

Catholic Education

by Philip C. L. Gray

ISSUE: What is Catholic education?

RESPONSE: Catholic education recognizes that knowledge is at the service of man and must be directed toward the common good and the salvation of all. Such education requires training in the virtues and is rooted in the commandments of God. An education is truly Catholic to the degree an educator uses the educational experience to evangelize the students and form them in Christ.

DISCUSSION: To understand Catholic education, we do not need to understand a particular method of education. Rather, we must understand the nature of man, his relation to God and his relation to others. In other words, we must start with the fundamental principles regarding the dignity and rights of the human person, and then apply them to the context of education. A method that builds on this foundation will reflect the mind of Christ and the discipline of His Church.

Purpose of Education.

When we think of education, we typically think of formal training in certain basic or job-specific skills. Through education, a person learns to read, write, and calculate; he learns to use specific tools for a specific task; he furthers the advance of society through advances in technology and science. Although these are important results of education, these are not the primary purposes of education as set forth by the Church:

All men of whatever race, condition, or age, in virtue of their dignity as human persons, have an inalienable right to education. This education should be suitable to the particular destiny of the individuals, adapted to their ability, sex, and national cultural traditions, and should be conducive to fraternal relations with other nations in order to promote true unity and peace in the world. True education is directed towards the formation of the human person in view of his final end and the good of that society to which he belongs and in the duties of which he will, as an adult, have a share.¹

When we examine this statement, we find four important aspects of a true education.

(1) *“All men of whatever race, condition, or age, in virtue of their dignity as human persons . . .”*

A proper education is a natural right of every person. Because every man is created in the image and likeness of God, he has a right, by the fact of his existence, to obtain an education suited to his existence.

(2) *“This education should be suitable to the particular destiny of the individuals . . .”*

The existence of every man is suited to being formed in Christ. On Mount Sinai, God gave Moses the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:2-17) as a light of understanding, so that we may know what must be done and what must be avoided. He gave these laws to bind all people, regardless of race, religion, or social class. They reflect the natural law written on the hearts of all men (cf. Rom. 2:15). They provide a minimum requirement for humanity.² When he lives according to these laws, a man opens his heart to the grace of conversion. Faith and charity become the foundation of his life. He is gradually formed into the humanity of Adam. These moral norms must permeate every educational experience, or the education falls short of the formation to which every man has a right.

(3) *“True education is directed towards the formation of the human person . . .”*

“God’s commandments show man the path of life and they lead to it.”³ No man can follow God’s commandments without reflecting on his relationship with God and his final destiny. A proper education will foster this reflection and encourage the pursuit of truth in the quest for knowledge of God. As affirmed by the Church, all men have the obligation to seek the truth, and the right to live according to truth as they know it.⁴ A proper education, forming man into the humanity of Adam, will guide him to recognize the truth of Christ and allow him the opportunity to embrace it.

(4) *“and the good of that society to which he belongs and in the duties of which he will, as an adult, have a share.”*

God created man as a social being. “Life in society is not something accessory to man himself: Through his dealings with others, through mutual service, and through fraternal dialogue, man develops all his talents and becomes able to rise to his destiny.”⁵

To find fulfillment of purpose, one must live a life of faith and charity, first loving God and secondly loving one’s neighbor for the love of God. In fulfilling these two great commandments, each human person finds true meaning, and society finds prosperity and peace.⁶ In short, a proper education will teach man the sciences and arts, not for the sake of furthering knowledge, but rather to further knowledge for the sake of humanity. All must be ordered to the glory of God and the salvation of men.

Vatican II emphasized these concepts, not only in the above quotation, but throughout its *Declaration on Christian Education*. The sciences, arts, and technology should be tools through which each person develops physically, morally, spiritually, and intellectually.⁷ In short, true education must direct a person to salvation and simultaneously promote unity and peace among all peoples; it must make him fully human.

From the Heart of the Church

Because an authentic education aimed at the purposes noted above points to Christ, education is not complete unless it is truly Catholic. In this regard, Vatican II clearly focuses on the knowledge of salvation and the life of grace:

Such an education not only develops the maturity of the human person in the way we have described, but is especially directed towards ensuring that those who have been baptized, as they are gradually introduced to a knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become daily more appreciative of the gift of faith which they have received. They should learn to adore God the Father in spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:23), especially through the liturgy. They should be trained to live their own lives in the new self, justified and sanctified through the truth (Eph. 4:22-24).⁸

Such an education allows the person to grow into manhood according to the mature measure of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:13), and devote himself to the building up of the Mystical Body. Moreover, aware of his calling, he should grow accustomed to giving witness to the hope that is in him (1 Pet. 3:15), and to promoting that Christian transformation of the world by which natural values, viewed in the full perspective of humanity as redeemed by Christ, may contribute to the good of society as a whole.⁹

The Church identifies three “principle aims” that must permeate a truly Catholic educational experience:

(1) *“that those who have been baptized, as they are gradually introduced to a knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become daily more appreciative of the gift of faith which they have received.”*

Knowledge alone—even knowledge of God—does not save a man. In fact, the desire for knowledge tempted our first parents to sin (cf. Gen. 3:1-7). Man must direct knowledge by faith and, through knowledge, grow in faith. A Catholic education must be directed by the faith itself. Advances in the sciences and arts are necessarily subject to the eternal truths taught by the Church. Scientific theories that contradict the truths of faith, such as certain theories of evolution, must be rejected as false. In all things, knowledge must be presented in such a way as to draw the student to faith.

(2) *“They should learn to adore God the Father in spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:23), especially through the liturgy.”*

Adoration of God must be a principle aim of Catholic education. Our final destiny is to adore God forever in heaven. Through liturgical worship, the student is drawn into the eternal mysteries of God and sanctified in Christ. Equally important, because liturgical actions are not private actions, but celebrations of the Church herself, liturgical actions develop and strengthen unity among peoples and the good of society.¹⁰

Liturgical worship, especially the celebration of the sacraments, provides the ordinary and necessary graces for the student to mature in the Christian life. It continually renews the student’s faith, thus providing a firm foundation for all acquired knowledge.

(3) *“They should be trained to live their own lives in the new self, justified and sanctified through the truth (Eph. 4:22-24).”*

In the Sermon on the Mount, “Jesus shows that the commandments must not be understood as a minimum limit not to be gone beyond, but rather as a path involving a moral and spiritual journey towards perfection, at the heart of which is love.”¹¹ This is the new standard of manhood, to become perfectly united to the Father in Christ through the power of the Spirit (cf. Jn. 17:21)—to become a living and personal fulfillment of the law of love.¹²

The Catholic Educator

Authentic education primarily entails a formation in moral living and an invitation to knowledge of the truth. Specific knowledge and skill development are subordinate to an awareness of destiny and the obligations toward others. Catholic education fulfills the purposes of authentic education by enlightening the process with supernatural faith, adoration of God, and transformation of the person into the likeness of Christ.

The ideals of an authentic Catholic education will not be realized unless they take form through the experiences offered by an educator. Unfortunately, most education today does not include proper formation or understanding of obligations toward others. Many educators emphasize knowledge for the sake of knowledge. It is not subordinate to faith. In many Catholic schools, religious education, adoration of God, and liturgical worship occur but do not permeate the educational environment. This allows errors concerning the nature of man and his destiny to influence the student’s approach to the sciences and arts. Distrust between peoples is encouraged because of an overemphasis on the individual to the detriment of the common good.

The lay Catholic educator has tremendous influence over the students. Whether we look at schools in general or Catholic schools in particular, the influence of the laity is enormous. “For it is the lay teachers, and indeed all lay persons, believers or not, who will substantially determine whether or not a school realizes its aims and accomplishes its objectives.”¹³

A Catholic educator has a serious obligation to saturate his teaching methods with respect for the rights of students and Christian charity. “It is in this context that the faith witness of the lay teacher becomes especially important.”¹⁴ He can only do this if his own formation is proper and his faith strengthened by the Church and the sacraments of Christ.

Recognizing that many educational systems do not allow for an external, Catholic education to exist, the witness of Catholic educators by their way of life can nonetheless transform any educational setting into a Catholic experience. For the Catholic educator, “true education is not limited to the imparting of knowledge; it promotes human dignity and genuine human relationships, and prepares the way for opening oneself to the Truth that is Christ.”¹⁵

Conclusion

Education is a tool of evangelization. To the degree an educator promotes human dignity and knowledge of the truth, the education is authentic. To the degree the educator forms the students into the likeness of Christ, the education is truly Catholic. Catholic educators would do well to saturate their curriculae according to the principles given by Mother Church.

¹ Vatican II, *Declaration on Christian Education (Gravissimum Educationis)*, no. 1. As a declaration, this text is understood as a “policy statement” or application of previous documents and teachings on education. This text did not offer substantially new insights on the subject. Rather, it consolidated and applied the principles already taught by the Church.

² Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *The Splendor of Truth (Veritatis Splendor)*, no. 12.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Code of Canon Law, canon 748; Vatican II, *Declaration on Religious Liberty (Dignitatis Humanae)*, no. 2.

⁵ Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et Spes)*, no. 25.

⁶ Cf. Deut. 6:4-9; Lev. 19:18; Mk. 9:29-31.

⁷ *Declaration on Christian Education*, no. 1.

⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Cf. Vatican II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*, nos. 26-32.

¹¹ *The Splendor of Truth*, no. 15.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *Lay Catholics in Schools: Witnesses to Faith* (1982), no. 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, no. 32.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 55.

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The Goal of Education

Men, created by God to His image and likeness and destined for Him Who is infinite perfection, realize today more than ever amid the most exuberant material progress, the insufficiency of earthly goods to produce true happiness either for the individual or for the nations. And hence they feel more keenly in themselves the impulse toward a perfection that is higher, which impulse is implanted in their rational nature by the Creator Himself. This perfection they seek to acquire by means of education. But many of them with, it would seem, too great insistence on the etymological meaning of the word, pretend to draw education out of human nature itself and evolve it by its own unaided powers. Such easily fall into error, because, instead of fixing their gaze on God, first principle and last end of the whole universe, they fall back upon themselves, becoming attached exclusively to passing things of earth; and thus their restlessness will never cease till they direct their attention and their efforts to God, the goal of all perfection, according to the profound saying of St. Augustine: “Thou didst create us, O Lord, for Thyself, and our heart is restless till it rest in Thee.”

—Pope Pius XI, *Encyclical Letter Christian Education of Youth (Rappresentanti in Terra, 1929)*, quoting St. Augustine, *Confessions, 1,1*

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