacked onto a secular conception of things looks and *is* ridiculous, but because, for this very reason, this sort of whiggish "atheism" hardly seems worth the bother. By and large, modern

6. See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), and Andrew Willard Jones, *Before Church and State: A Study of Social Order in the Sacramental Kingdom of St. Louis IX* (Steubenville, Emmaus Academic, 2017).

people—and especially our "educated" elites—don't think of God; for them, he neither exists nor does not exist. The secular in this sense is external neither to the Church, nor to our own souls. Whatever faith each of us can muster must be carved out of the inertial background of the secular, which continually frames a faith now reduced to a "lifestyle choice" within this godforsaken reality.

Given the universal recognition of a crisis in education, it is remarkable that few of those offering solutions ever seem to pause and ask *what education is*. It is like attempting to build a house beginning with the second floor. But the crisis in Catholic education is marked by an even deeper failure. The truth is, we have never seriously asked what education must be if Catholicism is *true*. This is because our secularized imaginations can scarcely conceive what it means for Catholicism *to be* true. Sadly, the contemporary Church often does little to help us in this regard, with its scandals, its sociologism, its unmystical celebrations and banal "art," which seem continually to renounce Christianity's own grandeur. So, we fail to perceive in any adequate depth the conflict between the modern secular imagination and a Catholic vision of reality, with all that the latter implies for the meaning of God, being, nature, the human person, history, knowledge, and truth. Much less do we perceive the conflict with the *American* world, the land where the elves have always already sailed west. America is *essentially* liberal and modern in a way that the nations of Europe, where the memory of a mystical Christian past is inscribed in stone and in the landscape, could never be. The crisis of the Church in the modern world is perennial and unresolved, but it is particularly acute in this most secular of nations, whatever statistics may say about the relative vigor of American Christianity in contrast to the Old World. It is true that the crisis in American Catholic education is rooted in the failure of the Church in America to discern "the signs of the times," to grasp the meaning of our age; but more deeply than this, this crisis is rooted more deeply in a failure of the Catholic imagination.

Nevertheless, it is important to be as understanding as possible here and to try to enter imaginatively into the world of our forebears if we wish to avoid anachronism. The challenge confronting the American bishops in the latter half of the nineteenth century was as enormous as the solution they devised to

address it. The massive system of Catholic primary and secondary education that would issue from their decrees was forged like a diamond from several points of pressure converging simultaneously. When the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore convened in 1884, the American bishops presided over a population of over 4.5 million mostly poor, mostly immigrant Catholics, spanning the continent from the urban ghettos of the northeast to the German enclaves on the Western frontier.[7] The scope of their pastoral chore in a world of such great material need and minimal infrastructure, ecclesial or otherwise, is difficult to imagine. Moreover, they were convening as a revolutionary change in worldview swept the country, giving a naturalistic justification for America's native pragmatism and profoundly reshaping American society and its institutions as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth. The 1859 publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* affected the American mind as at least as deeply as Marx's *Das Kapital* affected Europe, providing a cosmological backdrop and scientific legitimacy to the new progressive conception of politics and society.[8] The emerging system of public education, shaped in its early decades by the likes of Horace Mann, Lester Ward, and John Dewey, was born from this progressive vision. Breaking from the Protestant denominational foundations that had borne responsibility for American education through the early nineteenth century, the new state system would be organized around the social sciences and ordered toward the pursuit of scientific progress and the realization of democracy, recast by Dewey as both a Baconian utopia and a spiritual communion, whose attainment lay in an ever-receding eschatological future.[9] This new conception of education at the primary and secondary levels was mirrored in the founding of seventy-six land grant universities through the Morrill Acts of 1867 and 1890, which would make "classical studies"—long since conceived so as to exclude metaphysics and theology—the

7. Francis P. Cassidy, "Catholic Education in the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore," *The Catholic Historical Review* 34, no. 3 (October, 1948): 294.

8. See Michael Hanby, "American Revolution as Total Revolution: Del Noce and the American Experiment," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 48, no. 3 (Fall 2021), 450–86.

9. See John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Educatio*n (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 81–99.

adjunct to practical disciplines such as agriculture, military science, and engineering.[10]

The Council Fathers were at least partially aware of the intellectual and spiritual dangers confronting them. Charged with protecting this vulnerable population, they were already in a defensive position. They had weathered the Know-Nothing Movement of the 1850s, and the Blaine Amendment had been passed in 1875 largely to prevent public funding of Catholic schools. The recent declaration of papal infallibility opposed by the American Fathers at the Vatican Council only added fuel to the American suspicion of this new foreign element in the body politic. The speeches and homilies of the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore are replete with warnings against the dangers of materialism and religious indifferentism, and the Council Fathers fretted that even well-intended secular education, in the words of Francis Cassidy, "so degenerated that it became irreligious and dangerous to the faith and morals of youth."[11] Archbishop Spalding gave an erudite and impassioned homily in favor of the establishment of a flagship Catholic university that would be a bulwark against these erroneous philosophies, which led to the founding of The Catholic University of America three years later. And the Council decreed that Catholic parents must "procure for their children a truly Christian education by sending them to parochial schools," and that a parochial school be erected near every parish unless the bishop were to judge this a practical impossibility.[12]

Yet these men were the spiritual descendants of John, Daniel, and Charles Carroll. They were contemporaries of Orestes Bronson and Isaac Hecker.[13] They believed deeply in the

10. Such developments were anticipated in the new nation's commitment to "useful knowledge," exemplified in institutions such as Ben Franklin's American Philosophical Society, where Thomas Jefferson served as president for eighteen years. See Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Lost World of Thomas Jefferson* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

11. Cassidy, "Catholic Education in the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore," 293.

12. Cassidy, "Catholic Education in the Third Plenary Council of Baltimore," 294.

13. For a fascinating account of the reconciliation of republicanism and Catholicism among the Founding generation of American Catholic leaders, a

compatibility of Catholicism and the American project, and regarded these worrisome intellectual and social developments not as the outworking of America's deepest principles, but as a perversion of them. Archbishop Gibbons's pastoral letter at the conclusion of the conference "emphatically" declared—for the benefit of both American and Roman ears—that there is "no antagonism" between the "laws, institutions, and spirit of our country" and the "laws, institutions and spirit of the Catholic Church."[14] Excessive enthusiasm for this position would elicit Leo XIII's *Testem benevolentiae* and its gentle condemnation of "Americanism" some fifteen years later. One needn't go beyond what has already been said about the American liberal order to say, at the very least, that subsequent history has called this assumed harmony into question. Suffice it to say that the failure

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reconciliation that would prepare the ground for Bronson, Hecker, and eventually Murray, see Michael D. Breidenbach, *Catholics and Religious Toleration in Early America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2021). Breidenbach details how the Catholics of the Founding generation justified this reconciliation by appeal to a "conciliarist tradition" that predated the Reformation. Breidenbach writes, "[T]he religion most associated with [the Enlightenment's] medieval caricature in fact had important adherents who advocated a juridical separation of church and state. And they did so based on medieval ecclesiological principles" (p. 13).

This conclusion places one squarely in the middle of long-running debates about the "natural law" origins of the American Founding and whether the Founders built "better than they knew" because of their own tacit reliance on a medieval conception of natural law. I have addressed this question elsewhere. For these purposes it suffices to suggest that the conclusion implied here represents something of a category mistake that substitutes historical judgment for philosophical and theological judgments. Historians as such can only consider such questions empirically or sociologically; they cannot adjudicate whether such understandings are true, what, e.g., actually constitutes the distinction between the "temporal" and the "spiritual," or what power and authority actually are. None of the historical judgments need be contested. The interesting question, philosophically and theologically speaking, is whether the presence of such tendencies of thought among early American Catholics attests to a transformation in the underlying ontology assumed by eighteenth century Catholics in the Anglo-American world. See Michael Hanby, "The Birth of Liberal Order and the Death of God: A Reply to Robert Reilly's America on Trial," *New Polity* (February 26, 2021), available at https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5bb7cb2193a632487214565f/t/603956e7bd383e4d84e937e1/1614370537086/Hanby+-+The+Birth+of+the+Liberal+Order+and+the+Death+of+God.pdf.

14. Third Plenary Council of Baltimore, "The Pastoral Letter of 1884," available at https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=518.

even to subject this assumption to serious scrutiny has had disastrous *educational* consequences.

This divided mindset of the Council Fathers meant that Catholic schools were created with something of a divided mission: to fortify children in their Catholic faith while *also* helping them assimilate into the American mainstream. Catholic schools would play an important role in the great assimilationist project of the late nineteenth century, making it possible for Catholics "to find themselves at home here," in the words of Archbishop Gibbons's pastoral letter. This project was too successful by half. If the sad statistics I noted earlier are evidence of failure in the religious and educational half of this mission, the booming era of brick-and-mortar Catholicism and its massive network of churches, schools, universities, and hospitals, the Catholic transformation—indeed takeover—of much of urban America, and the ascension of American Catholics to the heights of political power, is evidence of the stunning success of the assimilationist half. We have indeed "found ourselves at home here."

The divided mission of Catholic schools was further exaggerated by the nature-grace extrinsicism that characterized the era's Neo-Thomism, which was easily translated into a dualism of education and religion. Education and religious faith were of course deeply complementary and mutually necessary—religion does not destroy but perfects education, as it were—but education was nevertheless one thing, and religion, consisting principally of supernatural truths to be accepted on the authority of the clergy, was another.

The Council thus devoted great thought and energy to the rigorous curricular requirements for minor and major seminaries. But the unspoken assumption seems to have been that such education was for the clergy. The role of the laity was to assent to the supernatural and moral truths that the clergy expounded. In the view of the Council Fathers, parochial schools should exist "principally [to] give the knowledge fitting for *practical* life"—not an unreasonable assumption, one might add, for a flock of immigrant laborers—and so they contented themselves with adding catechetical and moral instruction to schools that, in the words of their decree, "shall be nowise inferior to the public schools." Indeed, the problem with Catholic education is not that it has been inferior to public education, but that it has been

largely *identical* to it, albeit with a religion class tacked on to the curriculum. This assumption that American education was in good enough working order that its defects could be remedied by a dose of catechesis liberated the Council Fathers from serious theoretical considerations, freeing them to concentrate on the overwhelming practical challenges of so ambitious an endeavor—whether to command or simply encourage every parish to found a school and all Catholic parents to send their children to them, for example, or how to compel all the laity to support the parish school financially in the absence of public funding.

The glory of this story is that the Council laid the foundation for a system of Catholic education unlike anything in the world in its scope and organization. The tragedy is that it inadvertently internalized the very disease the bishops sought to inoculate themselves against, providing answers to questions that children would soon cease asking while tacitly reinforcing the separation of faith and life, the unspoken assumption that religion is something "tacked on" to an essentially secular reality devoid of the divine presence. Assuming that lay education was practical rather than theoretical, they did not think deeply about what education is. Assuming a fundamental harmony between the "laws, institutions, and spirit of our country" and those of the Catholic Church, they neither asked what it would mean to educate Catholics in this rapidly secularizing country nor asked what education must be in principle if Catholicism is *true*.

From its very origins, Catholic education in America has thus failed to perform what had been one of the most basic functions of education since the advent of Greek *paideia*: initiating children into a comprehensive vision of reality—a comprehensively Catholic vision; and it failed largely because it failed to make them the full heirs of their own civilization, the cultural, artistic, literary and philosophical patrimony that is their birthright as Catholics and children of the West. For it is precisely in being initiated into tradition that we are humanized, that what is most human in us—the capacity to see, attend, remember, understand, judge, and love—is cultivated and strengthened. C.S. Lewis likens this sort of initiation to old birds teaching young birds to fly, in contrast to mere conditioning, which is more akin to the activity of poultry-keepers, "making them thus or thus for purposes of which they know nothing."[15]

15. C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: MacMillan, 1947), 14.

We can see why such an educational process is humanizing by considering perhaps the West's most authoritative answer to the question of what education is, the famous "Allegory of the Cave" from Plato's *Republic*. Plato depicts education as a strenuous ascent from an immanent realm of images, shadows, and falsehoods to the transcendent realm of the Good, from whose vantage it is possible to judge the things of this world—including one's former thoughts—for what they are. In this sense, education is a kind of conversion, as evidenced by the difficulty of the cave-dwellers in turning their necks around and their contentedness with the shadows; but also a liberation from deception that frees us to think and to act in accordance with what is true.

It is difficult to imagine what education could be, how it could differ from mere conditioning or consist in more than the manipulation of social and physical reality, if this is not essentially correct. To acknowledge this is to see that the very possibility of genuine education, in contrast with mere conditioning, has metaphysical and theological preconditions. It depends upon there being an immutable order of being and nature transcending the flux of historical circumstances that precedes us and binds us to its necessities. It depends upon an order of truth that is more than mechanical function or the accidental aggregate of social and material conditions and that *obliges* our assent by its own self-evidence. It depends upon real goodness that lays claim to our desires prior to our choosing. It depends on real beauty that wounds and compels our desires prior to our choosing. Our contemporary educational crisis is rooted in our society's deep and constitutive attempt to reject these conditions, though they could not be rejected entirely without our ceasing to be human. Real education is thus inherently philosophical and theological, not in the sense that it should include philosophy and theology among its range of disciplines—though it should—but in the sense that a certain kind of "what is" questioning about the true and the good, the kind of questioning excluded from modern conditioning, pervades *every* discipline and *every* object of study.

Plato's depiction of this assent as a solitary journey points to another important truth about education that echoes throughout the tradition. Understanding, insofar as it is a human activity, is a deeply interior act, something we must do *for ourselves*. No one can know or understand on my behalf. I cannot be *coerced*

into knowing, much less to into loving and embracing the truth. This seems to be part of what it means when Aristotle and Aquinas say that *truth* itself is the cause of our knowledge, that it precedes us and obliges us from within, that it elicits a response from us that is simultaneously compelled and free.[16] The truth communicates to us from the "outside-in," but the movement of soul that it elicits proceeds from the "inside-out." This is one reason why Augustine in his *De magistro* concludes that it is Christ, the "indwelling Truth," who alone teaches men truth.[17]

This solitary ascent, far from eliminating the need for teachers, reveals something about what a teacher really is, something reflected in the etymology of the word education itself (*educere*=to lead or draw out). The philosopher who sees in the light of the good is compelled by what he sees to return to the cave and to draw others up into the light behind him. That this process takes the form of a dialogue in Plato reveals something essential about education. It is important that the context for understanding in Plato is friendship, where there is a genuine desire to know—no one can really understand against his will—and a bond of trust, trust in one's teachers, but more than that, the shared trust of both teacher and pupil in the goodness of being itself, which always exceeds our knowledge of it. There is a profound *philosophical* truth in St. Anselm's *fides quarens intellectum*—faith seeking understanding. "The believer does not seek to understand, that he may believe,' he writes, "but he believes that he may understand: *for unless he believed he would not understand*."[18] Faith and trust are more primordial in learning than doubt. Where this faith is lacking, where there is no longer trust in the goodness of being and transcendent truth, and in the God who is himself the truth and the source of being, then belief in reason itself eventually dies. We are experiencing that in real time throughout the once-Christian world.

This would be an appropriate place for a discussion of pedagogy, the practical means by which students are drawn into

16. Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, I.2, 72 a30; Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 1, a. 1, resp.; q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.

17. Augustine, *De magistro*, xiv.

18. Anselm, *Proslogion*, I, emphasis mine.

the light of truth. At the risk of sounding platitudinous or clichéd, I am going to confine myself to just a couple of observations that my experience with both universities and Catholic schools has convinced me are true and important—and *very* easy to lose sight of. The first is simply that Catholic education is not a program or a formula, but a *quest*: *quaerere Deum*, to borrow the words of Benedict XVI, the quest for God. It just so happens that when you find God you get the world for free. Dante understood this. Nevertheless, every other aspect of Catholic education—the handing on of tradition, the preservation of culture—is a by-product of that quest. The second observation is that teachers cannot lead students where they themselves are unwilling to go. A quest implies questions, questions common to both teacher and students. Teachers, therefore, must never cease to be pupils. Plato's Socrates demonstrates this truth again and again. The moment one is no longer interested—indeed *compelled*—to *understand* is the moment one's career as a teacher has ended, though one may continue to work for many years thereafter. And what is true of each of us as teachers is true of whole schools. Even a devoted or orthodox school that does not live the life of the mind, whose faculty do not have a common intellectual life, a school that is interested in education but has no time for understanding and truth, is ever in danger of becoming a pious educational bureaucracy.

Robert Spaemann's description of education as an "introduction to reality" is an apt summary of what we have tried to say thus far. Spaemann recognizes, however, that this only leads to the more basic question of what reality is. Plato depicts education as an ascent to the good; but what difference does it make if the good became flesh and dwelt among us? If Catholicism is true, then it surely makes all the difference in the world: dividing the times into a "before" and "after," making all things either a *preparatio* or *responsio* to him, and changing—or rather revealing—the deepest meaning of the world. For surely a world known and loved into being, and then visited by God in the fullness of time, is a very different place in its essence from a meaningless rock hurtling through space, a dim and monstrous oval germ, in Chesterton's words, that laid itself by accident.[19]

19. G.K. Chesterton, *What's Wrong with the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 18.

It is much easier to think about education, even Catholic education, than it is to think about the reality education seeks to discover. But if the crisis in education stems from the loss of a Catholic vision of reality, then there can be no real renewal of Catholic education that is not at the same time a deep recovery of this vision, which necessarily extends to everything. For there is no aspect of reality—not nature, not history, not science, not politics, not thinking itself—that falls outside of creation, nothing that is unaffected in the depths of its being by its relation to God.[20] And since the God who is "bottomless" is "in all things, innermostly," nearer to them than they are to themselves, the truth that education seeks to discover is itself bottomless.[21] This makes "renewing Catholic education" an almost infinite, and infinitely open-ended task. If Catholicism is true, then perhaps the deepest answer we can offer consists in the questions we should be asking.

If all things visible and invisible were made in the Word (*Logos*), what Joseph Ratzinger calls the "creative reason" of God, then it follows that reason, meaning, and intelligibility are not adventitious to the universe but built into the very structure of being, and that thinking itself, which always presupposes being and finds itself within it, is subject to its exigencies. Though neither Plato nor Aristotle quite held to the Christian understanding of creation that their philosophies would help to articulate, both understood that the world was governed by an originating reason, with the former calling the good the "non-hypothetical" first principle and the latter locating the "most certain principle of being," in the so-called law of non-contradiction, which is an ontological principle before it is a logical one. To say that the first principle is non-hypothetical is to say that it is presupposed and affirmed in being and thinking as such, "for a principle which everyone must have who understands anything that is, is not a hypothesis, and that which everyone must know who knows anything, he must already have when he comes to a special study."[22] Both interpretations can be defended on philosophical

20. On creation as belonging to the category of relation, see *ST* I, q. 45, a. 3.

21. *ST* I, q. 8, a. 1; Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.6.11.

22. Aristotle, *Metaph.* IV, 1005b15.

as well as theological grounds, since meaning is inescapable for us, and since living things are unintelligible without a "sake" for which their parts act.

What, then, *is* nature, and what does it mean truly to study and understand it, if the world is indeed creation? Archbishop Michael Miller, in delineating his "five essential marks" of a Catholic school, says that it must be "inspired by a supernatural vision."[23] But a "supernatural vision" is destined to appear unreal and unmeaning if nature itself is merely a meaningless mechanical system. How then are we to understand the nature of science, which abstracts experimentally or mathematically from the fullness of reality, and how are we to *teach* science in a way that is scientifically rigorous, so that children learn to *do* science rather than just memorize scientific facts, without reinforcing the mechanistic and reductionistic idea that the abstraction is more real than the whole from which it was abstracted or the scientistic view that only scientific knowledge counts as real knowledge? It is not enough to piously insist that all truth is one. Students need to see and understand this unity, to understand *what kind of truth* the experimental sciences yield, and the nature and limits of this form of knowledge; and they need to discover how to integrate scientific theory and practice within a richer humanistic context and a more comprehensive understanding of nature, reason, and truth.

What is true of nature must be true perforce of *human* nature. The inherent unity, form, and finality of the human organism, which precede the development of that organism as the source and end of its unfolding, must be "visible" in our biology. Yet for this very reason, responsibility for the meaning of human nature cannot fall to mere biology, because biology on these terms is no longer "*mere*." How then are we to incorporate the end-directedness, without which the organism is not even intelligible, into our understanding of scientific explanation? What place is there in our understanding of nature for nature's self-presentation as an intelligible whole comprised of intelligible wholes? What role does our "inside view" of life play in our understanding of scientific knowledge? Such questions are not

23. J. Michael Miller, *The Holy See's Teaching on Catholic Schools* (Atlanta: Sophia Institute Press, 2006), 20.

themselves scientific questions, but philosophical ones—which means that we must learn not just to *do* science but to think philosophically *about* science, to reflect both upon the full reality of the natural world, which includes the sense we make of it, and the nature and limits of scientific reason itself.

Similar questions can be put to mathematics, which presupposes notions of unity, necessity, and order that are not themselves mathematical in nature. Aristotle denied that there could be a mathematical physics precisely because mathematics abstracted from matter and motion, that is, from real being and from the actuality of mov*ing* and chang*ing*.[24] How then are we to understand the relationship between mathematical physics and metaphysics, between mathematical being and real being, between the formalism of mathematics and the real forms it indifferently describes? Mathematics as such cannot answer this question; only a philosophical understanding of mathematics can. This is essential if we are to overcome the modern conceit that mathematical reason is the paradigm of reason as such and mathematically expressed truth the only real truth.

What is history, and how are we to understand it, if the Incarnation and the advent of the Church are central to its meaning and "plot structure"? For if the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, then this singular event must surely be decisive for the meaning of reality, and every age, including our own, must bear some kind of reference to it for good or for ill: as anticipation, outworking, or reaction, though discerning this is doubtless a complex matter.

The principle that all things were created in the Word and that there is therefore nothing outside creation, nothing that is unaffected in the depths of its being by its relation to God, has meant, on the one hand, that Christians have taken a capacious but judicious approach to pagan culture, laying claim to the truth wherever they find it. In the words of Hugo Rahner,

> The very fact that it is the flesh of the *Logos* become man that ultimately defines the limits of Christian humanism contains the possibility of almost explosively extending

24. Aristotle, *Physics* II.2, 193b30; Michael Hanby, *No God, No Science? Theology, Cosmology, Biology* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 107–49.

> those limits to what is really a limitless degree. Now we may dare—indeed dare we must—to take up with an all-embracing gesture into this pattern of the Christian man whatever in the long perspectives of history or in the depths of his soul is true and noble in thought and deed. All that is good and true has proceeded from the Word and has its homing point in the incarnate God, even though this be hidden from us, even though human thought and human good-will may not have perceived it. . . . For the humanist Christian there is only one possible attitude that he can take towards the world: he must love. Yet one can only love a person, and that is why the Christian humanist loves the human in every shape and form but only in him of whom St. Paul says, "all things were created in him." Here is the meaning of those words written by an ancient Christian . . . "Christ is the *Logos*, in whom the whole human race has a portion, and all who have lived according to this *Logos* are Christians, even though, like Socrates and Heraclitus among the Greeks, they are accounted godless."[25]

On the other hand, because the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, because God entered into history uniquely and decisively in the person of Christ, because Christ extends his presence in history through the Church, Rahner's "all-embracing gesture" generates a culture of its own, a culture that is in fact responsible for many of the highest, most beautiful, and most profound achievements of human civilization. If we in our secularism cannot hand on this Christian civilization to them, then let its beauty teach them to long for it and to mourn its loss. Let them learn to sit by the waters of Babylon and weep. What Christian soul could gaze at the rose windows of Notre Dame or Chartres, or visit Durham Cathedral—home to the remains of St. Cuthbert and the Venerable Bede and testament to nearly a thousand years of British Christianity prior to the Reformation but now no longer even Catholic—and not mourn the passing of a civilization generative of such beauty? More than one generation of Christians has been saved by such longing, showing forth the presence of God in his apparent absence. Maybe every generation.

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25. Hugo Rahner, SJ, *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1971), xiv-xv.

Christopher Dawson is therefore correct that Christian civilization itself should be a principal object of study, that we falsify history and refuse to understand ourselves without it. This judgment is defensible on historical grounds alone, apart from Catholic theological commitments. "Christianity did actually come into the historical world," he writes, "and did actually transform the societies with which it came into contact: first, the Hellenistic-Oriental society of the Eastern Roman Empire, and secondly, the Latin and barbarian societies of Western Europe."[26] But of neither the justification for making the study of Christian culture the organizing principle of Catholic education, nor our understanding of culture, is *merely* historical, but philosophical and theological as well.

What is human culture, after all? If human beings are creatures, if they have a nature that inclines them toward communion in the knowledge and love of God, if it is this inclination to truth and goodness that finally makes our actions intelligible as action and not mere behavior, then human culture cannot just be an arbitrary power structure whose mechanisms are analyzed by functional sociology. Human society and culture will be what St. Augustine in the *City of God* says they are: an order of love. If that is true, then a secular society such as we imagine ours to be is an impossibility, an illusion. A people is by definition religious, even if it conceals this from itself, because people created in the image of God are naturally and unavoidably religious. To study a people's art, architecture, philosophy, music, and patterns of life is to discover what they think is real and true, and what they love. To understand these aspects of our own era is to begin to grasp its deepest assumptions and the origin of ideas we have come to take for granted, which is essential if we are to discern the signs of the times and faithfully navigate them. To understand this while inheriting one's own tradition, even in fragments, is to begin to overcome the artificial separation of faith and life imposed by our irreligious culture and tragically reinforced by the attempt to add catechesis to an education that otherwise proceeds as if God does not exist.

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26. Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 107.

The questions which prompt this discovery are not questions about education; they are questions about the nature of reality and the God who is the source of reality, questions long excluded by our culture and its conditioning apparatus. To study and to question the objects of our love as men and women who have been initiated into the tradition, to think along with its artists, philosophers, saints and poets—even to glimpse what they have seen, to understand something of how we came to be who and what we are—is to be slowly liberated from the world of mere appearances, shadows, and lies. This is what education is and why it is Catholic. □

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