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Why Better Catholic Education is Better Education

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Virtually everyone seems to agree these days that education is in crisis, and virtually everyone has a plan to solve it—from increased STEM education to outfitting every high schooler with an iPad, surely the worst idea in a field that is littered with bad ideas. But virtually no one, it seems, has paused to ask what education actually *is*. Instead the general assumption seems to concur with the anodyne words of Common Core, that the point of education is to prepare children for "college, career, and life," which of course is a self-justifying mantra for doubling-down on more STEM education and the acquisition of basic, practical skills.

I have seen the failure of this vision of education first hand, during the twelve years or so that I spent teaching Great Books, theology, and writing to university undergraduates. Now before I go on to explain this I should say that I am aware that the problems with contemporary education are much bigger than education, and I am aware that our schools are terribly overburdened with sociological functions that go far beyond, and often subsume, their core educational mission. Almost anyone who attempts to teach these days will find himself locked in a losing battle against a pop culture, made omnipresent by technology, that is stupefying us and our children and tricking us into believing that "thinking" means knowing how to do things with an iPad. There are also the well-documented pressures on the modern family. The fact that families have entrusted education to "professional educators" means that education is now largely external to family life, not something at the heart of family culture or that the family organizes itself around. It is the childhood version of a "career"—something one does for 40 hours a week—but not a way of life.

We expect schools to compensate for this breakdown of culture and the family, and if that challenge weren't daunting enough, we ask them to serve everybody and to make special accommodation for those who need it most. So we ask schools to function as social service agencies and teachers to serve as substitute parents, social workers, dieticians, and counselors, and when they find time, to teach. Many do heroic work, and Catholic schools have a long and

venerable tradition—one which should continue—of serving the "least of these."

And yet many of the undergraduates that I have taught are not the "least of these." They have come to expensive universities with good grades from good high schools, as these things are typically measured. If these kids are struggling, then the problem must be vast indeed. And my experience with these kids, those who on the whole are comparatively advantaged, has convinced me that this failure is fundamental and systemic, that we no longer have a coherent idea of what education even is, and that attempts at systematic reform like Common Core simply perpetuate a deeply defective understanding of education and are thus doomed to exacerbate the very problems that they attempt to overcome. I have taught a good many Catholic school kids, and I can report, unfortunately, that these kids don't seem to fare much better than their public school counterparts. Catholic school teachers tend to be extremely dedicated, and Catholic schools typically offer a wholesome and nurturing learning environment, often doing heroic work reaching out to underserved populations. But they too have largely failed to ask "what is education?" or to bring the immense resources of Catholic tradition to bear on it. Most offer what is essentially a public school education, with a little extra morality and religious education tacked on.

The prevailing vision of education is thoroughly pragmatic and utilitarian. It is all *about* the acquisition of skills; this is what "preparing for college, career, and life" means in our society. The great irony is that this pragmatic and utilitarian approach to education has failed even in its attempts to cultivate basic skills. In my experience, few college freshmen—maybe two or three in ten—really know how to read, understand, and think about a good book. This is partly because they've read very few important books and partly because they are not taught to read them with the hope of discovering truth in them. It is also because most of them know next to nothing about history or the history of ideas. I hasten to add that it's not the students' fault. They are not stupid; indeed they are often very bright. But they haven't been taught, or rather, they've learned all too well the lessons of this mercenary view of education: that their educations are about "preparing for college, career and life." Their educations have made them the heirs of no tradition; they've received no coherent history. They simply accept on faith that the present is always better than the past, and so the only culture they know and think is important is the pop culture of the present moment. Consequently the great art or great literature that express the traditional western understanding of life—the symbolism and the allusions to historical events, to other works of literature, to the Bible—make little sense.

Many of these same students, easily half and probably more, cannot write a good English paragraph. Some cannot write a good English sentence. And if you cannot read well or write well, then it's very difficult to show that you can reason well. So college freshmen have a notoriously difficult time recognizing and constructing arguments; in fact, many have learned to mistake argument for personal insult.

Though contemporary education reduced to the acquisition of basic skills often fails by even this meager standard, this isn't the worst of it. Skills can be made up with hard work, and it's a dirty little secret that much of university instruction in the first couple of years is now remedial, developing skills that should have been learned earlier on.

The deeper problem is not how little the average freshman knows, but how listless he is about his ignorance. It is a persistent myth, and one which students are almost forced to believe, that their college years will be the "time of their lives." But in my experience they can be a pretty dispirited lot. They are what Robert Bartlett called "souls without longing," and little wonder. Not only has their education failed to give them skills. It has offered them no great proposal and no noble aspiration; it has made them heirs to no tradition. It makes no pretense to that

comprehensive view of the order of things that once went by the name of wisdom. Indeed comprehensive views, apart from liberal pluralism, are regarded with suspicion. Their educations have not borne the conviction that truth—or anything else for that matter—is desirable *for its own sake*, for what it *is* rather than what it *does*. Instead these kids have learned what we've taught them: that education is just a means to an end, and that the end itself isn't any too clear or too exciting. I've sometimes tested this theory by asking students—hypothetically of course—if they'd be willing to forego my great books course in exchange for a B+ or an A- right from the start. Those answering "yes" were always a majority, because in a mercenary view of education, it is the grade and not the knowledge that is the point. As I've gotten to know these kids, I'm always amazed and sad at how few of them can give any real reason for being in college other than the fact that it's what they're supposed to do next. They're busy dutifully pursuing not what they love or what interests them, not what has gripped them as true, or good, or even important, but what they think their parents want or what they think they have to do to make a living. This is despite the fact that today's technology and technical skills will soon be obsolete and despite the documented fact that most will change jobs many times and few of them will do work directly relevant to their university degrees. So they spend huge gobs of their parents' money or take on huge mounds of debt for no clear reason—and they often get little more in return than a heap of fragmented ideas and a certificate to enter the workforce. It is little wonder that so many university students are dispirited and listless about their education. Their educations have offered them no vision of life that is worthy of their desire. They have asked for bread and we've given them stones.

Our crisis in education is obviously a crisis of culture, and the prospects for large scale renewal appear pretty bleak. Our prevailing pragmatism is not an accident—it's rooted in the founding assumptions of our culture—and so a liberal society like ours seems all but destined for an educational crisis, especially as it decays, which means that the prospect of *comprehensive and systematic* educational reform is therefore probably doomed. A society with no shared understanding about the nature of the human person or the meaning of life beyond the vapid affirmation of choice and pluralism will be unable to agree on the meaning of education or the point of educating children in the first place. Much less will it be able to reach agreement about the meaning of history and about what children ought to know. The curriculum will necessarily be fragmented. It will look like the course offerings of a typical university department or the mish mash that is Common Core: a carefully negotiated settlement between competing ideologies and research interests. We will *have* to educate as if God doesn't exist, or as if his existence were only relevant in the privacy of individual hearts, lest this imply some comprehensive answer to these questions that might impinge upon the freedom of others.

And this brings us to the heart of the matter, though I grant that it will seem counterintuitive—even absurd—to many people. Of the many problems plaguing contemporary educations—and they are legion—the deepest problem, I would argue, is its *secularity*. It is stunning when one stops to think about it that it could be a matter of indifference to education whether or not God exists; that education happens to mean more or less the same thing whether we happen to be children loved into existence by God or whether we are merely accidental aggregations of matter thrown up by meaningless physical processes. One has to try very hard *not* to think in order to believe this.

Now my point is not that secular education is morally and spiritually empty; in fact, it can be overbearingly moralistic at times. My point is that resolute and systematic secularism makes education *intellectually* empty. Why so? In *Atheist Delusions*, a rebuttal to the superficiality of the so-called New Atheists, the Orthodox theologian David Bentley Hart writes, "It is pointless

to debate what it would mean for Western culture to *renounce* Christianity unless one first learns what it meant for Western culture to *adopt* Christianity."[1] Hart's point is that Christianity has shaped the basic premises of our culture so deeply that its influence is largely invisible to us, and that we cannot therefore renounce this inheritance without throwing away much else besides. "A world from which the gospel had been banished," he writes, "would surely be one in which millions more of our fellows would go unfed, un-nursed, unsheltered, and uneducated."[2] But more deeply still, though we have forgotten it, "citizens of the West are inheritors of a social conscience whose ethical grammar would have been very different had it not been shaped by Christian theological, ontological, and moral premises." "It is simply the case," he continues,

> that we distant children of the pagans would not be able to believe in things such as human rights, economic and social justice, providence for the indigent, legal equality, and basic human dignity—all palliated echoes and haunting fragments of Christian moral theology—had our ancestors not once believed that God is love, that charity is the foundation of all virtues, that all of us are equal before the eyes of God, that to fail to feed the hungry or care for the suffering is to sin against Christ, and that Christ laid down his life for the least of his brethren.[3]

St. John's Gospel tell us that at Jesus' crucifixion, Pilate had had inscribed over the Cross a sign which read, "Jesus the Nazarene, King of the Jews," and that it was written in "Hebrew, Latin, and Greek." The symbolic significance of this fact would not have been lost on the early Christians and the Church Fathers, who would have understood it to symbolize that Jesus' act—and by extension his Church—comprehends the whole world, unlikely though this might have seemed at the time when the Gospels were written. But eventually, Christianity did come to comprehend—to take up, transform, and synthesize within itself—the inheritance of Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem. One cannot separate this inheritance from the heart of Christianity itself, as Pope Benedict recognized. Jerusalem without Rome and Athens ends in the Reformation. Rome and Athens without Jerusalem ends in the Renaissance. The Gospel, traveling on Roman roads, penetrated a world already made one in some sense through Hellenization and through the Roman *imperium*. When it became necessary, at a crucial moment in the Church's life, to clarify crucial points of Christological and Trinitarian doctrine, the Church borrowed categories of thought from Greek philosophy.

To see this is to understand the profundity of Hart's point and its profound implications for education. One simply cannot erase the descent of Christ into the heart of the world and the subsequent penetration of human culture by Christianity, whether in the name of democratic order, or pluralism, or tolerance, or secular neutrality, without profoundly distorting one's *educational* mission. When we deny the importance of God to Western and human culture or relegate the question God to a merely private, subjective realm we falsify history and cut ourselves off from our own past and our own culture. Our own art, architecture, literature, music, and philosophy become like a foreign language that we cannot read. They used to call the great Cathedrals, with their frescoes and stained glass, the schools of the poor and unlearned. Now most of the educated can no longer understand their intricate symbolism. The history that made us becomes unintelligible to us so that we can neither understand ourselves nor see beyond the present moment. Our souls become small; we become prisoners of the spirit of the age. And our children—especially Catholic children—are denied their birthright. To educate as if God doesn't exist, in other words, is to commit our children to ignorance.

More crucially still, we cannot expel God from the curriculum without expelling what is

essential to our humanity along with him: the longing after God, the great search for truth which moved the West to philosophize, the longing after beauty which illuminated western art, architecture, and music and bequeathed to us the deep-seated notion of life as a pilgrimage or a quest—a theme variously expressed from the Bible and Homer, to Arthurian romances, to Dante, to Mark Twain and Tolkien. When God is rigorously excluded from thought, when we educate as if his existence were a matter of indifference, or when he is compartmentalized and relegated to religion class, "education" comes to mean rigorously *not asking* the great questions of human existence—What is true? What is good? Who is God? Who am I?—and *not* thinking about the answers that have been proposed to them through our greatest works of philosophy, art, music, and literature. In short, we come to confuse education with ignorance.

So when we exclude God and the Church from the curriculum, we both lose sight of the profoundest achievements of human culture, and we eliminate the very longing after truth that has always compelled people to desire education in the first place. Education then becomes merely pragmatic and instrumental, a matter of successfully learning to cope or manipulate the present moment. But since even the present is drained of anything objectively desirable, neither it nor the future really has very much to offer. *This* is ultimately why so many students seem so dispirited and are so indifferent to their own education. Contemporary education gives students little to wrestle with. It offers them no compelling proposal, no exalted vision of life to say yes to or even to reject, nothing great or noble to aspire to, nothing beautiful to love. Education in liberal society thus ceases to be liberal in the traditional sense; it does not liberate the soul from its enslavement to base things or from the realm of necessity. Rather it teaches students to resign themselves to it.

As a teacher in theology and the humanities, it was natural for me to think about these things. As a father of two young sons, eager to help them avoid this fate, it became urgent. So I had already been thinking and writing this problem for a long time when, about five years ago, a parish-wide meeting was called to discuss the future of St. Jerome's school, which was then very much in doubt. The school was failing for all the complicated reasons that Catholic schools around the country are struggling. The world had changed beneath our feet. Demographics had changed. Enrollments were down. And to be honest, the educational offering wasn't very compelling despite the dedicated efforts of the many people who lovingly worked and taught there. Many families in the parish, who in the past would have sent their children to St. Jerome's as a matter of course, had forsaken the school, opting for homeschooling instead. I came away from the meeting impressed with the new principal, Mary Pat Donoghue, and hopeful that the school would survive, but I was unconvinced that it would or even should survive in its current form. I wrote her a letter offering my support, provided that she were interested in trying something more bold, and I included a paper I had written, a kind of manifesto for education, parts of which would eventually make their way into the St. Jerome's plan. Mary Pat then invited me to join a curriculum committee that she had already formed to think along similar lines, a remarkable collection of people.

We weren't given a mandate to invent a new school; in fact, we weren't really given a mandate at all. And we probably spent a good six weeks or so without a clear direction. Several of us were attracted to the idea of classical education and had read Dorothy Sayers' *The Lost Tools of Learning*. But we were suspicious that Sayers' understanding of classical learning was anachronistic and maybe not all that classical—in the Middle Ages, for example, grammar, logic and rhetoric were subjects, not stages—and the more we read about classical education and the more we looked at curricula of classical schools, the clearer it became that "classical education" did not have a single, self-evident meaning. It began to feel a bit is if we were trying to build a house beginning with the second floor. So we decided to go back to first principles and ask some very basic questions: What sort of people did we hope our children would

become, and what would it be necessary for them to know and to love? But we realized we couldn't give very good answers to these questions without taking up some even more basic questions about God, the meaning of the human being, and the meaning of human history.

Our judgments about these questions are the foundation of what would become the St. Jerome Educational Plan, which was a foundational blueprint for a new school, founded on a philosophy of education, which rested, in turn, upon a philosophical and theological anthropology. To my mind, this is what is really unique about the St. Jerome's plan, that it thinks through a fundamental truth common to *all* attempts at education, but rarely acknowledged: that education presupposes anthropology—a philosophy of human nature—and a theology, even if this is only in the negative form of atheism. And everything in the plan flows from these philosophical and theological judgments: from the standard and principles of decision making, to our historical and interdisciplinary approach of the curriculum, to our disposition toward world cultures, to our "phenomenological" approach to nature studies, to our position toward technology in the classroom and the school, to the way the school is decorated, to the culture we are trying to create.

So, what then, are these judgments? The first is that the human being is *creature* with a built-in desire for God, even though this desire often goes by other names such as the desire for beauty or the pursuit of happiness, and is often not articulated or recognized at all. The second is that human culture is best and most fundamentally understood as an expression of that desire. This makes possible an approach to pre-Christian and un-Christian cultures that is simultaneously lovingly appreciative, sympathetic, and critical, rather like Paul at Mars Hill in Athens. The third is that God comes to meet and fulfill this desire in a surprising way in the Incarnation of Christ. And this means, finally, that the coming of Christ and the advent of the Church are therefore decisive events for the meaning of human history, a position which is defensible even on historical grounds, quite apart from philosophy and theology. It is Christianity then that takes up, transforms, and transmits to posterity the remnants of classical culture. It is Christianity that is responsible for giving rise to Europe, as a religious, cultural, and political entity distinct from Asia. Modernity, for good or for ill, is constituted in reaction to it. And so on.

On the basis of these judgments, we were then able to answer those earlier questions about what we wanted to achieve. First, we wanted to cultivate what is most human in our children: habits of mind and dispositions of soul—habits of wonder, memory, attention, and thought—that are integral to a fully human life and to happiness in God. And of course certain "skills," reading well, writing well, speaking well, and thinking well, are implied by this as well as certain pedagogical techniques for cultivating these skills. Second, we wanted to awaken our children to the great questions of human existence, in order that they might come to know God and themselves. Third, we therefore wanted to give them something better to love, principally because beauty and goodness are desirable for their own sake and without these there is no longing after truth, but also to help liberate them from the banality and hopelessness of much of popular culture. Fourth, we want to help overcome the separation of faith and life, to help them see that faith is not just a private, interior compartment but that being a creature comprehends all of reality, including culture, history, and the natural world. Finally, and for all these reasons, we wanted to incorporate them into the rich and beautiful tradition of Christian humanism, which for the historical and theological reasons just indicated, encompasses all that is good, and beautiful and true. We found all of this to be beautifully and powerfully summed up in a passage from Hugo Rahner's *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery*, which we chose as an epigraph to the St. Jerome's plan. Rahner writes,

> [T]he very fact that it is the flesh of the *Logos* become man that ultimately

> defines the limits of Christian humanism contains the possibility of almost explosively extending those limits to what is really a limitless degree. Now we may dare—indeed dare we must—to take up with an all-embracing gesture into this pattern of the Christian man whatever in the long perspectives of history or in the depths of the soul is true and noble in thought or deed. All that is good and true has proceeded from the *Logos* and has its homing-point in the incarnate God, even though this be hidden from us, even though human thought and human good-will may not have perceived it. Every great and noble deed flows from a power which the revealing Logos has shown us to be his own special grace. Because it is aware of this, Christian humanism rises superior to all purely historical or psychological interest in the development of human ideals. For the humanist Christian there is only one possible attitude he can take towards the world: he must love. Yet one can only love a person, and that is why the Christian humanist loves the person in every shape and form but only in him of whom St Paul says "all things were created in him." Here is the meaning of those words written by an ancient Christian [Justin Martyr]… "Christ is the *Logos*, in whom the whole human race has a portion, and all who have lived according to this *Logos* are Christian, even though, like Socrates and Heraclitus among the Greeks, they are accounted godless."[4]

I often cringe when I hear classical education referred to as the "classical *method*" —which echoes too much contemporary education's obsession with *technique*—or the classical *model*, as if classical education were merely another educational *technique*. Of course, the aspirations and principles of the St. Jerome's plan imply certain pedagogical practices—the emphasis on memory, on observation, on taking the time to do things with care, on drawing, recitation, and discussion. But for us at least, classical education is not just a method, but content, a *substance* that flows from these fundamental judgments. Commenting on the work of Christopher Dawson, the late Stratford Caldecott, a lovely man and a true humanist, suggests in his *Beauty for Truth's Sake* that a simple revival of the *trivium* and *quadrivium* would be insufficient to face down the current crisis. Rather, he says, "young people *need to be made aware of the spiritual unity out of which the separate activities of our civilization have arisen*, and [Dawson's] proposal was to do that *historically*…." "Teaching the story of Christian culture," he says, "may be the best way to 'maintain the tradition of liberal education against the growing pressure of scientific specialization and utilitarian vocationalism.'"[5]

Of course, Dawson and Caldecott are speaking principally about the university. But my experience is that by the time students reach the university, it is almost too late. Recovering this "spiritual unity" is really what the St. Jerome's plan is attempting to do. This is why the plan cycles twice through the history of the world—whose hinge-point is the Incarnation—devoting two years each to antiquity and the Middle Ages. This is why we attempt to integrate world history and Church history, and to integrate these with the study of literature, art, architecture, and music. This is why we incorporate natural philosophy into the study of nature. This is why we attempt to cultivate habits of attention and wonder and patience through observation, memory, listening and recitation: in the hope of incorporating students into that unity of knowledge and insight which used to be known as wisdom, without which all of our knowledge falls into a jumbled heap. And this is why an education that is truly Catholic is also classical and why a truly Catholic education is simply a better education.

[1] David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions*: *The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 16.

[2] Ibid., 16.

[3] Ibid., 33.

[4] Hugo Rahner S.J., *Greek Myths and Christian Mystery* (New York:Bilbo and Tannen, 1971), xiv-xv.

[5] Stratford Caldecott, *Beauty for Truth's Sake:On the Re-enchantment of Education* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2009), 27-28.

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