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# WHAT IS CLASSICAL CATHOLIC EDUCATION?

by Jonathan Beeson

**T**he best way to understand contemporary classical education is locate it within the history of education. In the beginning of the twentieth century, progressive educators advocated widespread reform and were quite successful in permanently changing the intellectual landscape of American primary and secondary schools. While not wanting to disregard the movement entirely, classical educators have felt that some significant educational principles and practices were lost during the revolution that was progressive education, and as a result, are looking to reconnect with a long standing educational tradition that began in ancient Greece and Rome. The term “classical” refers, at least in part, to the classical period from which originates the whole of western education and learning.

Classical education is also often referred to as liberal education. The “liberal” in liberal education does not, of course, refer to a particular political party or latitudinarian spirit; rather reference is made to an educational focus which insists that the *primary* purpose of education is to free human beings from slavery to the mundane. It is important to note that *all* Catholic Schools, by virtue of being Catholic, affirm the “liberal” nature of education. If the designation “Classical Catholic” is not a mere tautology, how, then, are Classical Catholic educators distinguishable among other contemporary Catholic educators?

I do hope to provide in my essay a detailed answer to this question; however, we must first bracket it and devote some time in the first section to explicate the “liberal” nature of Classical Catholic education. One can not hope to truly appreciate the essence of Classical Catholic education unless one is aware of the type of liberation it intends. In the second part of the essay, I



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will offer a definition of Classical Catholic education, highlighting its “essential difference” within American Catholic education. Finally toward the end of this essay I will offer a suggestion of how the terms “classical” and “catholic” fit together to form a coherent educational philosophy.

## I. The Liberating Nature of Catholic Liberal Education

### *Liberal Education is Virtue Education*

Catholic Liberal Education promises freedom but freedom from what? When most people encounter liberal education for the first time they are typically befuddled by the persistent insistence that most people are on the brink of being enslaved by some unknown, unnamed, something! It is also initially surprising to find that liberal educators are assuming a more expansive notion of freedom than is typical in the common parlance, for when the liberal educator speaks about freedom he is assuming both a “freedom *from*” and a “freedom *for*.” Simply put, Catholic Liberal Education inculcates *freedom from vice* and *freedom for virtue*.

But what classical educators mean by vice and virtue can also be easily misconstrued by the modern reader for vice and virtue, to us, are words used almost exclusively with moral connotations. Their more classical meanings—much richer than our truncated sensibilities—are broader in scope. A virtue is simply an “excellence” or the “perfection” of a thing; vice is, conversely, a defect or the absence of a perfection which should be present in a thing.

Virtues are also to be understood in terms of how a thing by nature—or by design—is suppose to operate. There are, of course, many operations a thing can possess; therefore when we are referring to the virtue of a thing we are referring to its *ultimate* operation. The virtue of the eye, for example, would not, properly speaking, be its ability to squint; rather, the virtue of the eye is sight. The eye’s vice, conversely, is blindness. This illustration is quite helpful for it shows us that we can not really think of the excellence or the perfection of a thing without noting what the thing is ultimately suppose to do.

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With these terminological distinctions behind us, we can understand how the classical thinkers could speak, not only of moral virtues, but also of intellectual virtues and physical virtues. But the Church has added the “theological virtues” to the classical usage.

The Classical understanding of *freedom for* virtue is also more nuanced than our own because in addition to being the converse of *freedom from* vice, *freedom for* virtue assumes an active habituation of the will. In other words, freedom is something that is acquired in education through a conscious effort, not only by the parent and teacher, but even more importantly, by the student. Virtue would hardly be virtue if it were cheaply purchased and automatically transferable. But once acquired, it becomes our greatest possession for virtue offers us a facility in that which is good and an aversion to that which is bad.

Assuming the broader classical and ecclesial meanings above, I think it is helpful to think of **Catholic liberal education as synonymous with virtue education**. Virtue education aims to develop habits of excellence in *every area of life*. In order to understand what an excellent human being really looks like, we now turn to the various virtues Catholic liberal educators intend to inculcate.

### Intellectual Virtue

Liberal educators insisted that human beings are unique within the terrestrial order precisely in their transcendental capacities. They are, as Aristotle suggested, “rational animals.” The intellect is not just one power among many; it is the highest of human abilities for through the intellect we resemble God. Clearly, human beings, as animals, share many points of similarity with other species. Animals and insects, for example, have “tools and tasks”; they “engineer” structures for the betterment of themselves and their “societies”, but human beings are qualitatively different as the human mind can acquire Truth. Applying our earlier terminological definitions, we can say that the mind is made for the contemplation of Truth—its virtue is the ability to discover and enjoy truth and its vice is to be beguiled by error.

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But what do we mean by Truth? A simple definition is helpful. Truth is the adequation of the mind to things. Truth is, in other words, when the mind sees and then expresses things as they really are. It would, for example, be error for the intellect to see and then express that a square is a circle or that a flame causes a decrease in the temperature of the air which surrounds it. In developing intellectual virtue in students, liberal educators are, in the realm of epistemology, committed “realists”. But certainly not “realists” of the empirist kind for human intellection can hardly be generated from matter; understanding, although it has some foundation in material objects, is generated from the light that the intellect places on sensory experience. Matter is, in other words, dark, but as it participates in the Divine, the human intellect casts light on sensory objects and sees what matter is intended to be.

The definition of Truth provided above certainly runs counter to the typical definitions of truth bandied around today. We tend to think of truth in mundane as opposed to transcendental terms. Truth “works” in the day to day; or, truth is something that is “constructed” and constructed for some mundane end. But when one takes more than a casual glance at the nature of truth it becomes clear that it is inherently timeless and spiritual.

The centrality given to Truth within Catholic liberal education is most manifest in the traditional distinction between liberal and servile studies. Examples of liberal studies are grammar, logic, rhetoric, music, geometry, and astronomy; the typical subjects often listed under servile studies are law medicine, carpentry, and masonry. Liberal studies are liberal because, in aiming towards transcendental, they serve no other end than the improvement of the thinking subject.

Engaging in liberal studies is, as Sister Joseph Miriam has suggested, an intransitive activity. The end of liberal studies is like “the rose blooming.” This image is appropriate because blooming is the end of the flower and contemplation—which all liberal studies aim towards—is the end of man. Servile studies, on the other hand, are transitive in nature. The end of servile studies is like “the



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carpenter hewing the wood.” The aim of servile studies is the production of something external to the thinking subject—e.g. the building of a house—and attempts to acquire some useful or pleasurable good. A useful good is some good which serves some higher end which is not an end in and of itself. Staying with the example of the carpenter, the carpenter builds the house to acquire the good of sheltering the body. The carpenter may also be a sculptor and as an artist he may decorate his house lavishly. In doing so he works to acquire a pleasurable good—i.e. aesthetic enjoyment. A pleasurable good—unlike a useful good—is an end in and of itself for pleasurable good are sought simply for the enjoyment they bring to a person. But liberal studies primarily aim at valuable goods. Valuable goods are—like pleasurable goods—ends in and of themselves, but, in addition to providing enjoyment, they qualitatively improve the human being. Acquiring valuable goods, in other words, is a “virtue building” enterprise. The classic examples of valuable goods are knowledge, health, and moral rectitude.

Clearly servile studies are good and can hardly be gainsaid but they are lesser goods when compared to liberal studies. Catholic Liberal education self consciously deemphasizes the “practical” and the “useful” and thus frees the individual for intellectual virtue. An educational trajectory dominated by servile studies, on the other hand, is deformative precisely because such a trajectory fails to lead man towards that for which he is made. Rather than habituating its students to virtue, a predominately servile education runs the risk of inculcating intellectual vice. Technological training curbs man upright posture, and turns his face to the dust.

Liberal studies, on the other hand, point us to transcendental things—in doing so they elevate what the Fathers called our “angelic nature”—but as creatures with one foot in heaven and one on earth, liberal studies also highlight the *partial* nature of all human knowing. Although the earliest stages of education offer unassailed answers, as children mature, they must be introduced to the open horizons which lie before everyone who thinks deeply about any matter. In doing so, the educator imparts a healthy appreciation for mystery. Mystery is



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not that we do not know; it is a mystical knowing and not knowing; or it is, if you will, the kind of knowing that elicits the wonder and curiosity which fuels all intellectual exploration.

The mystical “knowing and not knowing” mentioned above, is the result, at least in part, of the various ways one can be said to know something. We can, of course, come to know something analytically through discursive analysis; the highest form of such an analysis being a knowledge of the necessity of a thing. But there are other forms of knowledge; we can know things immediately without any discursive reason, for example, I can know that I am writing this sentence or I can know that these letters I am forming with my pin are black. If I stick myself in the hand with this pin I can also know that I am experiencing pain. One of the most overlooked forms of knowledge by epistemologists would be the knowledge I can have of another person. I can know, for example, my father or my wife. The knowledge of a person—and all the other forms of knowledge given above—are obviously distinct and can not be reduced to a type of analytical knowledge.

Catholic Liberal education, then, does not operate exclusively with an analytical definition of knowledge. While disciplines like Math, Logic, and Science have an important role in pointing students towards the kind of certainty we all aspire to attain, poetry, music and literature, for example, illustrate the *inexactness* of human knowledge and thus the *incompleteness* of the intellectual quest in this life. As such disciplines deal with verities that elude the grasp of the analytical, they more clearly explicate the *relational* aspect of truth.

Truth, surprisingly, makes a judgment about the subject as well as the object. The relational aspect of truth was present in our original definition of truth as “the adequation of the mind to things.” According to the definition, the subject has to be in right relation to the object; he has to be open to it; he has to be moved by it. This relational aspect could, of course, be deduced within the more analytical disciplines but the humanities provide something more for us to think about as they deal with our knowledge of other persons and beauty.



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Let us, then, look more deeply into what it means to know another person, and, in doing so, take our bearings from the Scriptures. When we read in Genesis that Adam “knew Eve” we are being told something about Adam. In essence, Adam’s knowledge of Eve meant that he was “just;” that he was not only open to her and moved by her, but that he loved her. And his love for her was immediate; there was no discursive analysis of Eve, Adam was simply attracted to her beauty. Here an important epistemological point is made: To know one must love. One will not learn anything about the world if one is apathetic towards it.

But what if a student is not interested in intellectual things? And isn’t intellectual curiosity simply a matter of personality differences anyway? Some people, so it is argued, are born curious, and others are not. In contemporary American culture, the seriousness of this question is acute for educators are fighting a *pandemic* boredom which makes a contemplative mindset almost impossible for today’s youth. Young people often cannot see why a disinterested contemplation of things—that is, a non utilitarian education—would be something worth pursuing.

In spite of the obvious personal differences in intellect, Aristotle was correct when he said that “all men, by nature desire to know.” Unfortunately many young men and women are being habituated to be completely disinterested in intellectual matters. The best way to fight the vice of intellectual apathy is through the modeling of a teacher. The Catholic Liberal educator counters the contemporary zeitgeist of intellectual sloth by modeling an active intellectual life. The educator, by her very presence, is *the* curriculum which is being taught. She shows how right it is to be engaged in a love affair with Truth because, by word and deed, she demonstrates that the intellectual quest *is* part of the religious quest. Intellectual virtues are cultivated in students when they are given an alternative to the banality of secularism. Like Adam who instantly fell in love with Eve, students are naturally attracted to the beauty of intellectual virtue; Liberal Education is the garden in which the beauty of that love blossoms.



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## Moral Virtue

Man is, in addition to his intellectual capacities, also distinguished within the terrestrial order by his moral capacities. Only man can perform a moral act; even more important to note is how moral decisions are predominate and inevitable in life. A person is always making moral decisions and these decisions, in turn, are shaping the person. In other words, a person—unlike an animal—is directly responsible for the person he or she is becoming.

Who we are coming to be is also directly related to our happiness. The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament and the great Greek teachers of the classical age (Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) teach us that an immoral person can not be truly happy. If education is to prepare us for life, we must spend considerable time thinking about the great moral issues which confront us. A student's own happiness depends heavily upon the moral instruction we, as educators, provide.

Of first importance is that a person knows how to act morally in any given situation. To know what to do and when to do it is the virtue of prudence. It is certainly a vice to not know one's "right from the left" in moral matters. To some degree everyone has access to knowledge of what is right. First there is the synderesis of the conscience which tells a person that one should do what is good and avoid what is evil. There is, furthermore, the natural law which, written on the human heart, gives guidance to the conscience offering basic notions of fairness and injustice. But the guideposts of natural law can be distorted by a pernicious education. This seems especially true of the modern educational system which is calculated to produce moral relativists.

It would certainly be a misunderstanding to think of Catholic Liberal educators as purveyors of arbitrary rules. In contrast to the voluntarism that marks modern ethical theory, the Catholic attempts to elucidate the ontological foundation of morality. Right and wrong, in other words, "fit" with the very nature of how things are, and, as a result, are consonant with reason. The hallmark of a liberally

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educated person is not that he knows what is right but that he knows *why* an action is right.

Catholic Liberal educators are also *more concerned* to develop an awareness of the basic principals of right behavior and the internal disposition to do what is right, than to fill the mind full of casuistic instruction. While casuistic education has its place, such instruction can hardly keep up with the multitudinous moral situations which confront a person in the course of a life. Moral education is best understood, as the development of the *right kind of person*: St. Augustine once remarked, “love, and do what you will.”

Moral instruction, from what was said above, obviously can not be heteronomic. If a person acts against what he or she believes then that act is a sin. As rational agents, human beings are always to act freely and to act according to reason. Liberal education tries to give students a taste for that which is right and an aversion to that which is evil but is always quick to point out that the acquisition of moral virtues—all human virtues for that matter—is the work of the student. In a materialistic age which so often eradicates responsibility by analyzing human beings exclusively in terms of chemicals and conditioning, the liberal educator reminds the student of his or her transcendental freedom; a freedom which makes the student responsible for whom they are fast becoming.

### Physical Virtue

Human beings are embodied creatures. If one intends to give a holistic education for the full self actualization of the person, one can hardly imagine neglecting physical virtues. But physical excellence is ephemeral and has a dignity which is borrowed from the spiritual realm. In the traditional listing of the virtues, then, one will not find any mention of physical virtues. According to the logic of the listing, all physical excellences can be reduced to virtues of the soul.

While fully embracing this reduction, can we not follow the pre-codified usage of the term and speak in some lesser sense of physical virtues? Doing so is helpful for any description of liberal education that fails to note the importance of physical training within



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liberal education is egregiously misleading. It would be fair to say that liberal educators are not *as* concerned about the body as they are about the soul, but it would be wrong to think of liberal educators as indifferent to physical education. Nothing could be further from the truth!

When a person speaks of the virtues of the body he typically refers to the body's "fitness". We say that the body is "fit" when it is as it is suppose to be. As a servant of the soul, the body's virtues, then, are those characteristics that promote virtues in the soul.

The fitness of the body is its beauty in appearance and actions. Liberal education is concerned about decorum and manners and takes great care to develop these virtues in the young. It is commonly noted that body and soul greatly influence one another. Especially in the very young, the training of the body can have an immense influence on the internal state of things. Clutter and disorderedness in appearance and action lead to a cluttered and disordered soul. But physical grace, on the other hand, speaks to the soul and tells it how it ought to conduct itself. Such decorum and manners are, however, not merely a means to an end, they are manifestation of a solid education for as the body is an extension of the soul, beauty in appearance and actions reflect an inward beauty.

But bodily "fitness" also entails physical power. As exercises of strength are the objects of the body, physical education must be oriented to strengthening the body for action. The body must be ready to ward off physical attacks both internal and external. However, training the body for action, once again, has its virtue precisely as it influences the soul. Sports, if engaged in the right way, are uniquely poised to develop character in the young. Through sports children learn courage, patience, sacrifice, and teamwork.

### *Theological Virtue*

Because of the fall, the liberty that liberal education strives to achieve is entirely out of reach. Catholic Liberal education relies, then, on the assistance of the grace of God given to us through the sacraments. The sacraments are offered to free us *from the vice* which,



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in human weakness, so easily ensnares us; in doing so, the sacraments also *free us for virtue*. But in addition to assisting us in the attainment of those qualities within the scope of human nature, grace supplies us with supernatural virtues which enable us to attain what human nature *per se* could never attain—the beatific vision of God.

The virtues of which we speak are the theological virtues of Faith, Hope, and Love. They are called “theological” because they have God as their author and object. As virtues infused by an act of grace they are not native to human nature. But, in so far as man is made for the beatific vision, theological virtues are properly called virtues.

With the horrendous evils which occur in the world how can one live without hope? Indeed one can not live without hope, but as pervasive as hope is in the world how can it be anything other than wishful thinking, if one can not ground that hope in God? Furthermore without the crucified God who, in experiencing our suffering, has overcome suffering, how can one have hope that God will right the wrongs of one’s life?

The theological virtue of hope is not a blind hope but a sure hope in the salvific work of God in Christ. Through the sacraments we have a foretaste of God’s ultimate redemption and it is this surety which enables us, with patience, to hurdle the obstacles of evil and run the race of life which is set before us.

God’s grace also gives us faith. Faith is sometimes seen as anything but a gift—it is rather often thought of as an opiate of the masses which is antithetical to reason—but this crude perspective sees faith as a devious presumption rather than what it is; faith in God as He reveals Himself through Jesus Christ. Faith does not reflect a human weakness, as Marx suggested, but it does certainly complete a lacking in human understanding. In short, faith gives us knowledge of the things that we were intending but could not achieve on our own. As such Faith places a person in a privileged intellectual position. The man of faith can see more clearly what, by nature, all men could see but do not see because of sin; and, with the theological content of revelation, the man of faith is able to know



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things far transcending the grasp of human intelligence. Humanity is in search of wisdom; the goal of the intellectual quest is to find the ultimate significance of things by knowing how all things fit together, but such vision is only granted through the eyes of faith.

The sacraments also give us love for God. Our hearts are, through the sacraments, redirected away from the self and towards God as the supreme Good. With every deeper engagement in the sacramental life of the Church, we come to see that all things, even our own love, is a gift from God. And this awareness of the giftedness of existence inculcates a joyful “ought” in how one lives one’s life

All of the vices of humanity are, as St. Augustine suggested, manifestations of a “disordered love.” As we love others and other things in the wrong manner, we find love disappointing and harmful. But through theological charity, the crowning virtue of the virtues, a person comes to live life to its fullest. Loving God sets all right; men and women are *free for* love and *free for* the happiness that love produces because, by the virtue of charity, they are *freed from* the vice of loving persons and things in the wrong way.

### *Liberal Education and the Other*

It is often objected that the educational philosophy as stated above, with its sharp focus on personal perfection, is too individualistic to serve as the path towards self actualization and human happiness. It is important, then, to explain how the world which surrounds the self relates to self actualization. Our Lord Himself points out the way when He calls us to be “in the world” but not “of the world.”

To be in the world but not of the world, as our Lord suggested, is to live life according to the order of things or, put in another way, it is to put things in the right perspective. If a person is taught to see and habituated to act in a way that is inconsonant with the order of how things really are in this world, obviously he or she operates at a loss. It is imperative then to be correct about basic matters. We must, then, address two fundamental questions: what is the State *for*;



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and, what is the Work *for*?

For the classical Catholic educator the answer to these questions assumes a certain hierarchy of being. The primary answer to all these questions is God. St Paul writes: “From Him and through Him and to Him are all things!” But one would be amiss if, in engaging in this theological reduction, the secondary aim of all created things was ignored. For everything in the terrestrial order also exists for man as *the medium through which* man serves and comes to enjoy God. But as man exists to complete the terrestrial, he is the *secondary agent who fulfills* the purpose of terrestrial things, giving them their dignity. Therefore we can also say that man exists for the things of this world.

In the language of St. Augustine, all of the terrestrial order—persons included—are to be used as means to enjoy God. As rational agents, human beings are, obviously, useful to other human beings in a more elevated sense than are non rational creatures. Therefore our usefulness to one another as human beings always assumes the importance of maintaining the freedom of every individual. In fact a person properly serves another person—i.e. exists for another person—as *the medium through which* the Other acquires, before the face of God, greater freedom and happiness. This gives equal dignity both to the one served and the one serving for there is nothing more divine-like than to elevate someone to union with the Divine, and there is nothing more divine than to be united with the Divine.

### The State

It is not surprising, given the secularism of our age, that many assume that the *primary* purpose of education is to form students for citizenship. The assumption, however, is a fundamental violation of the order of things. The State is subordinate to God, and to the Truth, Goodness, and Justice that point to God and are necessary for human flourishing. Within modern secularism, contemporary Catholic Liberal Educators insist that the *primary* purpose of education is to form students for the *civitas Dei*.

When educators fail to acknowledge the transcendental aim of humanity, they are abandoning students to the slavery of sheer



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power. Historically politics has always been closely aligned with the divine and this is because political questions inescapably ask questions that only revelation can answer. *From what* shall we build our societies? Where do our laws derive their binding power? *From where* does the human care, which we so value and look to instill in each other, emerge? And *to what* or *to whom* shall the oppressed appeal when suffering that which they perceive to be evil? When the transcendental is lost sight of, these questions become quite problematic.

Through history we can see that healthy politics is rooted in revelation. The American ideals of freedom and inalienable rights were inherited by Enlightenment thinkers from Christian theology. Probably the most poignant person to illustrate the dependence of politics upon religion in our own times is Martin Luther King. Using an idea borrowed from classical learning, Martin Luther King Jr. challenged the sacrosanct laws of America by insisting that an unjust law is no law at all. Clearly, what is best for society are citizens who are *free from* the state precisely because they are *free for* the transcendental.

But it would be wrong to simply talk about a *freedom from* the state and fail to mention *freedom for* the state. To not serve our fellow man by living a “state-less” life of selfishness is to be a slave to vice. Simply put, we are made for our fellow man and thus for the state. Thus as a political animal, we find ourselves more fully human in living out our natural connectedness to one another; in giving, to quote our Lord, we find ourselves richly receiving.

### Work

Work, like the State, must also be situated in its proper place in order to allow it to be life giving. Work properly understood is a means to promote the glory of God and the flourishing of our fellowman. This happens, when, in the name of Christ, one’s work helps one’s fellow man flourish. Work becomes evil when work is seen as a means to some other end which poses as ultimate or when work becomes an end in and of itself. Work for an illegitimate end is the vice of greed. As an end itself, work becomes meaningless and

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oppressive to the human spirit.

The true transcendental purpose of work is illustrated beautifully in the creation account itself. Following the writer of Hebrews who allegorizes the weekly Sabbath as a type of heaven, the Church shows us that the end of man is the “rest” or “leisure” of the beatific vision. In Genesis 1, God works to rest and, as creatures, we follow Gods example and work for leisure. Work, as intended by the Creator, dignifies man in that work gives man something meaningful to do—we play our part in completing the creation—and as a reward for our work, God grants us rest.

This perspective of the Church continued the classical Greek view of work so wonderfully summarized by Aristotle: “We work so that we can have leisure.” Work is, of course, always valuable but never as *an end to itself*; work is only valuable *for something else*: for the people one serves in the name of God, for bodily sustenance and the reward that God gives us for serving Him .

Leisure, in contrast to work, is the experience of things that are *ends to themselves*. If we see leisure—in its fullest sense—as akin to the rest of heaven then we avoid certain misconceptions. First we must never define leisure primarily as a means to refresh the worker to work yet another day. As a foretaste of heaven leisure is the rewarded end of our work. Furthermore as a participation of the glories of heaven leisure is hardly a disengaged idleness. In heaven we are completely engaged in the vision of God. Following Aristotle and other classical thinkers who spoke of leisure in active terms, St. Benedict referred to the contemplative life paradoxically as a “busy leisure.” Holding a mysterious—even mystical—middle point between the active and the passive, leisure is the engagement in those things which are valuable in an of themselves because they themselves cause the human spirit to flourish.

But the ever increasing totality of work which marks our secularist age obfuscates the connection between the beatific vision and leisure and in doing so blinds us to the transcendental end of human nature. Liberal education plays an important role in developing a culture which, in pointing to the transcendental,

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nurtures the *full* humanity of a citizenry. The end result of such a humanistic focus is both an improved industry and state.

*Social Justice and the Value of Liberal Education*

If the virtuous person lives for others, as we have said, then liberal education is egalitarian at its heart. There are those, however, who would insist that, far from being a catalyst for social justice, liberal education is an elitist form of education that solidifies class distinction. But nothing could be further from the truth. Liberal Education, at its core, is egalitarian in its aspirations *precisely because* it assumes that, as all people are *essentially* the same, they all aim for the same thing. As Aristotle reminds us “all men, by nature, desire to know.” Since liberal education is calculated to develop a contemplative attitude, liberal education is the right of every human being.

Furthermore, the virtue of justice, so dear to the liberal tradition, assumes that the just distribution of goods is a goal towards which every just citizen strives. While it is true that there will never be—nor should be—complete equality, justice entails that a society is responsible to provide the basic rights which are essential to human flourishing.

It is, of course, true that, historically speaking, liberal education was more *typically* an education for the upper class. This fact, however, is contingent upon historical accident. And not only does it misinform onlookers as to the true essence of liberal education, it also glosses over the historical instances when liberal education was used as a means to realize the hopes and dreams of a burgeoning middle class.

If seen correctly, Liberal education is the best way to provide social and economic mobility to the working class. A liberal education provides more vocational options for, in focusing on the cultivation of human excellence, liberal education develops the *broadest range* of human *capacities*. A liberally educated person can do more because he, or she, *is more* than the person who lacks a liberal formation. A task oriented education helps a student know how to

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do a task or a number of tasks; a liberal education—precisely because it is so “disinterested” in tasks—teaches a person how to think: clearly a more “useful” skill!

But a liberally educated person is also *free from* the vice of being manipulated by others. The liberal educated person knows that “knowledge” should not be used as a power to dominate other people but such a person also knows that it often is used in that way. One of the fruits of possessing knowledge is that knowledge frees its possessor from being subject to the abuses of power. This cherished fruit has a way of mitigating the social impact of greed, and, in turn, encourages the egalitarian balance which all political entities naturally move towards; the balance, which if ignored, or suppressed, leads to social conflict.

Liberal Education should play a central role in the ongoing struggle for social justice. Plato himself noted the political value of politics and concluded that the educator is more valuable for the good of a society than the politician. Of course, there are those who would see my case for the *usefulness* of liberal education as proof that all our talk about transcendental truth is nothing other than a subtle form of what Nietzsche described as “will to power”. But one need not take such a cynical view of things; liberal education is correctly used as a helpful political tool if the end result is transforming according to the way things are suppose to be!

### Conclusion

Liberal education is best thought of as virtue education. Virtue education assumes that a student is a “social animal” and intends to help the student realize his full humanity within a social context. In living to his fullest; in living, not only for himself, but for others, the student experiences the happiness which all hope to find.

The fullness that Liberal educators insist upon assumes that a solid education is a *general* education calculated to develop a well rounded person. Liberal education produces, then, the scholar-athlete; the musical mathematician; the poetic scientist and the religious civil servant. But in addition to developing well

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roundedness, this general education is intended to lead to the contemplative life of philosophy.

By stating that the goal of liberal education is the “contemplative life of philosophy” we do not intend all students to become philosophers nor are we rejecting the virtues of an active life made possible by some form of specialized instruction. People will need to specialize in a liberal or a servile subject, at some point, as a means of self preservation and the preservation of others, and there is, of course, great value in such preservation. The contemplative life of philosophy refers simply to a certain *manner of being* which a person in any station of life may have. To be contemplative is to be oriented to eternal things; it is, if you will, living the examined, as opposed to the unexamined life. Is such a life above any man? Is the man in the field, who works by the sweat of his brow, by his very station in life, cut off from contemplation? Shall we think of him as a mere beast of burden? Such elitist ideas should never be, even whispered, in polite company!

## II. The “What and “How” of Catholic Classical Education

Classical educators distinguish themselves from other Catholic educators by the *extent* to which they appeal to the history of liberal education. In particular, classical educators attempt to preserve the “liberal” nature of the tradition by a more direct appeal to the “what” and “how” of the tradition. By the “what” I mean what is taught; by the “how” I mean how we teach what is taught.

Classical educators are also different because they are committed to point students towards the recovery of a particular past. This focus determines the language students learn and the literature and history they study. Education is, as many have pointed out, the process of induction into a particular culture. It is also the ongoing formation of that culture. Both of these factors inform a classical educator’s decided historical focus.

This historical recovery, however, is not as straightforward as it

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might seem. First the history of liberal education is the embodiment of a living tradition that spans centuries and continents. It would be ridiculously *ahistorical* to suggest that the tradition is monolithic in either method or content. From which period and place are we to drink the pristine waters of liberal education? Second the advances in human knowledge—especially in the areas of science and math—and other exigencies of the contemporary context must inform the curricular decisions of a modern classical educator. It would, for example, seem neurotically obscurantist, and thus highly deformative, to advocate that a modern classical curriculum should exactly follow, for example, the medieval *cursus* of the Trivium and Quadrivium. Finally, applying an education to the masses, which historically developed as an education for the elite, needs fuller development than what currently exists in the scholarship on contemporary classical education. The ambiguity inherent in this and any other attempt to recover the past largely explains some of the curricular confusion in the movement.

The issues raised above only scratch the surface of the adjustments involved in “translating” classical education into the modern context. But given the limits of this essay and the nascent character of my own thoughts on these matters, I withhold from raising and solving all the matters at hand. This essay is a more modest description of what I intend to accomplish as the principal of a particular classical elementary and middle school. From it you should have a clear sense of how a Classical Catholic school might differ from a more typical Catholic school.

*Classical Catholic Education is a Latin Centered Education*

The study of Latin is central to the Language Arts program of any school classical school. There are great payoffs to studying Latin—i.e. it assists in the study of English grammar and serves as a great precursor to the modern romance languages—and these payoffs are, of course, part of the reason classical educators are so committed to a Latin centered education. But as fruitful as these fringe benefits are, neither discloses the primary motivation behind advocates of elementary and secondary Latin education.



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Latin is central to the classical school because the study of Latin creates a certain kind of student. Latin solidifies a particular intellectual orientation. One learns Latin to read Latin Literature. Through years of consistent Latin training, children are oriented to the classics of Latin literature in a way that non Latin students are not. Quite simply they have more invested in it and they have more ability to appreciate it.

The reason classical educators favor such literature is because the authors and works embody, in a way that modern authors and works do not, the worldview classical educators intend to pass on to their students. The definition of “virtue” espoused in this paper often feels foreign to the average reader precisely because he or she is subtly influenced by an ontology which is opposed to all that classical education stands for. Conflicts between ontologies and worldviews are, obviously, matters for philosophical reflection; however, in the adolescent and prepubescent years, classical educators are eager to develop, through certain literary works, an imagination which is receptive to the questions and categories of classical learning.

Studying Latin is also helpful in developing a “text based” culture. Books, as a medium for learning, encourage rumination and deep thought. Such profundity, however, is diminishing in our culture as we transition into the “image based culture” of the internet. There are, obviously, great advantages to the proliferation of information that results from the internet and other technologies; however, it seems clear that these mediums do have their drawbacks. In contrast to the text, the image is self evident, quick, and user friendly. Reading is, on the other hand, a slow exercise which in its slowness encourages depth. In Latin courses, the virtue of ruminating on a text is heightened as students spend ample time honing grammatical and exegetical skills.

### *History & the Classical Catholic School*

Historical knowledge has always been cultivated for humanistic reasons. If one loses sight of history’s role to develop the humanity of students, the value of historical knowledge becomes opaque.



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Through history students develop self identity. One can not possess self identity without an awareness of the historical precursors that form the self. It is imperative, then, that students who live under the aegis of the Western world learn western history. Yet so much of today's social studies are dominated by a very narrow Amero-centric focus which hampers self understanding. Children can hardly understand the American story if they can not contextualize it within western civilization. Classical Catholic educators, wanting to broaden the student's perspective, devote significant time to Greek, Roman, Medieval and Early Modern history.

But self identity emerges, not only from knowledge of the historical precursors to the self, but also from the noble and ignoble models present within history. We study history to glean lessons for how to live; we want to find the good life; we look to people and events to inspire us to greatness. Surprisingly, in studying the past, one is called to look forward as history challenges a person to become something that he or she has not yet become.

But the periods of history distinctive to a classical school have, sadly, fallen into disrepute. The annuals of these historical periods are constantly being rifled by many in search for evidence to besmirch the noble ideals and institutions of the Western world. While not wanting to cast a blind eye to the injustices of the past, Classical Catholic educators intend to balance what seems to be an ever increasing distortion of these great periods in human history. Its sins not withstanding, western civilization offers us countless models of greatness and offers a fantastic inoculation to the chronically snobbery that abandons the student to the mediocrity of status quo.

### Language Arts

We could explain the distinctives of a classical school's Language Arts program by enumeration. A Classical school will do poetry memorization and recitation, dictation, copying, and Latin. There will also be an intensified focus on grammar and our particular literary canon. But such an enumeration—accurate as it may be—fails to offer the onlooker a sense of what classical educators are truly

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after. The best way to explain the classical approach to Language Arts is to explicate the deep appreciation that classical educators have for the Trivium and the classical understanding of Logos which gave direction to the Trivium.

Logos is a Greek word with a very broad meaning. It can mean speech but it can also mean reason. Logos can refer to the spoken word but it can also reference the internal word of human thought. The internal word is an internal copy of what the mind sees in the external world. The external word is an expression of this internal word.

Among the animals, man alone, as the Greeks correctly noted, possess Logos. The Greeks also noted that our thoughts and speech had an uncanny correspondence to the surrounding world. They reasoned, then, that the world itself is governed by Logos.

In the New Testament we are given a theological explanation to what the Greeks were able to observe. As the world came to be through God's Word, a connection was made between the world, words, ideas, and God. This profound insight teaches us that an education in the language arts is more than, as one famous philosopher thought, learning a "language game;" it is an induction to reality and truth.

What is the Trivium? The Trivium is simply the study of Logos. It consists of the three liberal arts—grammar, logic and rhetoric—which taught in that order, is completed around the junior year of our high school sequence. Although the classical educator does not claim to reproduce the Trivium with historical accuracy, he or she is influenced by major contours of the Trivium.

Through the study of grammar, children are exposed, in a classical school, to the relationship between words and the structure of that relationship. In studying grammar, we believe students develop a structured way of thinking. With such mental preparation behind them, students are prepared to move beyond words to the ideas that words signify; in short, knowing grammatical structure prepares students to study Logic. Logic is the art of correct reasoning; it discovers correct reasoning from an analysis of language



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itself. However as words and ideas are connected with the world, Logic is not restricted to the Language Arts; rather it is the foundation for all learning since every discipline assumes correct reasoning.

Rhetoric is the persuasive expression of Logic in spoken and written word. Rhetoric, as taught in a classical school, is not indifferent to truth. The art of persuasion is always grounded in Logic and can not be used as a slight of hand to manipulate people. Such a use of rhetoric is a denial of the Logos character of words; that is, a denial that words reflect reality, God, and the beauty and truth that God intended when He created all things through His spoken Word. Rhetoric, correctly understood, is the skill of adorning Logic with simplicity and beauty; it is a facility in communication that enables the truth to be understood with pleasure and ease.

With the exposition above behind us, we now turn to how a classical school is different from other schools in the area of the Language Arts. In a classical school, it is not so much *what* we teach in grammar as *how* and *why* we teach the subject. A classical school spends *more time* than other institutions in an analysis of the structure of language. This increased focus encourages a distinctive pedagogical strategy. It would not be uncommon, for example, to find students in a classical school diagramming sentences. A classical school teaches grammar in this way because it is interested, in an age appropriate manner, to introduce the students to formal and material logic. The classical educator is also committed to the importance of Rhetoric in the language arts curriculum.

If a classical school is different in its Language Arts program it is because a classical educator is dogged in his belief that the goal of Language Arts is to develop, within the student, a deep, personal commitment to the Truth. Many young people today are cynical about truth precisely because their earliest education was devoid of what the Trivium intended to instill. An education without Logic is an intellectual formation bereft of a discipline which, with the exception of Math, is solitary in its ability to predispose a person to believe in the existence of truth. And without ever being presented a



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intellectual vision which grounds rhetoric in logic, students are encouraged, by the world around them, to think that all talk is either a self imposed game or worse a tool to dominate others.

### Music

Music education is taking a back seat to almost every other discipline within elementary and secondary education. A classical school self consciously attempt to reject that trend for, in looking to the liberal arts tradition, one sees the centrality of musical education in the humanistic curriculum.

Music is, in its purest form, an inexpressible connection with Beauty. As such music reminds humanity of its transcendental destiny. But as music expresses the inexpressible it points us to what we referred to earlier in this essay as our “mystical” connection with reality. Music in other words helps us, when words fall short, to express and experience reality.

As a liberal subject, music education educates the soul. Plato was one of the earliest authors to give articulation to this idea. Music is an education in harmony and when a person is continually exposed to and engaged in music its harmony passes through the ear into the soul, creating within the soul a love for all things harmonious and fitting. Music education, then, is quite important in forming the pre-conceptual minds of young people. Through music, before a person can even attempt to articulate definitions of beauty, truth and fitness, the soul is given a taste for that which is excellence and a strong aversion to that which is ugly.

If Classical educators are distinct among Catholics educators it is that they are quite persnickety about the importance of Music. Too much is missed in early childhood development if music is jettisoned for some other supposed “core subject.” But a classical educator will also be particularly concerned to transmit the great—yet sadly forgotten—musical heritage of the Church. Classical educators, coupled with their Latin program, are very desirous for example, to teach Chant as the privileged form of liturgical music.

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### Physical Education

Sports play a vital role in the liberal education a classical institution intends to provide to *every* student. In order to ensure that all can participate in the sports program, physical education must be committed to equip the entire student body to play the sports participated in by the school. In addition to the wellness goals which all PE curricula seem to share, the classical school is quite *methodical* in gradually teaching students the component parts of a *few, select* sports. This *narrowed* focus; it seems to me, is one of the distinctives of a classical approach to physical education.

But a classical school is strong in its insistence that PE is crucial to developing manners and physical gracefulness in its students. Physical education is much more, then, than a particular class; it is an overarching concept which governs the entire pedagogy of the school. A classical school offers physical training, for example, through a uniform policy. By training children how to dress, classical educators are informing the soul. Through the dress code, a child learns how to appropriately think about themselves and the school. But PE also extends to the development of manners and civility. In short, classical educators take care that the body reflect in internal dignity towards which a solid education aims.

### Math and Science

Science and Math have always been central to the liberal arts curriculum. The contrast often assumed between the liberal arts and science is misguided. Geometry and astronomy for example, are two of the four liberal arts within the Quadrivium. The more relevant contrast to consider when talking about science and math in a classical school is the *wrong* verses the *right* way to teach these disciplines. When placed within a humanistic perspective, science and math contribute in special ways to the liberating goals of Classical Catholic education. .

Mathematics is a subject highly prized, first and foremost, because it is a transcendental discipline whose very existence points to eternal verities. Mathematics, in other words, is a fantastic

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repellant to the dehumanizing worldview of materialism. But the transcendental focus of Math, along with its humanizing fruits, is lost if math is thought of largely as the foundation for some technical concern (e.g. engineering, computer science, economics, etc). When the student asks the question which every student asks—“why do I need to learn math, I will never use it?”—the classical teacher is careful to avoid the temptation to always make math relevant. The classical teacher, instead, takes the moment to invert the entire intellectual outlook of the student by asking a few counter questions. “Why should we only study things which are relevant?” “Does not Math itself show us that the human mind spans beyond the mundane?” “What is the significance of that mental expanse?” “What does it tell us about reality?” “What does it tell us about human nature?” Math, taught with these questions in mind, is essential to the entire liberal project.

Another “wrong way” to teach math would be to teach the subject *as if* it were nothing more than a computational operation. If our engaging in math was nothing more than such an operation, one would be hard pressed to find anything essentially humanistic in teaching math for a computer is fantastic at such operations. But math is more than performing a function, it is the discovery of the function itself! Often mathematical instruction becomes nothing more than teaching students sure and certain steps to solving a problem. One is told, in other words, that when he see problem type X he executes steps 1,2, and 3 and when he encounters problem type Y he performs steps 1,2, 3, 4, 5, and 6; etc. Informed by a humanistic perspective, the classical school rejects the purely computational approach and is anxious to encourage the student to see the problem behind the problem. In doing so, a humanistic education encourages true mathematical thinking.

Science deals with matter. As such it is uniquely poised to instill a “realistic” bias in its students. Science—like no other discipline—shows us that truth is not a subjective construct; it is rather, the adequation of the mind to things.

Science also attempts to discover why things exist as they do.



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As such the sciences are not servile subjects; science *qua* science is disinterested in how this or that can be used. Science is, rather, humanity’s romantic curiosity about the material order.

Understanding science in this way, we can see how science—prior to modernity’s politically charged bifurcation of science and religion—was viewed as a precursor to theology.

### **III. The Coherent Educational Vision of Classical Catholic Education**

We now turn to the question of how the terms “Classical” and “Catholic” fit together to form a coherent educational philosophy. As mentioned in the introduction, the word “classical” is typically used by practioners in the movement to refer to the classical period of Greece and Rome. If that, however, is all that is said about the label “classical”, one could give the impression that the “classical” educator is merely indulging in his or her antiquated interests. This focus could also appear to be a subtle, or not so subtle, form of cultural racism. Worse than that, however, would be the suggestion that classical education tends to unduly juxtapose modern against classical knowledge instead of seeing the intellectual accomplishments of both as partial acquisitions of an elusive Truth. Without question, these appearances, if in fact true, would conflict with the classical educators Catholicism.

This becomes evident when we think of what the term “Catholic” means. If we are concerned to understand how the genuinely “Catholic” relates to the various cultures and peoples of the world, the words “universal” and “global” come to mind. In the realm of human knowledge the word “Catholic” elicits the concept of *fides et ratio* and the notion of tradition. As we explore the concepts of knowledge and culture in Catholic theology we find that, far from being anti-modern, Catholic Theology conceives of tradition, culture, faith, and reason with the very modern categories of “historical embodiment” and “historical development.” Without continuing any further in our definition of the word Catholic, it should be clear that

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any educational philosophy which is obscurantist or tribalist in outlook is clearly not Catholic.

So how does one define “Classical” in a way that is consonant with Catholicism? The beginnings of an answer involve nuancing the definition of classical, mentioned earlier, in a slight, but significant, manner. I propose that we think of the “classical” not simply in terms of the Greek and Roman periods but primarily in terms of the continuation of those cultures in the middle ages. In doing so the Greek and Roman civilizations find their true significance for they were “fulfilled” in the cultural synthesis that was medieval culture.

The “classical,” then, in the classical catholic educational schema, is quite different from what a classicist would propose. We are interested in the Greek and Roman periods in so far as they express the intellectual, physical and moral virtues of human nature. This, of course, is no venerated interest for these cultures gave rise to the very foundation of the entire Christian system of virtue. But our retrieval of this past passes through an intellectual sieve informed by the great medieval minds who translated these two cultures to us in the first place.

The nuance given above, while it does align the term “Classical” more closely to the term “Catholic,” does nothing to allay the fears that classical education engenders tribalism and an obscurantist intellectual outlook. Given these valid concerns why do Classical Catholic educators favor a particular past? The answer is that we think that the contemporary man—and every man for that matter—is looking for two elements which characterize the long period of history which I have referred to as “classical.” Humanity is in search for a large cultural unity which extends beyond the confines of national borders. Intellectually, the contemporary man is also in search for something more universal than he currently enjoys. Modern man has lost his way. He is struck by the multifarious, inundated by information, and has no unified vision. The intellect longs for a world view to make sense of the world in which we live. The classical educator looks to the classical as a model which can inspire today’s generation to move beyond the particularism that



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plagues it at every step.

It seems to me that classical education only becomes tribalistic and obscurantist when educators lose the following perspective. First, that history itself shows us the sterility and stupidity of conservatism. The universalism of the classical world, so lauded by classical educators, was only acquired as people possessed the courage to be progressive both culturally and intellectually. Second, an education steeped in the classical world is only a means to an end; that is, such learning is only healthy if it enables the student to be fully present within modernity. Setting the classical model in this perspective assumes, of course, that the educator has devised a long term plan to move the classical student into the modern pluralistic intellectual and cultural context. This admittedly is a complex issue for if a student is immersed in the classical for too long, he or she is unable to really understand the modern. As a result the intellectually impaired student foolishly rejects the modern in an anti-modern conservatism. Such a student has rotted on the vine. On the other hand if a student is pulled off the vine of classical learning too early, the educator has spoiled the new wine he or she has intended to make.

There is, of course, no clear course to chart which would be devoid of all dangers. It should be clear; however, that classical catholic education forms a coherent educational philosophy and has noble aspirations. Like all Catholic educators, we operate, by the grace of God, with theological hope. We know, of course, our own shortcomings and how idealistic the project of education truly is, yet like Abraham, we hope *in spite* of ourselves.

Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead. Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised.