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To Lead a Child: On Reclaiming a Human Pedagogy

ELISABETH SULLIVAN

The capacity to wonder, St. Thomas Aquinas noted, is among man's greatest gifts. Aquinas held that man's first experience of wonder sets his feet on the ladder that leads up to the beatific vision.[1] Even long before the coming of Christ, ancient pagans such as Socrates and his student Plato recognized that wisdom begins in wonder. But today's dominant educational system, ordered toward the merely pragmatic and utilitarian ends of "college and career readiness," has no use for wonder or wisdom. We see its consequences in the weary apathy of students who repeatedly ask, "Is this going to be on the test?" When only that which can be quantified or graded is valued, all else falls away. The factory model of teaching and learning is manufacturing the malaise, anxiety, and even despair that burden so many of the young by depriving them of the two elements their innate sense of wonder seeks to find: the meaning and purpose of things.

For roughly three decades, however, a quiet rebellion has gathered force against this machine. It was born from the love of parents who, as the primary educators of their children, were willing to go to great lengths to restore the human dimension to learning, first in homeschools and then in independent Christian and Catholic schools. Within the last decade, this renewal has been embraced by a rapidly growing number of diocesan and parish schools that are changing the longstanding narrative of their decline. The turnaround can be seen in rising enrollment, supportive parents, dynamic academic engagement, and deeper religious formation. The most striking change in the school culture, seen by administrators, teachers, and parents alike, is the students' newfound *joy in learning*.

The source of this joy can be traced to the recovery of a Christian anthropology that treats children not as future producers and consumers but as creatures made in the image and likeness of God and destined to be with Him forever. The mark of this joy is the confidence and delight that comes from the freedom to see the truth of things, and to order our lives and our loves to that truth. Secular progressive education, by its very design and practice, undermines this freedom. When its methods are uncritically adopted in Catholic schools, it subverts the Church's intent. As Catholic educators turn instead to the Church's tradition of liberal learning, they are discovering the rewards of what it means to put Jesus Christ, the Logos, at the center of *what they teach*, and—importantly—*how they teach*. The recovery of authentic Catholic education reaches far beyond the mere acquisition of skills and fragmented information by helping students develop *eyes to see and ears to hear* the connectedness and the unity of all knowledge. But richer content alone, without pedagogy that sparks wonder and cultivates contemplation, cannot lead students to fully rejoice in the truth.

Pedagogy comes from the ancient Greek *paidagogos*, a compound comprised of "paidos" (child) and "agogos" (leader). In order to lead a child to his proper end, a teacher must begin with a clear understanding of what a child *is* and an equally clear understanding of his rightful destination. "The goal of education is the student himself, to form his mind and his character in such a way that he can

live his whole life, so far as possible, in a way that is consistent with the truth about himself as a human being created in the image and likeness of God.”[2] Further, in the words of Pope Benedict XVI, “the dignity of education lies in fostering the true perfection and happiness of those to be educated.”

The focus, then, is not solely on the facts, skills, or even truths to be imparted. Equally, if not more, important is the development of the child’s God-given capacity to observe, to wonder, to discover, to attend, to listen, to remember, to speculate, to calculate, to communicate, to reason, to contemplate, etc., and especially to love. These are the habits of lifelong learning and growth. Properly understood, teaching is not the act of pouring facts into empty vessels. As most students of the past 50 years can attest, this practice results in fleeting knowledge held in short-term memory. It dulls the intellect and dampens the soul. A true Christian anthropology demands more than the dominant industrial model permits.

Over the past century, as the pragmatism of the early 20th-century philosopher John Dewey has come to govern schools, consideration of the nature and purpose of both teacher and student has been suppressed. Consequently, the most fundamental aspects of human learning and human longing have been largely rejected. The crisis of industrialized education—and its dangers for Catholic schools—has been captured succinctly by Dr. Michael Hanby, one author of the *St. Jerome Educational Plan*: “The deeper problem is not how little the average (college) freshman knows, but how listless he is about his ignorance.”

Listlessness. Apathy. Indifference. These are tragic traits, and yet they are the inevitable result of content and pedagogy that ignore the nature of reality, of the human person, and of God. “Man by nature desires to know,” Aristotle observed millennia ago. That fact is confirmed daily in the chirping of any four-year-old’s endless questions. St. Augustine would later share the true end of our natural hunger for truth: “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee.” The intellect, the memory, the will, and the spiritual life are entwined. Therefore, education that contributes to indifference impedes the soul’s upward ascent to God.

The Holy See’s Teaching on Catholic Schools, a small booklet by the former Secretary for the Congregation for Catholic Education, Archbishop J. Michael Miller, CSB, distills key elements of the Church’s teaching on education since Vatican II. It notes that all instruction “must be authentically Catholic in content and methodology [*pedagogy*] across the entire program of studies.”[3] The document does not, however, elucidate what this means in practice. What, in fact, is “Catholic math,” and how is it taught in second grade? What insight does faith have into history? How are teachers to instill “a passion for truth” that Pope Benedict XVI tells us defeats moral and cultural relativism?

For content to be authentically Catholic, it must be presented in a coherent, ordered way that invites a child to see that nothing in this world exists in meaningless isolation. Children are not bored by facts. They are bored by random, detached facts. A teacher’s task is to guide a child to grasp many small truths, from the simple to the complex, and to help weave them into the child’s growing understanding of reality and of its Divine mysteries. “For education to be complete, our knowledge of things must lead to the meaning behind those things and ultimately to their Creator. The goal of true education, then, is to be drawn into relationship with God who created the world and gave it meaning.” [4]

For pedagogy to be authentically Catholic, it must actively engage the child, stirring a lifelong quest for Truth, which is a Person. Teaching is not simply telling. A Christian anthropology recognizes that an educator has a sacred trust to nurture the human desire to know, and to cultivate the human faculties that help the child perceive—and love—truth, goodness, beauty, and the One. Among those faculties are the following:

Imitation

Modern education scorns imitation—copy work, dictation, recitation, retelling, rendering, and re-enacting—and prizes originality instead. But this is a rejection of human nature itself. Ancient and medieval thinkers recognized that imitation is the first step in all learning. Think of a baby learning to walk or speak. Think of the great masters of the Renaissance who learned first in the ateliers of other masters. Fundamentally, this is a theological concept: we are by nature imitators because we are made “in the Image.” It follows that we need excellent models to imitate in the spiritual, moral, intellectual, and physical life—saints, heroes, poets, mathematicians, great sportsmen, and the like.

A teacher leads a child to active discovery by embodying truths or ideas through concrete examples, such as the concept of heroic virtue in the lives of the martyrs or the distributive property of multiplication in a variety of problems. A student makes the connections and imitates that idea, grasping it in his own mind. Thus, the very form of teaching is theological: the embodiment or incarnation of each small truth or logos, all of which ultimately connect and point to the one Logos.

The very act of learning is the *imitation* or re-presentation of the fact, skill, or idea to be known. This means that a teacher must create that gap, that wonder, that desire to know, so that a student’s mind will actively grasp what is to be known.

Language and Number

Language is a gift given to human creatures alone. It is the primary means of thought and communication. Number is another kind of language that reveals concrete truths, such as the constancy of a simple sum like $2+2=4$, but also points to mystery, such as the concept of infinity. Number, in proportion and pattern, are elements of beauty itself.

The human mind masters language and number through the seven liberal arts, which were the time-tested ladder of learning for millennia, and part of the Catholic intellectual tradition. Over the past 50 years, however, this proven framework has been replaced by a government-led system of state standards that has resulted in fragmentation and disorder because it attempts to break learning down to an absurd degree of processes and skills that can be precisely measured. In its attempt to mechanize what naturally flows along the human path to wisdom, it turns teaching and learning into a bureaucratic chore rather than an inviting adventure. An *art* is a skill or craft that produces something else. St. Thomas said that the liberal arts produce the works of reason. They are the *tools of thinking* that liberate the mind to discover the truth of things, and they prepare us to contemplate the higher things—philosophy and theology. We do not simply study the liberal arts, we practice them in order to develop the ability to think well. They are the arts of language, or the Trivium (grammar, logic/dialectic, and rhetoric) and the arts of number, or the Quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy/physics).

Memory

Another misconception in modern education is in the role of memory. “Rote memorization” is routinely dismissed as ignoring comprehension. But a firm recall of basic building blocks, such as multiplication tables and parts of speech, are essential for the mastery of mathematics and communication. A wise teacher discerns the difference between the memorization of key fundamentals and the memorization of random facts that have not been woven in with other knowledge. The latter are parked only in short-term memory, to be forgotten after the test.

Furthermore, memory has a deep significance for human identity. Without memory, we do not know who we are. Any anthropologist knows that a culture does not survive without passing on its story.

Education is enculturation; it includes “learning by heart” the collective stories, poetry, and music that are handed down through tradition. But tradition stretches back to origins, and even the youngest students can begin to know the chronological tale of Salvation history and to see themselves within that dramatic story. True Catholic education includes an understanding of history that had a beginning, that had a pivotal point in the Incarnation, and will have an end. It includes the story of the Body of Christ on earth, the Pilgrim Church, with all of its achievements in natural science, art, architecture, music, philosophy, and theology, as well as its missteps.

Most important, without memory, we cannot worship; the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is an act of remembrance.

Imagination

The human capacity of imagination, too, is misunderstood in our time. It is prized as originality or creativity that springs from a blank slate. This, too, is mistaken. Real imagination is about how we “image” reality, how we envision the world. Is a loving God at the center of reality, calling us to our vocation? Or, is life a trail of pleasure and pain with no significant consequences? The imagination is naturally formed in childhood. Authentic Catholic education shapes the moral imagination through the study of rich literature, poetry, history, the lives of the Saints, and Scripture. It shapes a *sacramental* imagination through the power of the sacraments themselves, but also by cultivating a sensibility to the Divine order and presence in the world: “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). In addition, music, poetry, drama, dance, and storytelling connect truth with beauty and therefore feed the soul. As Stratford Caldecott noted about J.R.R. Tolkien: “Through story—the *right kind of* story—including traditional legends and fairy tales—[the]ability to see all things with a pure heart and in the light of heaven could be evoked.”[5]

Secular progressive education, by contrast, currently emphasizes the reading of informational texts. This emphasis is misguided, even for the limited goal of improved reading comprehension. Any student who is taught to master language and number can easily digest them in any form. A technocratic approach is dry dust for the soul.

Inquiry

If wisdom begins in wonder, then the art of teaching must prioritize this first step. Today’s norm is quite the opposite: teachers are often required to state the lesson’s objective on the board at the start. This is the equivalent of telling the punch line before the joke. Even those who escape such a directive succumb to the great temptation for a hurried teacher: to *tell* rather than to *show*. The cycle of lecture, notes, and testing squashes the spirit of inquiry. “All telling, explaining, or other acts of so-called teaching are useless except as they serve to excite and direct the pupil’s voluntary mental powers,” wrote 19th-century educator John Milton Gregory. “Use the pupil’s own mind, exciting his self-activities. Keep his thoughts as much as possible ahead of your expression, making him a discoverer of the truth.”[6]

How? The best teachers ask the best questions. In doing so, they arouse the student’s mind to contemplation in order to grasp the truth. They also offer a model to imitate of what it means to think, using patterns of questions drawn from philosophy and classical rhetoric. By contrast, a steady diet of pre-packaged answers stunts a child’s ability to develop the patience required to wrestle with serious inquiry.

The damage done extends beyond the life of the mind to the life of the soul. “The key to a Christian conception of studies is the realization that prayer consists of attention,” according to French philosopher and Christian mystic Simone Weil. Therefore, she posits, “the development of the faculty of

attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies.”[7] Attention is desire, she says. “The intelligence can only be led by desire. For there to be desire, there must be pleasure and joy in the work. The intelligence only grows and bears fruit in joy. The joy of learning is as indispensable in study as breathing is in running. Where it is lacking there are no real students, but only poor caricatures of apprentices who, at the end of their apprenticeship, will not even have a trade.”[8]

Integration

The underlying principle of Catholic liberal learning is the essential unity in all knowledge. The mind and soul seek the harmony that is found in truth, goodness, and beauty, which are all aspects of the One. A pedagogy that explores the wondrous connections between, for example, math and music, responds to the human longing for that harmony. Students delight in finding meaningful connections.

But unity is a spiritual concept; it cannot be derived in an arbitrary fashion. It can spring only from a human mind informed by those spiritual truths that are bound neither by space nor time. Unity can come only from religion; for it is the nature of religion to synthesize, to bring all human knowledge into an all-embracing unity—that intended and planned by Him Who came as Light and Life to make all things new in a fallen but redeemed world.

If [E]ducation is to be effective in helping to restore ordered human life according to God’s plan, there must be acknowledged unity in aim and activity. Divine truth must be, as it were, the central core providing inspiration, directing and controlling all intellectual endeavor. Thus, pupils will become not merely passive recipients of information, but active participants in a spiritual regeneration, seeing the world in God, and God in the world.[9]

Conclusion

The transformative power of authentically Catholic education depends not on curriculum, not on technology, not even upon richer content. It depends on the transformation of teachers, who are called to love and lead the young from wonder to wisdom—to the Truth that sets them free. In recent decades, however, all teacher training has been fundamentally secular. It has failed to inspire teachers with an integrated vision of reality and to equip them with the tools to lead children to their destination according to their nature and purpose.

As these educators are renewed in their vocations, they discover that “wonder signifies that the world is profounder, more all-embracing and mysterious than the logic of everyday reason had taught us to believe. The innermost meaning of wonder is fulfilled in a deepened sense of mystery. [10]

Out of wonder, comes joy, according to both Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas. Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper builds on that insight, adding that wonder and hope have the same structure, the same quality of “not yet knowing.” The renewal of authentic Catholic education can offer this gift of hope, leading children out of the parched landscape of apathy and indifference that arises from the factory model of education.

Elisabeth Sullivan serves as the Executive Director of The Institute for Catholic Liberal Education (ICLE), which is the only organization currently working to renew K-12 Catholic schools by reclaiming the Church's distinct, proven tradition in the unity of faith and reason. Through the Institute's many programs, services, conferences, retreats, and publications, it immerses educators in the philosophy, the content, and the tools of teaching and learning that transform their communities by leading them to a deeper encounter with Truth.