

What Catholic Education Is

By

Steve Terenzio

G.K. Chesterton once observed that the problem with modern education is that it begins with the modern world; therefore it starts at the wrong end:

[Schools have] the responsibility for affirming the truth of our human tradition and handing it on with a voice of authority, an unshaken voice. That is the one eternal education; to be sure enough that something is true that you dare tell it to a child. From this high audacious duty the moderns are fleeing on every side.

Opposed to this modern view is a classical education where the masters of the ages take pride of place – “the best that has been thought and said,” in the words of Matthew Arnold. An education in the great literary, artistic, scientific, and spiritual achievements of Western Civilization forms the core of the curriculum – the great ideas and the great books that offer the true, the good, and the beautiful.

In a truly classical primary or secondary school, instruction centers on what the ancients identified as the *trivium*. Simply put, this refers to the three stages of learning a student travels through from childhood to a young adult. The first of these stages is *grammar*, or the learning of concrete facts through observation and memorization. The second stage is *logic*, i.e., the use of reason to understand the ‘why’ of what has been learned. The third state is *rhetoric* – the oral and written expression of knowledge. The student in a classical school, therefore, is more than a passive receptacle of information, but rather thinks analytically, communicates those thoughts, and makes new and specific applications with them.

From the foregoing, it should be apparent that a truly classical education is one that is teacher directed. The teacher in the classroom cannot be replaced with the latest technology or “student directed” initiative. As Fulton J. Sheen expressed it, a student can only give what he already possesses, and if like a flower he is uprooted before maturity, we risk placing him in new soil that is presently too rich. However, as the student’s education advances, his active role must increase accordingly, to use a biblical illusion, while the role of the teacher decreases.

Yet, the essence of a classical school is even more than that. Prior in dignity, if subsequent in historical chronology, is the Catholic Faith, without which a truly classical education is missing its prime component. Blessed John Henry Newman affirmed that “Christianity, and nothing short of it, must be made the element and principle of all education.” An authentic Catholic education, therefore, places grace before nature and integrates the Faith across the curriculum such that it permeates all areas of the school’s life. Far from making each of the profane subjects a branch of theology, as viewed in the light of the Faith, each discipline is thereby elevated to its proper state. For the same God who redeemed us, instructed us in the life of the Gospel, and gave us the sacraments for our sanctification, also ordained the order in our number system, created the earth and sky to which we may apply the scientific method, and infused an immortal soul into the geniuses of music, literature, art, and philosophy.

These days one often hears about educating the “whole child,” but this can only be done in its fullest sense by incorporating the cerebral with the active, the supernatural with the natural, the divine with the human; in short, a thoroughly classical, Catholic education.

Steven Terenzio is former headmaster of Montfort Academy in New York and has taught high school and middle school for more than 30 years. He also has written for Chronicles and The Latin Mass magazines.