

What is Catholic Liberal Education?

Catholic

...Catholic education has suffered no less – perhaps even more – than secular education from the decline of classical studies and the loss of the old humanist culture. This was the keystone of the whole educational structure, and when it was removed the higher studies of theology and philosophy became separated from the world of specialist and vocational studies which inevitably absorb the greater part of the time and money and personnel of the modern university.

The Catholic Church embraced classical education in the early Middle Ages, incorporating it into monastic, ecclesiastical and, eventually, secular life. In one form or another, from the Benedictine monasteries to the medieval universities to the Jesuit's Ratio Studiorum, Liberal Education has traditionally been the core of Catholic education. The goals of classical education – perfecting the natural powers of the mind while embracing and developing a tradition – coalesced perfectly with the incarnational, traditional and pilgrimatic understanding of Christian life.

Liberal Education occurs within a tradition of learning and culture. The Greeks learned Homer and the poets, the laws and the histories. These contained the best and most beautiful accounts of the good, the beautiful and the true. Becoming conversant with these texts made the young accustomed to the most noble and challenging of ideas; he became a fellow in the highest society, one fit at some level to listen to, question, and even develop these great men.

For Catholics, the Catholic Tradition is our tradition. Catholic educators aim to make their students conversant with our comprehensive theological, apologetical, philosophical, aesthetic traditions. Liberally educated Catholics develop an admiration for, a confidence in that Tradition, in its power to stimulate and satisfy the mind and heart, in its strength to foster, accept and patiently answer the most searching questions, in its wisdom that emphasizes the beauty of life without hiding its evils, in its dynamic humility, which accepts the truth from whatever source it is found.

Catholic Liberal Education is Catholic in its inspiration, resources and direction. It begins in faith and seeks understanding under the guidance of the Church's Magisterium and through the rich patrimony of the Church's intellectual, spiritual and cultural tradition. It is also Catholic in its willingness to learn, within the boundaries of faith, from any source of wisdom -- Christian or pagan, ancient or modern.

For as education reaches a certain point of development, it opens up new and wider cultural horizons. It ceases to be a utilitarian parochial effort for the maintenance of a minimum standard of religious instruction and becomes the gateway to the wider kingdom of Catholic culture which has two thousand years of tradition behind it and is literally world-wide in its extent and scope.

Liberal

*But I observed that even the good artisans fell into the same error as the poets; because they were good workmen they thought that they also knew all sorts of high matters, and this defect in them overshadowed their wisdom.... Socrates, *The Apology**

What would you do if money were not a concern? If you had an infinite supply of money? For better or worse, that is not the lot of most of us. Most of our lives are dictated by the necessities

of living. That thought dominates most of our educational institutions. What kind of job will our students be able to get, and how much will they make for it? How can we prepare them for the best and highest paying jobs? This worldly focus has its successes, but also its price. Time and again, great thinkers have warned that minds limited to the necessities of life will tend to judge all things by that measure.

Were I a mere chemist, I should deny the influence of mind upon bodily health; and so on, as regards the devotees of any science, or family of sciences, to the exclusion of others; they necessarily become bigots and quacks, scorning all principles and reported facts which do not belong to their own pursuit, and thinking to effect everything without aid from any other quarter.

But if our students were truly free of worry about necessities, how would we educate them? Liberal education, in one fundamental sense, is the answer to that question. "Liberal" means free, and Liberal Education is what is proper for the free man. The man who is free, as the aristocrats of pre-modern societies were, wants what is desirable for its own sake, not what is essentially a means to something else. But what is that?

In the history of education, two different but not incompatible answers have been given. For some, the best kind of life is that which is most fully human, a life of full participation in and even leadership of society. The man who through his understanding and prudence and speech can guide his city or nation through difficult times to the most happy and prosperous state receives the highest admiration and honor and thanksgiving. He understands the deepest values of his society; he is equipped to arouse his countrymen to awareness of dangers and devotion to the good.

For others, the best kind of life is that which is most nearly divine, one not devoted to making and doing but to understanding and loving and wondering. The man who looks beyond his society to the great order of creation, to the Creator Himself, who questions the customs of his upbringing to determine that which is good in itself, who seeks knowledge of what transcends the ordinary lives of men, is the truly admirable man.

Educators have agreed, with varying emphases, that adequate training in the arts of language and mathematics is essential for both kinds of life. Called the Trivium and Quadrivium, these arts made up the backbone of Liberal Arts education. Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric formed men who were masters of the spoken word, who readily understood what was said and unsaid, who knew their own minds and could share them effectively with others. Geometry, Arithmetic, Astronomy and Music introduced young minds to truths outside of the mind. Beyond these basic arts, the liberally educated man was introduced to the finest ideas of his culture through his study of literature, history and the fine arts, while he tested the soundness of these ideas through philosophy.

This education is not only proper to a man with time on his hands; it also made him more free, free to be the best man he could be – free from the interior confusion of scattered experiences and opinions, free to express himself fully, free to understand and weigh the greatest and most beautiful thoughts of man.

Hence it is that his education is called "Liberal." A habit of mind is formed which lasts through life, of which the attributes are, freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation, and wisdom.

So Liberal Education is finally also the most practical for those who are capable of it. For it prepares a man to be, not a carpenter or a teamster, a chemist or an historian, nor even a lawyer or doctor or politician, but to be the best man he can be. And the best man will live the best life and, as a bonus, will also frequently be the best suited to acquire the habits of management and planning that businesses seek after.

Gentlemen, I will show you how a liberal education is truly and fully a useful, though it be not a professional, education. Good is not only good, but reproductive of good; this is one of its attributes; nothing is excellent, beautiful, perfect, desirable for its own sake, but it overflows, and spreads the likeness of itself all around it.

Education

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends....

“You can’t teach an old dog new tricks”, but you can teach a young dog new tricks. Dogs and horses and dolphins can be trained. People can, too. An office clerk is trained to use the filing system; a soldier is trained to fire a rifle and dig trenches. But you can’t educate a dog or horse or dolphin. Education implies much more than training or even teaching, something that is properly human.

When a dog is trained to roll over on command or a dolphin to jump through hoops, nobody bothers to explain to the animal why it is being asked to do this. Training a cashier or even an accountant is similar – do the math, don’t ask questions.

Education doesn’t aim at simply accomplishing a task; its goal is understanding. Nurses might be trained to wash a patient’s wounds, and administer medication, but a doctor needs to understand what makes a body healthy, and how the body works, in order to best determine how to bring about health in his patient.

Training is entirely appropriate for many tasks. But when attorneys are trained to win cases without considering justice; when bureaucrats are trained to follow countless rules without learning prudence; when doctors are trained to manipulate the body without considering its proper functions; when generals are trained to kill without considering nobility; then society will reap the bitter fruits of having failed to educate its citizens.

Education presupposes and builds on training. Learning the alphabet, memorizing Latin paradigms, repetitious practice of scales are necessary for Dickens, Cicero and Mozart. Educators need to recognize when they are training students and when they are educating them. Have standardized tests reduced history class to a memory drill of names, dates and facts? Or are my students coming to understand the motives, the ideas that have shaped great events? Do they understand why George Washington was admirable? Will they recognize the next Napoleon or Lenin, or the conditions that might produce him? Are they learning to raise probing questions about the historical interpretations that are being presented to them? Scantrons don’t answer such questions.

But education is a higher word [than instruction]; it implies an action upon our mental nature, and the formation of a character; it is something individual and permanent, and is commonly spoken of in connexion with religion and virtue. When, then, we speak of the communication of Knowledge as being Education, we thereby really imply that that Knowledge is a state or condition of mind.... Newman, *Idea of a University*

Education above all aims at developing the proper habits of mind. It takes patience, prudence, and prayer. Facts will be forgotten after the exam is passed; education provides the foundations for a lifetime of growth.