

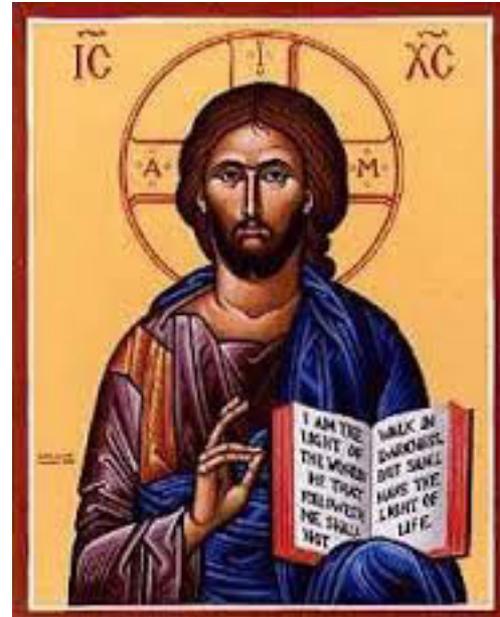
Beyond the Test

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THE CATHOLIC INTELLECTUAL TRADITION, REDISCOVERED

Sometimes the most obvious solutions are the ones that are most easily overlooked.

As Catholic schools strive to deepen their identity in the faith, provide excellent academics, and maintain enrollment on a shoestring budget, many find it increasingly difficult to compete with public and charter schools. Some parents are unwilling or unable to pay tuition for religion class and uniforms, with more modest infrastructure and activities, when most of the curriculum is often identical to what they can get elsewhere for the price of their tax bill.



A growing number of Catholic elementary schools and high schools, however, are leading a stunning renewal by probing the most basic identity questions: What should be distinctive about Catholic education? How does our own intellectual tradition offer the solution to the failures of modern education? Why would we imitate any approach that fails to see that every child is made in the image and likeness of God, is called to holiness, and is destined to live with Him forever?

The answers to these questions have deep implications for every aspect of teaching and learning, from the books, the tests, and the homework, to the daily activities in every classroom. The answers to these questions, most importantly, also have deep implications for the formation of the soul of every child.

Schools that have discovered the great heritage of the Catholic intellectual tradition have seen it transform their communities, quickly and comprehensively. Teachers have seen their vocation in a new light. Parents have seen that the joy, the sense of wonder, and the growing faith of their children are worth the sacrifices that make this foundation possible. (See accompanying story.) Ironically, this restored vision of Catholic education began largely out of necessity among homeschoolers, fledgling independent schools, and struggling parish schools, but now these efforts at the margins hold great promise for all Catholic educators.



What these schools have in common is a determination to embrace *The Holy See's Teaching on Catholic Schools*, as summarized by Archbishop J. Michael Miller in his 2006 document. They have answered this call with a fuller understanding of what the traditional or classical liberal arts mean at every grade level, including both content and methods of instruction. Some, but not all, summarize their approach by the term "classical school." While they have not rejected everything that can be found in a modern classroom, they set themselves apart with

certain core elements:

1. The Truth revealed in Jesus Christ permeates not only the spiritual life of the school but also its academic life. Faith and reason are connected. Truth, goodness, and beauty are explored throughout every subject, as reflections of the Divine in the created world. These transcendentals and other themes (virtue, order, harmony, freedom, justice, etc.) help connect all learning, in stark contrast to the fragmentation of modern education, which presents isolated facts disconnected from meaning.
2. History is taught not as a series of names and dates, but a compelling story of man's relationship to God. Students see themselves within this story. Events and ideas are taught chronologically from the ancient world to the modern era, with the Incarnation seen as the central event in human history. The relationship between Christianity and Western Civilization is given close attention. Primary sources are used as much as possible.
3. The power of narrative is understood as vital to the development of a child's moral and spiritual imagination. Traditional and classical literature is read carefully, from myths, fables, and saint stories for younger students, to Aristotle, Aquinas, Dante, and Shakespeare for older students. Works are not simply dissected into literary elements, but probed for insights and life lessons in the pursuit of virtue. Students learn by heart memorable passages and poems that deepen their appreciation and boost their rhetorical skills.
4. Mathematics and science are understood to reveal order, harmony, and mystery in the world. Careful study promotes habits of learning that improve a child's ability to attend, to reason, and to perceive reality.
5. The mastery of language is valued because it is the means of logical thinking. Teaching styles emphasize questions, discussions, debates, and writing, which help children develop their thoughts and refine their expression. Assignments and assessments rely on essay writing and public speaking instead of multiple-choice and short answer questions that test only memory, not understanding.
6. Latin is often taught, for a variety of reasons. Latin contains the roots of more than half of all English words, it forms the base of several Romance languages, and its structure promotes ordered thinking, more akin to learning algebra than a language. Latin opens up the world of classical literature and the language of the Church.

Countless examples of the Catholic Church's embrace of the classical liberal arts can be found throughout history, from the Benedictine monasteries to the Medieval universities to the Jesuit's Ratio Studiorum. Training in the seven liberal arts of language and mathematics (the classically-known Trivium and Quadrivium) developed the habits of mind that would last a lifetime, and would allow a person to contemplate the higher truths. For thousands of years, this education was valued as the path to make a man free (Latin, libera), free from manipulation, free to be the best man he could be, free to understand and live a fully human life. Some of the most insightful minds in history were formed in this way. In the Church, a classical liberal arts education ultimately pointed toward the imitation of Christ.



A century ago, progressive philosophies of education began to sever faith from reason. The deepest questions of human existence that had been central to learning since the time of the Ancient Greeks were squeezed out of education. Eventually, even Catholic schools began to adopt curricula, textbooks, and styles of teaching that pushed aside the love for wisdom and passion for truth that had been the hallmark of the Church's intellectual tradition. Secular educational approaches cannot offer a vision that unites faith, reason, and love. To the contrary, secular education undermines the search for meaning and truth.

Faced with financial and identity crises, a number of independent and even diocesan Catholic schools have discovered that the solution has been right in front of them. They are leading a renewal by reclaiming their own tradition, instead of imitating a system of education that fails to truly educate or inspire young people because it leaves out what is most important in a human life.

by Elisabeth Sullivan