

# EDUCATING THE HUMAN PERSON: A THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITION

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“Education is the continuation in time of the mystery of our own birth. This means that we have been given the task of brining finite being to completion—ours included—through our knowing it, loving it, and unfolding the design and project it contains.”



## 1. APPROACHING EDUCATION

In his message for the forty-fifth celebration of the World Day of Peace in 2012, Benedict XVI wrote: “Education is the most interesting and difficult adventure in life. Educating—from the Latin *educere*—means leading young people to move beyond themselves and introducing them to reality, toward a fullness that leads to growth.”<sup>1</sup> Almost a century earlier, Joseph A. Jungmann

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1. Pope Benedict XVI, *A Reason Open to God: On Universities, Education, and Culture*, ed. J. Steven Brown (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013), 99. Hereafter cite as ROG.

used the same definition but noted that education seeks to introduce the person to “the unity, globality, and complexity of all of reality (*Gesamtwirklichkeit*).”<sup>2</sup> This further qualification suggests that a fitting education takes into account the intricacies of the engagement of all of our person with all of life and each other, as well as the different sciences born from this encounter with reality. More deeply, it claims that an authentic educational endeavor must consider reality in its unity. Education, therefore, is the leading of the human person to all of reality seen in a greater unity. What does it mean to see reality in its unity? How can we, finite and historical beings that we are, perceive this unity, let alone introduce others to it?

Modern Western culture tends to shun unity. To the modern spirit, unity reeks of totalitarianism—above all if unity has not been agreed into existence. Fragmentation and abstraction are far more familiar to us. We are prone to conceive life, and indeed our very selves, as coexisting areas that, most of the time, are loosely connected: nature, work, family, economics, school, politics, entertainment, sexuality, personal identity, etc.<sup>3</sup> Although at times unpleasant, this sense of fragmentation is favored because it gives us the illusion of being the masters of our lives or being able to keep danger at bay. We thus rename it specialized, experiential, and pragmatic knowledge. Swayed by this approach, we tend to think that the definition of education as “the introduction to the whole of reality” has an a-personal

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2. Joseph A. Jungmann, “Eine Einführung in die Gesamtwirklichkeit,” in *Christus als Mittelpunkt religiöser Erziehung* (Freiburg: Herder, 1939), 20. See also Robert Spaemann, *A Robert Spaemann Reader: Philosophical Essays on Nature, God, and the Human Person*, ed. and trans. D.C. Schindler and Jeanne Heffernan Schindler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 111–20; Luigi Giussani, *The Risk of Education: Discovering Our Ultimate Destiny*, trans. Mariangela Sullivan (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 25.

3. Think of the popular belief in the separation of the self from the body, sex, and gender that grounds the ideology according to which we now all need to identify with our own concrete bodiliness; or of the separation between love, offspring, and sexual intimacy; or of freedom as a neutral capacity for self-determination detached from the good, our bodies, and social existence; or of time as endless historical progress with an uncertain fate; or of the perception that we are just what we feel, etc. See, e.g., David Crawford, “Brief of Scholars of Philosophy, Theology, Law, Politics, History, Literature and the Sciences as *Amici Curiae* in Support of Respondents,” no. 23–477 (October 15, 2024).

and quantitative meaning: to learn as many things as possible so as to master life ever more successfully.

In one of his essays on education, the Italian philosopher Antonio Rosmini (1797–1855) signaled what is arguably the main reason behind our current worldview. Listening to this insight will help us retrieve an adequate sense of unity. “The spirit of the world,” he wrote, “either by taking God away from nature, or by not thinking about him, or by thinking about him partially, that is, only for one’s own interests, cannot conceive the great unity and simplicity of the order of everything. It instead introduces disorder.”<sup>4</sup> In this view, the pervasive and progressive fragmentation of our studies and educational institutions, which brought George Grant to propose renaming “universities” as “multiversities,” comes from replacing God—who is the origin, goal, and meaning of all there is—with human acuity.<sup>5</sup> If we heed Rosmini’s suggestion and let our reason be open anew to God, then we could say that when we claim that reality is a “whole,” we mean reality perceived in light of that eternal being that accounts, on the one hand, for the being of whatever is in its intrinsic goodness, truth, and beauty and, on the other hand, for the positive meaning of human existence and endeavors. Following Maximus the Confessor, we could argue further that reality is one because it is brought into existence and kept in being by God, who in Christ, the very center of the world, moves reality to its proper end and does so from within it and with its own

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4. Antonio Rosmini, “Sull’unità dell’educazione,” in *Opere*, vol. 31: *Pedagogia e Metodologia* (Città Nuova Editrice, 1994), 197–314, at 237. It exceeds the scope of this essay to describe in detail the reasons and moments of modernity’s long development that has brought about this worldview and its concomitant forms of education. Some helpful historical texts in this regard are Michael J. Naughton, *The Heart of Culture: A Brief History of Western Education* (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2020); Christopher Dawson, *The Crisis of Western Education* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010); Josef Pieper, *Scholasticism: Personalities and Problems of Medieval Philosophy*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2001); Werner Jaeger, *Early Christianity and Greek Paideia* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961); Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth’s Sake: On the Re-enchantment of Education* (Grand Rapids, MI, 2009).

5. George Grant, “Faith and the Multiversity,” in *Technology and Justice in The Collected Works of George Grant*, vol. 4: 1970–1988, ed. Arthur Davis and Henry Roper (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 607–39.

cooperation.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in light of this ontological and theological sense of unity, introducing a person to the whole of reality means leading people to think radically and live truly, that is, to help human persons both to perceive that ultimate light which illumines the truth and contours of every area of existence and, to encourage them to affirm its true goodness with the whole of themselves.

The following reflections aim to contribute to an adequate articulation of the nature of education as the introduction of the person to the whole of reality by exploring what I would call its twofold theological presupposition. It is my hope that rather than approaching education from a specific angle—such as the study of one of the different places where it is offered (high school, university, the internet, etc.)—or examining different educational models (the modern, progressive one, or a more classical education form), revisiting education's overarching theological horizon will strengthen our endeavors to offer an education that does not simply prepare students to succeed or become subservient to a society in which they ultimately do not count. Rather, positively stated, re-examining education's theological horizon will help our efforts to develop an education that balances strong curricula with mature teachers and that communicates wisdom without being afraid of meeting the complexities of our current historical times. Thus, we shall see first that, at its heart, human education is a co-working with God's leading us to him. Second, since educational relationships take place between persons, and since one's own idea of the person informs one's own understanding of education, we will then examine the mystery of the human person. The human person can be

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6. "Christ is all in all. It is he who encloses in himself all being by the unique, simple, and infinitely wise power of his goodness. As the center of straight lines that radiate from him, he does not allow by his unique, simple, and single cause and power that the principles of beings become disjoined at the periphery, but rather he circumscribes their extension in a circle and brings back to himself the distinctive elements of beings which he himself brought into existence. The purpose of this is so that the creations and products of the one God be in no way strangers and enemies to one another by having no reason or center for which they might show each other any friendly or peaceful sentiment or identity, and not run the risk of having their being separated from God to dissolve into nonbeing." Maximus the Confessor, "The Church's Mystagogy," in *Maximus the Confessor: Selected Writings*, trans. George Berthold (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), 187.

considered the other element of the theological presupposition, not only because the category of person finds its deepest articulation thanks to Christ's revelation of God as triune love, but also because the human person is best understood in terms of a constitutive dialogue with God.<sup>7</sup> To unfold this theological meaning of person, this paper presents three complementary approaches to the mystery of the person and suggests their significance for an account of education that seeks to keep in mind the subject who is to be educated.

## 2. A DIVINE INVITATION

The claim that education is the introduction to the whole of reality requires seeing that the unity of reality, and thus of education, derives from the ontological and existential centrality of God to all that is.<sup>8</sup> Let me clarify that this view does not transform education into a means of promoting some sort of religious integralism. It would do so if by God one only meant a religious point of view among many others whose insurmountable partiality brings both its own demise and the violence with which one uselessly tries to fit everything within it. The notion of education we are proposing here is not a worthless plea to introduce religious instruction and rites in every educational institution, as if God were just an "object" to study or handle at will. When

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7. Two brief examples can help us grasp this often-missed anthropological assumption: progressive education, as we see in Dewey, valuing society over the individual and emphasizing mostly the practical capacities of the latter, conceives of education as a life-long process through which the individual adapts to the world and betters the society in which he lives. Modern liberal education, seeing the individual mostly through the lenses of an absolute self-determining freedom, fosters the development of skills and attitudes that can strengthen the capacity to actualize potentialities or secure successful bourgeois existence. These educational models either consider God irrelevant to human existence or imagine God to be an abstract, omnipotent freedom. See John Dewey, *The Middle Works, 1899–1924*. vol. 9, 1916: *Democracy and Education* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1980).

8. "Christianity gave unity to education because, first of all, it placed in our hands . . . the ultimate end to which we can lead everything" (Rosmini, *Sull'unità dell'educazione*, 226). Rosmini develops this unity in three respects: the unity of the end of education; of the sciences or the curriculum of education; and of the method of education.

God is confined to religious instruction and sporadic liturgical practices, the unity proposed by Christian education relinquishes its innate catholicity. Rather, the claim that God is the one who alone can ensure the unity of the human being, nature, and the world, as well as of any authentic educational endeavor, expresses the splendid grace by which God allows us to participate in the communication of life and its meaning. Thus, the “theological presupposition,” rather than a principle or a thought to keep in mind, means that education is, first and foremost, an action of God in which man is called to participate.<sup>9</sup> Let us now explore—how, with the gift of our own being, God calls everyone to this most fundamental task of education.

We rightly name human conception “procreation” because we realize that this mysterious and wonderful event is a co-working of God and human spousal love. God allows a couple to participate in the coming to be of a creature born in time and destined for eternity. To avoid romantic readings of this event, let us also note in passing that in doing so, God accepts the risk and messiness this entrustment entails. As parents soon realize, the birth of the child carries within it the task to lead the newborn

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9. When we consider education as, first and foremost, a divine action, one cannot but recall Augustine’s eloquent explanation of how Christ is our interior master (Augustine, *De magistro* 12.39–40). The way in which Scripture recounts God’s teaching us to come to him through Christ (Jn 6:45; Is 54:13) also comes to mind. Irenaeus of Lyon and Gregory of Nazianzen, among others, spoke beautifully about it. Let these two short passages of Irenaeus suffice to show a way to account for God’s education of mankind: “Thus, it was, too, that God formed man at the first, because of his munificence; but chose the patriarchs for the sake of their salvation; and prepared a people beforehand, teaching the headstrong to follow God; and raised up prophets upon earth, accustoming man to bear his Spirit [within him], and to live in communion with God: he himself, indeed, having need of nothing, but granting communion with himself to those who stood in need of it, and sketching out, like an architect, the plan of salvation to those that pleased him” (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.14.2). “Moreover, he educated the people, who were prone to turn to idols, instructing them by repeated appeals to persevere and to serve God, calling them to the things of primary importance by means of those which were secondary; that is, to things that are real, by means of those that are image; and by things temporal, to eternal; and by the carnal to the spiritual” (Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.14.3). See also Gregory of Nazianzen, *Or.* 31, 25–29. Rather than pursuing further these admirable reflections, our remarks explore the ontological grounds of education from the point of view of the relationship between the transcendentals, which are coextensive with created finite being, and the human person.

into the meaning of existence. Every child yearns to know who he is, why he was born, whether life is good or not, and what it means to live. This “stretching oneself to know,” as Aristotle described it, is not extrinsic to our being born.<sup>10</sup> The mystery of our own birth unfolds in time as education because the being and life we receive are inseparable from the truth and the good.<sup>11</sup>

An ontological reflection that welcomes the revealed knowledge of the creative character of being shows that being’s intelligibility and desirability are not accidental properties of being. They are coextensive with being and irreducible to each other. The intrinsic relationship between being, truth, and the good helps us to see that being *reveals* itself—this is the Greek sense of truth as *aletheia*. Moreover, being *shows* itself as the faithful ground upon which existence is built—this is the scriptural sense of truth as *emeth*. Revealing and showing itself, being also *gives* itself in beauty as what is most desirable (*bonum*). The ontological perception of the transcendental properties of being suggests further that the relationship between being and truth and between being and the good, requires a spiritual being that can receive being and affirm its concrete singularity in their mutual belonging to God. Man’s task to receive and affirm all of being is not one task among others. It is his main endeavor, since, as the experience of himself proves time and again, his fulfillment is found outside him: in the totality of being. God hands being over to man as one, true, and good, so that both man and being can be and find fulfillment in a reciprocal relationship that leads them to their common source. Originating from God, the human person truly affirms reality only when its archetypal truth and goodness are also acknowledged. As Augustine beautifully put it, we desire nothing more strongly than truth, and we find rest only in that ultimate truth and loved good that alone grants existence, life, meaning, and direction to all that is.<sup>12</sup> This co-belonging of being-truth and man is one of the key reasons why

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10. “πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει.” Aristotle, *Met.* 980a.

11. It is not by chance that the Fathers of the Church, following St. Paul, expressed the education in the faith as a giving birth to Christ in the believer. See Hugo Rahner, *Our Lady and the Church*, trans. Sebastian Bullough (New York: Pantheon Books, 1961), 69–79.

12. “Quid enim fortius desiderat anima quam veritatem?” Augustine, *In Ioh.* 26, 5.

education is our co-working with God in bringing people to the heart of reality.

To unfold a little bit about what this divine and human co-working means for the task of education, allow me to mention three points. First, when God creates by knowing and affirming himself,<sup>13</sup> he not only gives us being. He also grants us the capacity to know it. Being therefore carries within itself the light that renders finite beings intelligible and human beings intelligent. "The gospel message," said Benedict XVI, "perceives a rationality inherent in creation and considers man as a creature participating in, and capable of attaining to, an understanding of this rationality."<sup>14</sup> Thus, when we do research, teach, learn, and educate in and out of a classroom, we do not make truth but recognize it. We do not impose our own idea; we seek to help people to grow into what they are called to be.

Second, God is not only the source of being and its truth. He, as Benedict XVI says, is also the origin of "all goodness and of the intellect's passionate desire to know and the will's yearning for fulfillment in love."<sup>15</sup> Being is good. As good, being gives itself over to man as fit for him. In the same way, man, through the good, sees being and its truth as lovable and desirable, as its end and fulfillment.<sup>16</sup> Reality's goodness, we could say, brings reality to "wait" in anticipation of being possessed by us, just as we yearn to be one with it: to "own" it and be "owned" by it. If the good, then, is what completes us, and not what we feel or wish, education is not mostly teaching attitudes or behaviors. Neither is it teaching people to pursue their wishes or pleasures successfully. Rather, education helps us to listen to the truth of things and affirm the common good; it assists us to listen to the truth as the common good.

13. ST I, q. 14, a. 8: "scientia Dei est causa rerum." See also Augustine, *De Trin.* 15.13.22.

14. Benedict XVI, ROG, 38.

15. Benedict XVI, ROG, 48; Augustine, *Conf.* 1.1.

16. "Convenientiam ergo entis ad appetitum exprimit hoc nomen bonum ut in principio Ethicorum dicitur quod bonum est quod omnia appetunt" (Aquinas, *De ver.* 1.1.c); "ex hoc ipso quod veritas est finis contemplationis, habet rationem boni appetibilis et amabilis et delectantis. Et secundum hoc pertinet ad vim appetitivam" (ST II-II, q. 180, a. 1 ad 1).

Third, although being is true and good *for* us, it is also the case that it remains *other* than us, just as we, no matter the degree of our unity with it, remain other from it. In fact, as Aquinas said, otherness (*aliquid*) too is a transcendental property of being.<sup>17</sup> This co-belonging and irreducibility of being and the human person is wonderful. It first of all points to God, the common source of being and man (Rom 1:9–20). Furthermore, it testifies that the unity of reality is informed by a project, a design, that man in his freedom is called to carry out.<sup>18</sup> If anything, our God-given dominion over creation means this: to allow reality to bear the fruit it contains within itself but cannot yield without man's collaboration.<sup>19</sup> Through us, grapes give wine just as wheat gives bread. As Christian faith teaches, both wine and bread are sacramentally fulfilled in the eucharistic species. God creates reality in such a way that he allows us to collaborate in his task of educating the human being into the full truth, goodness, and otherness of all that is, i.e., of finite and infinite being. Education is the continuation in time of the mystery of our own birth. This not only means that God has created us with reason and will so that we can know the truth and love it, that is, to become one with it; certainly, it entails this dynamic union. More deeply, however, it means that we have been given the task of brining finite being to completion—ours included—through our knowing it, loving it, and unfolding the design and project it contains. This divine condescension makes education possible—if we understand education not as the handing on of information or the training of skills, but as our engagement with any dimension of truth and goodness by which we are shaped and whose coming to light we further.

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17. "Dicitur enim aliquid quasi aliud quid; unde sicut ens dicitur unum, in quantum est indivisum in se, ita dicitur aliquid, in quantum est ab aliis divisum." *De veritate* q. 1, a. 1 c.

18. Being and man, so to say, do not stand in front of each other statically, nor does being remain indifferent for man's action. Their "being-for each other" pre-contains a design and an order that the human being is called to bring to light. Needless to say, before the Incarnation of Christ, this "design" is only glimpsed by the human being, and, even then, only some aspects of it are grasped. The fullness of this plan is fully disclosed in Christ (Eph 1:9–14).

19. Antonio López, "Without Beginning: Human Freedom and Divine Omnipotence," *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 47, no. 3 (Fall 2020): 503–35.

The co-belonging of being and man, as well as the existence of a design that needs to be unfolded, allows us to begin to have a proper understanding of human experience, that is, the action that brings one to seeing reality with all of oneself through the engagement with all of reality. Experience is indeed vital for authentic education since it is a privileged way for the learner to be present to the truth, to see it without reductions, and to grow as a human person. Nor need we consider scientific experimentation to be the archetype of experience; scientific experiment only yields one specific kind of knowledge. Given that the engagement of all of the human being with all of reality is at stake, it is better to follow a concept of experience that can take into account the human person, reality, and their intrinsic relationship with their divine origin and destiny. It is this overarching concern that Luigi Giussani has in mind when he defines experience as “the original impetus with which man reaches out to reality, seeking to become one with it. He does this by fulfilling a project that dictates to reality itself the ideal image that stimulates it from within.”<sup>20</sup>

In this second part of our reflections, we have argued that to define education as an introduction to the whole of reality entails realizing that we cannot account for the totality of reality apart from its intrinsic relationship with God. Moreover, God’s centrality is best grasped when we view education as a co-working with God to lead human beings into what fulfills us, ultimately, God himself. This not only means that education is a life-long endeavor. More importantly, it discloses the fundamental content of educational relationships: what is to be recognized in every form of human knowledge and action is God’s “all-ness” and, within it, our unfolding of every instance of truth and goodness. Recognizing God as all in all, however, goes far beyond a mere affirmation of his existence—as if one could remain indifferent to God once one has become aware of

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20. Luigi Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, trans. John Zucchi (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1997), 9. Antonio López, “Experience: A Philosophical View,” in *St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe et al. (University of St. Andrews, 2022), article published August 1, 2024, <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/ExperienceAPhilosophicalView>; Antonio López, “Christian Experience: A Catholic View,” in *St. Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, ed. Brendan N. Wolfe et al. (University of St. Andrews, 2022), article published August 1, 2024, <https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/ChristianExperienceACatholicView>.

his significance for the unity of reality and of oneself. Rather, it means that the human being is constituted as a person because he exists in dialogue with God. To see education as the collaboration with God, therefore, is not to claim that human beings are called to carry out a task in his stead, or even with his help. More profoundly, as a co-working with God, education, along with the pursuit of real wisdom, has the capacity to help human beings to grow as persons.

### 3. THE MYSTERY OF THE HUMAN PERSON

To approach the mystery of the human person, it is most fitting to inquire *who* the human being is.<sup>21</sup> Knowing *that* we are rational animals, social animals,<sup>22</sup> free embodied spirits, and so on, while crucial, still does not fully address the mystery of what it means to be a person. In his early works, Karol Wojtyła argued that Aristotelian metaphysics accounts for man's being in terms of *agere* and *pati*, matter and form, act and potency. Within this metaphysical framework, "person" means the individual who "possesses himself" (*sui iuris*), is "incommunicable to another" (*alteri incommunicabilis*),<sup>23</sup> and "can act of himself" (*per se agunt*).<sup>24</sup> Yet, Wojtyła rightly notices that man is not only a *suppositum*,

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21. "If you deliberated well and paid careful attention, then you would notice that a 'what' rather than a 'who' is indicated by the word 'substance,' but conversely, a 'who' rather than a 'what' is designated by the word 'person.' . . . And we must note that with regard to the question 'who is that person?' or 'what is it' we usually give the same response: a proper name or something equivalent . . . something rather than someone is implied in the word 'substance'; but, conversely, someone rather than something is indicated by the word 'person.'" Richard of St. Victor, *The Trinity*, 4.7, in "The Trinity," trans. Christopher P. Evans, in *Trinity and Creation: A Selection of Works of Hugh, Richard, and Anselm of St. Victor* (New York: New City Press, 2011), 213–382, at 273–74.

22. Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a.

23. Antonio López, Carl A. Anderson, David L. Schindler, David S. Crawford, Nicholas J. Healy, Grzegorz Ignatik, eds., *The English Critical Edition of the Works of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II*, vol. 1: *Person and Act and Related Essays*, trans. Grzegorz Ignatik (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 32, 463–64.

24. *ST I*, q. 29, a. 1.

a *subjectum* (subject) of a rational nature. The human person is not simply “something,” a subsistent rational being. The person is also “someone” who experiences himself as an “I” *irreducible* to the world. The person *transcends* the world. In saying this, Wojtyła is not separating nature from person or disregarding nature; such a view would misinterpret both him and the order of things. On the contrary: the human person is the full realization of a human nature which never exists in separation from its personal instantiation.

A text of particular importance for pondering the mystery of the human person positively is the *Catechesis on Human Love*. Here Wojtyła, in one of his key pontifical texts, proposes that what constitutes the human being as a person is his intrinsic relationship with God, and affirms that to be a person is to be a “partner of the Absolute.”<sup>25</sup> To be a person is to be someone who can be called and addressed by God, and whose response God awaits in turn. In this sense, therefore, we could say that the irreducibility of the human person consists in being a living dialogue with God. To grasp the depth and extent of this dialogue, it is essential to realize its roots in the reciprocity of being and man that is established by the creative act, which, as we saw in the previous section, grounds the understanding of education as a coworking of God and the human being. At the same time, this dialogue fulfills that reciprocity of being and man that leads the person to recognize and affirm God. While this dialogue rests on the view that, as Augustine cogently showed, the true image of the Trinity in the human spirit is to remember, to know, and to love God,<sup>26</sup> it is more than a sheer exercise of human faculties. This dialogue can only happen if God takes the initiative to open himself up to the human being, speak to him, and allow himself to be addressed and called upon. Once this takes place, the human person is both affirmed in his being’s goodness and brought to discover and live the meaning of existence—the reason why “I” have been allowed to be born.<sup>27</sup> This dialogue, then, fulfills

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25. John Paul II, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 6:2.

26. Augustine, *De Trin.* 14.12.15.

27. Within this dialogue one also discovers the full scope of the project implicit in reality that we mentioned in the previous section and that the

our spiritual being because, within it, the discovery of the goodness and meaning of our own existence is given and unfolds as a relationship of loving, asymmetrical dependence.<sup>28</sup>

This theological concept of the human person thus depends on whether God actually is a personal being. To speak of God in personal terms is a rather difficult task. Many ancient and modern philosophical systems and most religions reject considering God a personal being. For these views, to claim that God is a person is diminishing: it betrays an all-too-human attachment to finite material individuality, to our own limited rationality and perception of the good, and to our inconstant freedom.<sup>29</sup> In contrast, Christian revelation claims that the category of person is precisely that which secures God's uniqueness, because "person" indicates that something of him cannot be communicated. He remains other from the world (Is 55:8–9). Yet this very incommunicability is, at the same time and in a paradoxical way, perfect communicability. As our Christian faith teaches us, God

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human being, through his work, is called to realize. It is the "plan of the mystery hidden for ages" (Eph 3:9) to enable us through Christ to enjoy and praise the Father's glory. Within this constitutive, living dialogue, the human being receives and is called to carry out a specific form of the unfolding of God's glory.

28. The theological account of person as dialogue cannot be taken to entail a demotion of the other definitions of person, let alone an elimination of the dignity of human being tout court—as if only those who live a dialogue with God were persons and the rest were just individuals of the human species deprived of any meaningful singularity. The theological meaning is the fulfillment of the ontological meaning of person, because that rational being that is incommunicable to others can act of himself. As such, the ontological meaning is both open to the theological one and moves towards it, because in an inchoate form—regardless of how tacit, rare, and mixed with errors this might be—every human existence is to various degrees a communication with its divine origin.

A further clarification is needed: while God remains other from the human being (and in this sense, he does not depend on him), his revelation of himself to man (and the covenant with him he establishes) is an act of love by which God freely and gratuitously binds himself to man. The beloved Son of the Father becomes the son of Mary and she, in turn, becomes the *theotokos*. The qualification of the loving dependence as asymmetrical signals both the order of the relationship (it is God who takes the initiative and makes the unifying dialogue possible) and God's remaining eternally ever-greater than his creature, even if he brings the latter to beatifying union with him.

29. Jean Daniélou, *God and Us*, trans. Walter Roberts (London: A.R. Mowbray, 1957).

is a personal being only because he is a tri-personal communion. The Father is not Father for himself, but totally for the Son whom he begets eternally, and through whom he breathes the Spirit. The Son is not Son for himself, but is he who eternally loves the one who generates him, and loves him with the love of both. The Holy Spirit is not Holy Spirit for himself. He is the person-communion in whom Father and Son are eternally one. Because God is this triune eternal being-for, -with, and -in each other, he can create, speak to, and bring man into the ever-fruitful eternal dialogue that he is. Of course, God's utter communicability is necessary with regard to himself, as well as gratuitous and free with regard to the world. Once God's self-revelation takes place in history, the human being discovers that he is a person because he is the creature to whom God speaks, whom he befriends, and whom he gratuitously allows to participate in the further unfolding of his eternal glory.

To clarify the account of the human person as a living dialogue with the triune God, within which one discovers and responds to the place prepared for him, I would like to present three complementary paths to the mystery of the human person though of course we cannot do so exhaustively here. These three paths are the perception of person in terms of recognition, freedom, and mission. I will approach each of these analogically: that is, I will first suggest their theological meaning, and in that light their anthropological sense. The following reflections seek only to give some solid reasons for an adequate concept of person with an eye to articulating better the nature of education.

William of St. Thierry (1085–1148), a Benedictine monk who was a friend of St. Bernard and was one of the most important spiritual writers of the High Middle Ages, was aware of Boethius's classic definition of person but preferred another, which also seems to come from Boethius.<sup>30</sup> In his *Against Euthyches*, Boethius suggests that just as the audience could recognize by the mask the actors wore during a play which character they represented, so also men "can be clearly recognized by means of their

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30. "Rationabilis naturae individua substantia." Boethius, *Contra Eutychen* 4.10, in Boethius, *Theological Tractates and the Consolation of Philosophy*, ed. H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 92.

form.”<sup>31</sup> “Person” means to be recognized, acknowledged (Latin: *agnoscere*). Each divine person, says William in his *The Enigma of Faith*, “offers sure recognition (*agnitio*) of himself” to the other two. In the “individual designations [of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit] there is understood no separation of nature but a recognition of persons.”<sup>32</sup> The divine persons are persons by means of their reciprocal recognition. Thus we could say that, for William, each divine person is a person in the revelation of himself to the other two in three different ways (as begetter, begotten, or gift). Each is himself in the eternal and reciprocal recognition of the other two. It is not simply that each person “knows” the other two, but that each re-cognizes the other two. Since God is eternal, to “recognize” is not simply to become newly aware of an identity known before, as it occurs among human beings. It means that each person knows the other persons as the one God that each is, and simultaneously as another person than himself. One sees both the same divine being in the other and one’s irreducible self in the irreducible other. It is precisely this irreducibility of the persons, their eternal otherness and inseparability, that accounts for the eternal recognition being ever-new.

The dialogue that constitutes the human person as such entails, in an analogical way, the reciprocal recognition just mentioned. Theologically speaking, human beings are persons inasmuch as they indwell in a loving, reciprocal recognition. To be a person is to be for someone else, and vice-versa. The original experience of one’s own life is the parental embrace of the child.<sup>33</sup>

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31. “Sed quoniam personis inductis histriones individuos homines quorum intererat in tragoedia vel in comoedia ut dictum est repraesentebant, id est Hecuba vel Medeam vel Simonem vel Chremetem, idcirco ceteros quoque homines, quorum certa pro sui forma esset agnitio, et Latini personam et Graeci πρόσωπα nuncupaverunt.” Boethius, *Contra Eutychen*, 3.20–25. Loeb translates: “But, since as we have said, it was by the mask they put on that actors represented the individual people concerned in a tragedy or comedy—Hecuba or Medea or Simo or Chremes—so also of all other men who could be clearly recognized by their appearance the Latins used the name *persona*, the Greeks *proson*” (Boethius, *Theological Tractates* 87), emphasis added.

32. William of St. Thierry, *The Enigma of Faith*, trans. John D. Anderson, (Washington, D.C.: Cistercian Publications, 1974), no. 34, p. 66.

33. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord. A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 5: *The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil, John Saward, and Rowan Williams (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 613–27; Giussani, *The Religious Sense*, 105–7.

Of course, the fragility of human recognition is apparent to all of us. We are also aware, however, of its fundamental importance both for a healthy human development and for flourishing in the state of life to which each has been called. This is why it is important to recall that this understanding of the human person as reciprocal recognition finds its ultimate truth in God's recognition of each human being, whom God calls into existence through the loving embrace of the parents and who grows humanly through friendships (Lk 12:6–7).<sup>34</sup> Human recognition is true when it is realized as an integral part of God's recognition of us, and ours of him. Without this ultimate theological ground, "recognition" would be either a romantic approach to existence or an abusive form of power in disguise.<sup>35</sup>

Before drawing the implications that this understanding of the mystery of the person has for an articulation of the nature of education, let me mention a second account of person: the person as freedom, which is included in the first approach we just examined. Besides recognition, the term *agnitio* used by William also means to acknowledge. To acknowledge someone is to assent to, to accept, to let another person into one's self. In this sense, to recognize someone is coincident with one's own acceptance of the other person within oneself. For the God of Jesus Christ who has revealed himself to be love in itself, this tri-personal acknowledgement can be expressed as the eternal act by which each is himself in the other two and each is, so to speak, the space for the other two. The divine persons dwell in each other. For the immutable triune God, this acknowledgment, this eternal and ongoing letting the other two persons be in oneself and oneself in the other two, is beyond the interplay of necessity and freedom. It goes beyond necessity and freedom not because it excludes them but because it recapitulates them at a higher level in being tri-personal love (1 Jn 4:8–16). A glimpse of this is

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34. "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God. Indeed, even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows." Lk 12:6–7; Mt 10:19–31.

35. This divine ground is what accounts for the fact that, albeit deeply wounded, children of divorced parents do not lose their personal identity. See Margaret McCarthy, *Torn Asunder: Children, the Myth of the Good Divorce, and the Recovery of Origins* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017).

given to us in the revelation of the eternal processions of the Son (Jn 1:15) and the Spirit (Jn 15:26), as well as in the mysterious grounds of Christ's kenosis: "though he was in the form of God, [he] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" (Phil 2:6). It is this ineffable, perichoretic indwelling, to use the technical term, that best grounds what "acknowledgment" means for the human person.

For the human person, to accept the other as part of oneself and oneself in another—that is to acknowledge another and be acknowledged—is the flourishing of one's nature in an act of freedom. In his treatise on the triune God, the first definition of person that Aquinas considers is "to have the capacity to act of oneself."<sup>36</sup> This capacity (*autexousia*) is at the very heart of what it means for the human person to be free. If we are mindful that the human person is born—that is, that his being is given to him—then human freedom can be described as the received capacity to possess oneself, a capacity that is endowed with an intrinsic movement toward the truth and the good. Human freedom then is, first, the received capacity to *possess* oneself. The creative act places our own being at our own disposal. It is the giving of ourselves to ourselves which carries within it the received capacity to possess being, reality, and God. Rather than a knowing, which happens when we understand an idea, or an assimilating of reality as happens, for example, when we eat, the person is free because he is a self that *as a self* can possess what is given to him. This ontological perception of freedom secures the conscious participation of the self in the possessing. Further, as received, human freedom is also the capacity to *reciprocate* the original gift *from oneself*. The new beginnings that every human person puts in place are his creative response to what is first given to him. Every possession, every assent, just as every work, is a reciprocation to what is first given.

This second approach to the mystery of the person allows us to deepen the meaning of dialogue insofar as it shows that man is a person in the gratuitous reciprocation of his entire

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36. *ST I*, q. 29, a. 1. As is well known, Aquinas accepts and modifies Boethius's concept of person: "Persona igitur divina significat *relationem ut subsistentem*" (ibid., a. 4).

self to the one who first speaks and who gives himself to him.<sup>37</sup> Analogically to God, human freedom, as the received capacity to possess one's own being in another, must here be understood ontologically and not simply as a spiritual faculty. In this sense, to be a human person is to be oneself, to have one's own being in the acknowledged other whose being is at the same time in us. To be free is to acknowledge and to be acknowledged, to welcome the other person within us who has first welcomed us within himself or herself. Here, once again, the fragility of human freedom is apparent to all. Yet, here too freedom's enactment is always preceded, enabled, and sustained by God's patient initiative (Mat 25:31–46) and his merciful letting us be in him (Rom 8:32; 1 Jn 3:1).

Let me now draw four implications of these two concepts of person (person as recognition and person as freedom) for the nature of education. First, the concept of person as *agnitio* helps us to see that, analogically to God, communion and singularity are equiprimordial for the human being. Society is not something that comes after the individual, nor is it a larger human reality that absorbs the individual within itself. A right educational relationship will not see others as extrinsic to the singular person. It thus will help to extricate us from that deep-seated individualism that is a hidden form of nihilism. Furthermore, the goal of education will not be to turn people into skilled workers who will either disappear into the web of history or subjugate society to their own projects. Resting on the common good of the truth, which binds being and educational partners together, an education that understands the person in light of this substantial recognition and acknowledgment will teach one how to become more oneself in belonging to that larger community and in the contribution to the common good of society. The person as recognition reveals education as a labor of communion.

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37. Similar to William, in recent times Luigi Giussani argued that "To accept love creates reciprocity, generates reciprocity. This in the [divine] Mystery is nature. In Jesus of Nazareth the nature of being revealed itself as love in friendship, that is, as recognized love. In this way, the Father's mirror is the Son, the infinite Word, and in the infinite and mysterious perfection of this recognition . . . of the Father (*Splendor Patris*), proceeds the mysterious creative potency of the Holy Spirit." Luigi Giussani, *L'uomo e il suo destino. In Cammino* (Genova: Marietti, 1999), 19, trans. mine.

Second, this concept of person as recognition helps illuminate the educational relationship as an event of self-disclosure, self-communication, and communication of the truth, all of which is mediated by the truth of being to which all who are involved in an educational relationship naturally have access. Education has the form of an event that takes place as the letting be of the truth that is greater than the subjects of an educational relationship and within which truth they are called to know and give themselves to the others. While it is also being the handing on of a tradition and acquired knowledge, this eventful form prevents the educational relationship from being reduced to a sharing of information mediated by technological means that cannot but seek to replace teachers. When the person is seen in light of recognition, education is understood as an event of truth's disclosure.

Third, understanding the person as (ontological) freedom entails that one can recognize and assent to the truth—no matter how dire personal or historical circumstances may be. Furthermore, this perspective on the mystery of the human person enables us to grasp more deeply what has been described as the “risk” of education, that is, the letting the learner see and respond from himself to the truth he has been led to.<sup>38</sup> The risk is to avoid the temptation to take the place of the student, which is the same as to do away with those who seek to learn, and rather for the student to see from themselves the truth that reveals itself to them. Seeing the truth requires making oneself present to it, that is to say, to give oneself over to it. We see the truth when we allow it to determine us, to give form to us. It is at this juncture that thinking critically and profoundly takes place. Knowing is a “con-version.”<sup>39</sup> It is easier for the learner to make himself present to the truth proposed to him, to accept the risk to be educated, when the person who educates is an authority not simply because he is older and tends to know more than the one who is learning, but when the teacher is ongoingly engaged with the truth in which his own being is at stake. When the person is

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38. Giussani, *Risk of Education*, 61–64.

39. In this context, it is worthwhile to reread Eliot's famous, piercing questions in his *Choruses from the Rock*, 1: “All our knowledge brings us near to our ignorance, / All our ignorance brings us nearer to death, / But nearness to death, no nearer to God. / Where is the Life we have lost in living? / Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? / Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

understood as freedom, the risk of education is adequately seen and can be pursued with hope.

Finally, embracing the mystery of the person's being-free also means that, as Benedict XVI contended, the educational relationship is to "awaken the courage to make definitive decisions, which today are considered a mortifying bind to our freedom. In reality, they are indispensable for growth and in order to achieve something great in life—in particular, to cause love to mature in all its beauty, and therefore, to give consistency and meaning to freedom itself."<sup>40</sup> A true education is the one that elicits the desire to give oneself completely and, since love is the highest relationship among persons, to give oneself in response to another in a form of life that Christians call a "state of life." Education is to render attractive the acceptance of being oneself in the place God has designed for each person. This sense of person as freedom helps us discover education as the way to maturity in love. When the person is perceived as recognition and freedom, true education is revealed to be the deepening of communion, the eventful realization of truth in which both educational partners accept the risk of affirming the true common good, and a help to mature in love.

The final path to approach the human person that would be helpful for our reflections is Balthasar's concept of person as mission. Rooted in Scripture and in the tradition of the Church, Balthasar cogently argues that Christ's self-presentation as the "one sent" by the Father is what constitutes the mystery of his person (Jn 17:23).<sup>41</sup> For Christ, his mission, that is, his being-sent by the Father, is not simply a task to carry out and which begins to unfold at a certain time in his life. Rather, as a historical expression of his eternal procession from the Father, Christ's mission constitutes his being and his self-awareness. In this light, for the human being to be a person, discovering who one is means to be brought into the place of love where the Son eternally dwells, the love of the Father, and from there, to let one's whole life participate in Christ's mission to glorify the Father in the way that has been predetermined. The dialogue that constitutes

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40. Benedict XVI, *ROG*, 185.

41. Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* vol. III: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 149–259.

the human being as person has as its task a specific form of collaboration in the revelation of God's glory. Admittedly, glory may be a foreign concept for most of us. Yet, if we remember that, according to Scripture, glory means the power and splendor of God's love, then we can see why glory is what every human being is seeking for himself and is what any education strives to obtain.<sup>42</sup> Analogically to Christ's person, for the human being to be a person is also to live existence as a being-sent to glorify the Father. It is in the Father's glory that we can enjoy genuine power and love, and within that glory, grow ever more human. This mission, which the saint represents at its highest degree, is also inchoatively enjoyed by anyone who accepts to live for the true and the good rather than for his own sake.

Just as Christ's existence moves in a twofold direction, toward the Father and toward the world (and the latter in and through the former moves toward the Father), so does the mission of the Christian person move in a twofold direction: toward God in and through the world, to contribute with one's own endeavors to give the world the form that it is waiting to acquire. Rather than fostering the self-serving mastery of oneself and nature, this insight into the human person reveals that genuine education labors to instill in the human being the full depth and direction of the power and splendor for which the world has been created. Accordingly, rather than shunning the world, one learns through an adequate education to "test everything, hold fast to what is good" (1 Thes 5:21; Rom 12:1–2). "Whatever be the risk of corruption from intercourse with the world around," wrote John Henry Newman, "such a risk must be encountered if a great idea is duly to be understood, and much more if it is to be fully exhibited."<sup>43</sup> An education that strives to give the human person

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42. Heinrich Schlier, "Doxa bei Paulus als heilsgeschichtlicher Begriff," in *Besinnung auf das Neue Testament: Exegetische Aufsätze und Vorträge*, vol. 2 (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1967), 307–18. It is thus not by chance that the slogans of most universities are variations on this theme.

43. John H. Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine* (Notre Dame, IN.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 39–40. This thought echoes what he learned from Philip Neri. At the end of his *The Idea of a University*, Newman presents the figure of Philip as his "special Father and Patron": "[Philip] lived in an age as traitorous to the interest of Catholicism as any that preceded it, or can follow it." Unlike some of his contemporaries (Charles Borromeo, Ignatius, Francis Xavier, etc.), Newman said that "Philip preferred to yield to the

his full form is called to teach to affirm every glimmer of truth wherever it may be found and to elicit in the person the capacity to communicate the truth he discovers.

## CONCLUSION

As a contribution to an articulation of the nature of education—seen as the introduction to the whole of reality—the foregoing reflections sought to show, on the one hand, in what way education is a participation in God's education of the human being. Education is the continuation in time of the mystery of one's own birth. Furthermore, the previous remarks proposed approaching the mystery of the person from three theological entry points: recognition, freedom or acknowledgment, and mission. Together, these three roads bring us closer to the mystery of who the human person is: a dialogue with God in which all his nature is fruitfully engaged and which spans all of the person's historical existence. With this view of the human person, it is more feasible for the educational form one may embrace to help the person truly to flourish. A genuine education, then, introduces the human person to the whole of reality when it helps people "always to seek the face of the Lord" (Ps 104:4 Vul.) and, within that face, all that is God's. This search is never-ending. One is called to seek God both throughout all of life and in the eschaton, since, as Augustine says, "the seeking of the discovered One grows with the growth of love."<sup>44</sup> □

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stream, and direct the current, which he could not stop, of science, literature, art, and fashion, and to sweeten and to sanctify what God had made very good and man had spoilt." See *The Idea of a University* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 162.

44. "Ac per hoc qui diligitur, etiam praesens quaeritur, dum caritate perpetua, ne fiat absens, agitur. Proinde quem quisque diligit, etiam cum eum videt, sine fastidio semper vult esse praesentem, hoc est, semper quaerit esse praesentem. Et nimirum hoc est, *Quaerite faciem eius semper*, ut non huic inquisitioni, qua significatur amor, finem praestet inventio, sed amore crescente inquisitio crescat inventi" (Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 104:3).