

New Beginnings
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The so-called dark Middle Ages were not as dark as skeptics would have you believe. In the late second century, Cyril of Alexandria established a catechetical school in Egypt, the first of its kind. In addition to theology and philosophy, its curriculum included science, mathematics, logic, Greek and Roman literature, and the arts. The best and brightest educators were invited to teach there. It was the Church that established universities and centers of learning that attracted prominent scholars to lecture there.

Early in this country's history, the Franciscan and Dominican friars sought to evangelize those whom they found in native America. In colonial days when the anti-Catholic bias was actively in play, there were no schools to serve Catholics who had transplanted themselves to a new country. Today, the Church teaches three million students a day in more than 250 colleges and universities, in its more than 1200 high schools, and its more than 5,000 elementary schools.

Despite the rising costs of Catholic education, studies consistently find that Catholic-school students do better than their public-school counterparts in reading, writing, verbal skills, and mathematics that call for greater focus. The success in low drop-out rates is owed in large part to the cooperation among educators, administrators, and families of students; however, education in art and music remains a pressing need, for children learn to express themselves with creative discipline through the arts.

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Last Sunday during his homily, the celebrant regaled the congregants with one boy's reaction to new beginnings. As a recent graduate of kindergarten, he asked his father what came

next, now that he had graduated with honors. At his Dad's reply, he quipped in utter disbelief, "I thought I was done with school!"

At the beginning of this academic year, every student, whether in a school overtly Catholic or in a public or charter school, is called on again to grapple with perennial questions of life. How shall I live? What gives meaning to my life? Why do I go to school? To get a degree, earn a fine name, a fine position? Then, what? In non-sectarian schools, these questions are only implied lest they be interpreted as religiously-motivated. Additional questions confront teachers: Why have I chosen the profession of teaching? Is it a job? Or, is it a vocation with the splendid responsibility of forming human beings in the best way I know? One answer is that our students are temples of God, unfinished symphonies, gardens of budding flowers? Aren't they God's works of art in-the-making even when they misbehave?

Education: Quality and Non-Quality

America has some superb schools, public and private, but the dominant tendency leans toward non-quality, applying to intent and effort. We settle for less when we should be aiming for more. Too many students cannot and do not read. They cannot spell, speak, or write correctly much less do them well, a fact that lends credibility to Henry Higgins' remark about the use of English in this country: "In America, they haven't used it in years!"

According to Barbara Tuchman, the cultural historian, "quality is the investment of the best skill and effort possible to produce the finest and most admirable result possible. Quality is achieving or reaching for the highest standard as against the sloppy or fraudulent. It is honesty of purpose as against catering to cheap or sensational sentiment. It does not allow compromise with the second rate. . . . Quality can be attained without genius."

General Malaise

A prevailing attitude has seeped in to both teaching and learning. Learning must be fun; students must be allowed to study what they like. Consequently, young children and high school students fail to value disciplined study. Why bother? Though quality is not elitism, fewer are opting for more quality.

Overview of Catholic Education

There is such a thing as a Catholic sensibility, a Catholic way of thinking, a Catholic way of doing things, a Catholic ‘brand,’ a Catholic style. Though Catholic education shares many insights and methods with other educational systems, it rejects any ideology that sacrifices eternal values to temporal or harmful realities. Ideally, Catholic educators form affective and effective disciples of the Lord.

Having internalized Catholic principles, our Catholic students are expected to defend the faith, if necessary. They will take an active part in shaping the important issues of life. To fail in this vision is to offer an incomplete Catholic education. Today as in the past, our students who belong to other faith-traditions greatly respect the Catholic vision, or they would not come to be educated there.

Jesus the Model Teacher

Jesus was most often seen as a teacher who gave his disciples the mandate to go out to teach (Mt 28:19-20). In the film, “Son of God,” produced by Mark and Roma Downey, Jesus and his disciples are discussing the future and their mission. Peter asks, “What are we going to do?” “We’re going to change the world,’ comes the Master’s quip, unapologetically. ‘We can and must do it—now. There is no other time to do it because the present moment is all we have.’

The Catholic Educator

The Catholic educator is catholic and Catholic to the core. This assertion calls for some explanation. First, God gives to the world beauty of life and the ability to wonder at created things. Second, all of us can find God emerging “in ten thousand places” from the heart of a suffering world. Our providential God is not only present in our lives but at work there as well; good can emerge from life’s harsh realities.

The anchoress, Sr. Wendy continues to amaze her audiences by eliciting Christian themes from art works deemed controversial, or worse, pornographic. Here the Catholic educator can draw lessons from the culture and see it in the light of the Gospel. Nothing is finally secular. Such is the finding of God in all things—catholic to the core—with a theocentric view of life.

Third, through creation and the Incarnation, all matter comes from God. Jesus Christ, as the bridge between God and man, embraced all that is human so that it might be returned to God: Catholic education is Christocentric. The personal encounter with Christ in prayer is fostered among our students through sacramental and other spiritual activities. They come to see that the human is intrinsically sacred and Catholic to the core. Finally, our faith-tradition calls us to “walk in beauty” and “to keep all our goings graces” by making “the future all ablaze with God springing up everywhere.”

There is no more exhilarating experience than to delight in a creative, witty, and enthusiastic educator who is consistently well prepared for the sacred mission of education. There is nothing more wonderful than to delight in a Catholic educator who consistently inspires their students with the highest ideals by which to live, often quoting Classics of literature and poetry to reinforce a lesson. For the child or youth, this wonderful person is a living thesaurus of knowledge and wisdom. This educator stands in the place of Christ who knew all about bringing light to others. This inspiration comes from within the educator who has learned the art of self-

discipline, the art of refinement, and the art of communicating the love of learning to his or her charges. Prayer inspires such inspiration.

Most of us know the pain of sitting in a class conducted by teachers who were unprepared, uninterested, bored, and boring. *Nemo dat quod non habet*, and students are quick to spot those “who can’t give what they haven’t got.”

“I Gotta Be Me”

In the late Sixties, Sammy Davis Jr. popularized the song, “I Gotta Be Me.” The title reinforced what had already become a rallying cry for, and defense of, liberal individuality, especially among college-age students. In the fourth century, St. Gregory of Nyssa anticipated these lyrics with unapologetic wisdom in his *Life of Moses*: “I have to become me, and that me has to become God. When I am not like God, I am not me. I have to let the real me shine through.” Catholic education is

“charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil. . . .”
(Gerard Manley Hopkins)