



# Humanum

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## Rooted in the Body: Growing a \*Theology of the Body\* Curriculum

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The question of how children learn has always been close to my heart. Since graduating college, I've taught pretty much every grade from kindergarten through high school in some capacity or another, and I've seen things that work: challenging instruction, teaching a child to contemplate, Socratic instruction, seeking the truth, comparing and contrasting, and so on. I've also seen many things that don't work: facts as the content of education, absent authority, teaching to the test, standards-driven curricula, adding Christ on top of a modern research-based teaching method. I knew that in order to understand *why* certain approaches work and others do not, I needed to know more about the human person. And so, several years into my teaching career, I enrolled at the John Paul II Institute in order to obtain my Master's in Theological Studies.

In learning more about John Paul II's vision of the world, I saw that the answer to the question of how children learn is rooted in man's experience of himself, his experience of the world, and his experience of his own desires. Our desire is always for what is beautiful, and this is no less true for children. Education often treats children as though they were machines—take in this piece of information and spit it back out again—but of course, they are not; nor are the adults they grow into. Teaching them can and should be aimed at nothing other than their personal development: as teachers our hope is to form them in such a way that they can both recognize what is beautiful and good and true, and also freely manifest that beauty in the world. Children, just like adults, desire to be free.

How to answer this desire as an educator? In some ways it seems impossible to allow our children to be free, especially given that we live in what seems like a very broken culture. Perhaps it is safer to force a child to memorize rules, to regurgitate only the facts that I permit him to know, to disallow an encounter with the world and the culture, in order to protect him. We all have this impulse: learn x, y, and z, and then you will be safe. But that kind of safety is illusory: it enables children only to know what to do within certain parameters, rather than encountering the generous beauty that the world offers because it is created by God. It does

not enable them to be free.

When John Paul II was a young man in Poland, his culture was being systematically attacked: his response to this was not to run away from the world, but to plunge more deeply into it through the experience of beauty. The beauty he found in and through the theater and the natural world. So, when I was asked to write a Theology of the Body curriculum for grades K–5, this is also where I started. We are free in the face of beauty: and so to answer the child's desire to be free, we must educate him into beauty.

In writing the K-5 Rooted Curriculum I selected stories for each age group that are well known, beautiful or from the classics. Literature has the power to make abstract concepts more concrete to a child, in a way that the child is particularly adapted to understand. Through stories we more readily see the connection of moral lessons to our personal life: this makes the embodiment or imitation of these truths possible. With the story as the entry point, a teacher can guide his class through a theme in the Theology of the Body in a manner consistent with what is already happening in the classroom. Activities are also suggested, in order for the children to learn in a hands-on manner.

Perhaps more unique to the curriculum are its nature walks; an activity suggested for every grade level. Nature walks are not always seen as an intrinsic component to the content of a curriculum. However, as I spent more time writing and observing classrooms it became clear that an adequate understanding of reality is crucial to understanding the Theology of the Body. The goal of these walks is to immerse the child in something greater than himself, so that he begins to understand experientially that all of creation is a gift from God, who reveals himself in all that he makes.

I had made the decision to incorporate nature walks into the curriculum long before having my first child. This practice helped me be more attuned to my son's interaction with the created world from an early age. From about the age of 4 months, my son John has loved to watch trees blowing in the wind. He made this discovery on his own lying underneath a mobile near a window in our home. I would give him some time on his own, lying on the floor looking at this mobile but as I watched from a distance I found that he was actually staring out of the window, his whole body shaking with excitement, cooing happily whenever the wind picked up. On our walks in the stroller, or sitting in the backyard, he would be entertained for quite some time by trees. This became something we would do together, pausing on our walk or lying in the backyard in order to watch the trees blow in the wind. Through my presence I communicate to him that I love him, and by sharing in his delight, I foster my relationship with him. I know that other children have also experienced this love of trees moving in the wind.

How is this a sign of God's love and an invitation into relationship with him? In part because simple delight in creation shows us that creation is a gift. But the delight of my child in these specific trees also has to do with me, and with my particular experience and history: that is to say, my child's delight feeds back to me; it points me at a better understanding of my own path. Our home is one block from my childhood elementary school. As I watched my son responding to the tree, it struck me: this tree has been growing since before I was born, planted by some former owner of our home.

Every day I was going to school, this tree was silently growing; I would have walked by it many times, yet it did not seem significant to me. Why would I pay attention to a tree in my schoolmate's yard? But God was paying attention to that tree. He was filling it with life, shaping its branches, giving color to its leaves, etching a memory of the seasons into its rings,

preparing it to be a home for birds, all the while knowing that one day, through the interaction of thousands of seemingly casual accidents, it would be the tree in *my* yard, in which *my* son would take such delight. He had been growing this tree before my lifetime—all in order that my son's eyes might behold it. Just as the author of a great story is aware of the end even in the beginning, so too is God aware of his creation.

This tree is a witness of God's fidelity: God was present year after year, day in and day out as I was going to school, he was planning something significant for me even in something I took for granted as part of the landscape, the background. He remained and continued his preparation even when I moved away. He anticipated my return and the delight of my son in his creation. This tree that carries in its rings the memories of the spring growth and the summer heat of my childhood will now also carry the memory of the seasons of my son's life. The beauty of creation provokes wonder which is evident in John's response to the tree. This same process of wonder and delight applies to the whole created world. Wonder is the beginning and foundation for appreciating the human body as made in the image of God. The Father who prepared this tree is also preparing countless other gifts. He waits for me to meet him fully, in his glory, and he draws me to him as he weaves together the experiences of my life into the fabric of his one great story.

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