

Conclusion

My reflections are those of a bishop who has spent thirteen years as an educator and an additional seventeen years as a chairman or board member of several Catholic colleges, including eleven years as Chancellor of the Catholic University of America. It is my happy privilege to serve as a member of the Congregation for Catholic Education and to have been involved in the preparation of *Sapientia Christiana* and *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*. Every day I am more and more convinced of the value and importance of Catholic higher education for the Church and for the world. I am convinced that Catholic higher education remains a uniquely powerful way of communicating the gospel in all its fullness to new generations of leaders who will serve both the Church and society. Our Catholic colleges and universities have a vital and irreplaceable role to play in the work of re-evangelization. The five hundredth anniversary of the evangelization of the Americas is an appropriate time to consider how well our institutions of higher learning are fulfilling that crucial task. □

Towards a distinctively Catholic school

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The process of education occurs in the context of an initiation into *communio*, into a community of relationships extending through time, which is also the lived experience of a cultural tradition.

The Catholic school finds its true justification in the mission of the Church; it is based on an educational philosophy in which faith, culture and life are brought into harmony. . . . The special character of the Catholic school and the underlying reason for its existence, the reason why Catholic parents should prefer it, is precisely the quality of the religious instruction integrated into the overall education of the students (*The Religious Dimension of Education in a Catholic School*, Congregation for Catholic Education, 1988, paras. 34, 66).

A Catholic school can only bring faith, culture, and life into harmony by putting God at the center of the curriculum. God is the unifying principle of all human knowledge, and of all human society, including the community of the school itself. The decline of our culture can be traced back to the moment (if it was a moment) when we lost sight of this unifying presence. An attempt was made in universities and schools to eliminate the sacred, to comprehend the world while leaving God out of account. The secularization of education meant the rise of the Machine as the supreme archetype of our civilization. At the same time, the dissolution of a shared tradition of discourse into a plurality of disconnected disciplines, each with its own special language and its own narrow goals, followed

inevitably from this initial schism. The "connecting principle" of the culture had been lost, and under new conditions it became impossible to communicate universal values to succeeding generations. Recently, however, a way to reconnect the fast-dissolving components of our culture has begun to suggest itself. A series of developments in theology during our century have enormous implications for the philosophy of education.

These developments give us a new understanding firstly of the human person, secondly of the relationship between nature and grace, and thirdly of beauty in its relationship to truth and goodness. *Personalism* consists in the insight that we are creatures of freedom, by which we shape our own destiny. Our nature is determined by relationship to others, and is fulfilled by the gift of self in love. This is connected with the second set of insights concerning *grace*, for it turns out that human freedom and the power to love is itself a gift, by which we are enabled to share in the freedom of God. Furthermore, our freedom has no ultimate fulfillment which is purely "natural," but is satisfied and perfected only by the giving of the self to a supernatural object: God. The life that is ours by nature, as persons, is therefore not opposed to the life of grace or supernatural gift. (What is opposed to grace is sin, a misuse of freedom which destroys the harmony of nature and grace.) These first two developments were consolidated by the authoritative documents of the Second Vatican Council. They were taken a stage further theologically by Hans Urs von Balthasar, who explored the underlying form of the grace that fulfills the world. In the divine object of love he saw the mutual inherence of truth, goodness, and beauty. The "neglected transcendental," *beauty*, he grounded in the glory of the Blessed Trinity revealed in the mission of the Son.

None of this is new. It is all implicit in the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, right down to that "Doctor" of our own age, John Henry Newman. But though implicit, it remained for a long time undeveloped within the Church, under a crust of degenerate Scholastic theology. The renewal of theology in our day turns that science back into what it was for the Fathers and saints, a science of love, at one and the same time precise, systematic, and practical. Love has been rescued from the marshes of sentiment and reinstated as the bedrock of God's revelation to humanity, a revelation about nature, about ourselves, and about God. The inner structure of love is revealed as Trinitarian, because in any real act of

love the self of the lover is simultaneously given, received, and shared. To be united with another through love is not to lose one's distinctive identity, but precisely to receive and to be confirmed in it. From her knowledge of the structure of love the Church is able to unfold a comprehensive ethical and social teaching, according to which human society is understood as a *communio*: a communion of persons called to fulfillment in mutual service or "solidarity." By virtue of the fact that physical bodies belong to our essence as persons, this solidarity extends itself to the very limits of the natural world.

Developments such as these in theology give some hope of a renewal to come in education, if ways can be found to apply them in practice. They should help to dissipate any sense that religion is irrelevant to everyday life, or that it is opposed to science. They should provide a basis on which to defend the objectivity of standards and a framework of absolute values. (For truth, goodness, and beauty are objective axes which cannot be separated. They converge in the lives of the saints, and they meet in Christ.) The same set of developments should help to ensure respect for the freedom, inviolable conscience, and personal experience of each student, by valuing persons above ideas and information. At the same time, they deepen our understanding of the role of authority in the teaching process.

The practice and experience of obedience to a legitimate authority is essential if we are to learn to transcend ourselves. Obedience has a bad name, but this is largely because of the popular confusion between will and desire. It is no function of obedience to destroy the will, but only to enable it to order desire. A person must become detached with respect to the self, in order to become capable of unreserved attachment to God as the soul's true center. The student submits to the teacher, not necessarily out of respect for the teacher's personal qualities, but out of respect for the teacher's office—in other words, for the divine authority the teacher is commissioned to represent. The teacher must therefore submit first, to God and to the objective truth of his or her subject. It is in the name of that prior obedience that the teacher has a right to demand obedience of the student. It follows from this also that genuine authority grows in proportion to humility (as the example of the saints demonstrates beyond all doubt).

The new theology also helps to reawaken a sense of the indivisibility of knowledge, so important for a Catholic

school. In *The Idea of a University*, Newman writes that "all branches of knowledge are connected together, because the subject-matter of knowledge is intimately united in itself as being the acts and work of the Creator" ("Knowledge Its Own End"). The purpose of a Catholic education is not merely to communicate information, let alone current scientific opinion, nor to train future workers and managers. It is partly to teach the ability to think, speak, and write. This was the function of the classical Trivium of Grammar, Dialectic, and Rhetoric, the essential foundations for the study of the various subjects in the Quadrivium. Yet even this falls short of the goal. More important than the ability to think—or, if you prefer, the highest aim of thought—is the ability to find *meaning*. We must be able to perceive the inner, connecting principles, the intrinsic relations, the *logoi*, of creation. For this the eye of a poet, or of a mystic, is needed. Education should lead to contemplation. The arts and the sciences consequently belong together. After all, science, like poetry, begins with a search for unifying principles. For methodological reasons which fast became ideological, modern science turned its back on God, but faith in an ultimate Reason always leads to the idea of a Creator. The unifying factor in creation is its relation to God. The unifying factor in the curriculum should be religious instruction.

If the Trivium/Quadrivium model is to be an adequate basis for Catholic education today, especially at the primary and secondary levels, it needs to be considerably adapted. Christopher Dawson put the point more strongly when he wrote (in the first chapter of *Understanding Europe*) that "even if it were possible to preserve or to restore classical education it would by itself prove quite ineffective as a solution for our present problem." Education has always taught children "how to do things—how to read and write, . . . to hunt and cook, and plant and build." But it has also initiated the young "into the social and spiritual inheritance of the community." Today's problem is that of making them aware of the "spiritual unity out of which all the separate activities of our civilization have arisen." In order to achieve that, it is essential to devise a curriculum which comes to grips with modern civilization in a way that the more traditional liberal arts program can so easily fail to do.

What if the curriculum were organized around a core of basic human skills—thinking, remembering, communicating, and the use of tools—taught through languages, logic,

mathematics, handicrafts, design, and computing? Around this core and drawing upon it, the rest of the curriculum would follow three interwoven themes corresponding to the three traditional "levels" of the human personality: body, soul, and spirit. The first or physical theme would comprise subjects from the natural, practical, and human sciences, exploring the outward or tangible world through physics, chemistry, biology, ecology, history, geography, and economics, with an "applied" dimension in technology. The second theme would comprise the "humanities," exploring the interior human world of consciousness, thought, and expression through literature, music, poetry, dance, painting, philosophy, and comparative religion. The third theme—that of "spirituality"—would introduce the world of Christian revelation, or theology and Scripture, of grace and its influence on human life. In our idealized picture, the whole school would be permeated by an ethos of prayer and moral virtue: this would, of course, depend on the character of the teachers themselves. The integrating force behind the curriculum of such a school would be love: love for creation, love for humanity, love for God—and finally the love between pupils and teachers.

As far as teaching *methods* are concerned, in most countries educators are polarized between two approaches. On the one hand, the old-style educators regard teaching as mainly a matter of conveying information (for example about salvation history and the deposit of faith), much of it learnable by rote ("by heart"), backed up by some system of discipline involving examinations and penalties. This approach, out of fashion for some time, shows signs of coming back: in Britain, it is being promoted by the Conservative Government—mainly, it seems, out of panic at falling literacy levels in State schools. On the other hand, the new-style educators believe that too much rote learning and compulsion will drive children away from the Church as they mature and learn to think for themselves. They insist, instead, on an "experiential" style of teaching based on active learning projects, through which the child can pursue his or her own search for God, his or her own unique "faith journey"; the teacher's job being mainly to provide encouragement and suitable resources, such as stories, games, ideas, and (occasionally) information.

The new educational style tends to lead to rapid secularization, the old style sometimes to a privatization of religion and a growing sense of irrelevance. Either way, the

faith may be lost. Nor is it hard to see why it is in the teaching of religion that one finds the last battalions defending the old style of teaching. For there is in the Catholic faith a certain content that cannot be found by searching, discussing, and arguing. It is a characteristic mistake of the new-style educators to assume that faith can be conveyed by such methods. In the face of Revelation, we are all children. Naturally, as grown-ups we have more complicated difficulties and doubts, but once those have been disposed of we still have to accept the authority of the Church to teach us what we could not know otherwise. The purpose of a Catholic school is to help its pupils not to "grow up," but to reach true maturity by becoming child-like.

Our "communio school" would therefore teach "content," and would teach it with authority, but it would set that content *in context*: it would connect it with lived experience. A personalist philosophy of education starts from the premise that the human person is constituted by "relativity toward the other." This implies that an educated person is one who is educated for relationship, for empathy and imagination. The school (which receives its authority over children ultimately from their parents) does not exist simply to feed the industrial machine with workers or the market with consumers. It is intrinsically oriented towards the family, and family life. The process of education certainly involves the communication of useful information (and skills), but only in the context of an initiation into *communio*, into a community of relationships extending through time, which is also the lived experience of a cultural tradition. The more human we become, the more our own lives and experience connect with different aspects of the culture into which we are progressively initiated by the school. To make the content of the curriculum relevant to the everyday life of the pupil, it is essential not to shrink the content to match the pupil's present experience, but to expand the life of the pupil to match the proposed curriculum. To grow as a person is to learn self-transcendence. A world centered on the ego gradually gives way to a world centered on the other. And in this process, the *ethos* of the school is always at least as important as its curriculum and teaching methods. Growth in prayer and in love is at the heart of education, for prayer involves interior opening to the supreme Other, and it is the relationship to God made possible by this opening that strengthens us in our attempts to love.

At present, our educational system suffers from the fragmentation that afflicts the whole of modern civilization. Increasingly in Catholic schools, as already in secular schools, not only the Christian faith but even the literary and humanistic culture that was originally nourished by faith is regarded by the students as "irrelevant," and with it the whole realm of values. The roots of the problem can be traced back to the Reformation and Renaissance. But one should be careful, in reaction to this state of affairs, not to over-idealize the medieval period. It contains valuable pointers to a reunification of culture, but we can learn just as much from mistakes that were made, both then and subsequently. Short of the Cross itself, there has been no perfect school since the first days of Christianity. However, the Redemption is the secret of eternal rebirth, and the continual dying of Christendom is also a history of new beginnings. □