

CULTURE OF LIFE

Classical Education Makes a Comeback

Schools Show New Interest in Traditional Curriculum

BY Susan Klemmond

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Seeking to pass on the wisdom of Western civilization, which was founded on Christian principles, a grassroots movement of parents, educators and others is reviving classical education in the Catholic tradition.

Often developing their own curricula, classical education supporters across the country are opening new schools or transforming existing schools into independent and diocesan classical academies where students may read Plato and Aristotle, study Latin and examine the traditions of Western culture.

In some cases, the result has been higher test scores, growing enrollment and interest from other schools and groups who want to copy these models or use the curricula.

Centered on Christ

Supported by home-schooling parents and others concerned about the quality and direction of both public and Catholic education, classical education tries to form and develop students' natural capacities for understanding and action and ground them in moral, intellectual and theological virtues. Classical education focuses on the trivium of grammar, logic and rhetoric and the quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. It also includes the study of the liberal arts (literature, poetry, drama, philosophy, history, art and languages). It emphasizes teaching young people to think by studying the classics through a Christ-centered program, according to Andrew Seeley, executive director of the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education, in Ventura, Calif., which promotes authentic Catholic education.

"When I've spoken to groups around the country, there is a hunger for this," said Dale Ahlquist, co-founder and board member of Chesterton Academy, a classical school in Edina, Minn., near Minneapolis.

"Parents really care about their kids' education, as well they should, and when they see that we are teaching the faith in a really coherent and cohesive way — where it informs everything that we're teaching and that we're doing it in an affordable way — they get very excited. They say, 'This is exactly what we've been looking for.'"

Classical education emphasizes what is true, good and beautiful — transcendentals used in the Catholic Church to describe God, Seeley said. Classical education aims to teach students to think and how to reason through reading, lecture and often the Socratic method of group discussion.

Starting in kindergarten, students at St. Jerome Academy in Hyattsville, Md., learn the principles of Western civilization, from ancient Egyptian history through American history, with Christ at the center.

"It's coming to understand that it was the Church that has carried forward the good of those cultures, while Christianizing those things that were not so good," said Mary Pat Donoghue, the school's principal. "I think, for our kids, both as Americans and Catholics, this is their birthright."

What classical schools in the Catholic tradition have in common is a Catholic identity that informs the whole curriculum and environment, Seeley said. "A Christ-illuminated understanding of what the human person is in all our capacities" is the goal, he said, plus, "how an encounter with Christ and Christian civilization fulfills and develops students in all those capacities."

Chesterton Academy offers an integrated approach, said Tom Bengtson, another co-founder of the Minnesota school. "It isn't as though everything is taught in silos, separate from each other. It truly is centered around one thing, which is the Incarnation, and it all works together."

Christ-centered classical education prepares students to defend their faith, Ahlquist added.

"We want people to be able to stand up and defend the faith in a public way with confidence and with a certain artistic ability to articulate," he said. "Everything we do at school directs them towards that. We want them to live happy lives, but we also want them to be (Catholic) warriors, defending the Catholic faith."

Pioneering Coursework

Depending on students' ages and stages of learning, classical education focuses on grammar, logic and rhetoric.

Both private and diocesan schools are developing their own curricula, drawing on the expertise of their faculties, as well as parents and parishioners who are themselves college and university faculty members. While there is no effort to write a national curriculum, some schools are offering their classical curricula and textbooks to other schools around the country.

"We know our goals, and then we learn and try to adapt what we have to fit our goals," Seeley said. "The movement has not waited for someone to do a research project and somebody to lay the whole thing out and hand it to us. The movement has had the spirit to pursue what's good in education and adapt. It's a very pioneering spirit."

Godly Aim

Unlike classical education, secular education doesn't have concern for man's spirituality or dignity as its goal, Seeley said, as evidenced by the Common Core State Standards being adopted by public and some Catholic schools; Common Core includes a set of standards for mathematics and English language arts/literacy that emphasize preparing students for college and careers, some say, through test taking.

The Common Core teaches to the test rather than for the soul, Ahlquist said. According to Donoghue, "While it may achieve some goal of consistency, in a lot of cases, it results in the lowering of standards across the board."

Common Core will change in the coming years as the standards are debated and revised, but Michael Van Hecke, headmaster of St. Augustine Academy in Ventura, Calif., believes that, because of the soundness of his school's classical education, his students will be able to think their way through such tests.

"We don't want our children to aim for college and a career. We want them to aim for the good life," said Van Hecke, who is also the founder and president of the Institute for Catholic Liberal Education. "Do you think our Founding Fathers (just) aimed for college and career? If they would have done that, we wouldn't have America."

Diocesan Schools

Nationwide, there are 12 diocesan classical schools, and the number is expected to grow in the next five years, Seeley said.

St. Jerome is a K-8 school with 300 students in the Archdiocese of Washington; it adopted a classical program in 2010 as part of the parish community's effort to save the failing school, Donoghue said.

The move has been successful; last year, the school added a Montessori preschool as preparation for the classical program.

"I was praying that we could keep the school going," Donoghue said. "I believed that this program was the best thing I had ever seen. It has been successful beyond my imagination."

St. Augustine Academy, a K-12 classical school with 150 students, began as a private school in 1994 and was asked to become a diocesan school in the Archdiocese of Los Angeles in 2012, Van Hecke said.

Chesterton Model

Chesterton Academy, a high school, was started by a group of parents in 2008 and opened its doors to 11 students.

G.K. Chesterton was chosen as the school's patron because the 20th-century writer and Catholic convert is considered by many to be a model of a complete thinker — and that's what the school hopes every student will

become, Ahlquist said. This fall, the flagship school is enrolling 140. In addition, three new Chesterton schools will open, and another will use its curriculum.

The Minneapolis-area school is not part of the Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis, although it maintains good relationships with archdiocesan officials, Bengtson said.

Three Chesterton private schools, which have licensed the Chesterton Academy name and logo, will open this fall in Buffalo and Rochester, N.Y., as well as in the Chicago area.

Another Chesterton classical school, not connected to the Minnesota school, was also founded in 2008, in San Benedetto del Tronto, Italy.

The Buffalo, N.Y., Chesterton Academy will welcome 28 students this September. "There's an enormous amount of interest," said founder and headmaster Deacon Mike McKeating. "My phone is ringing off the hook."

McKeating said he prefers to be an independent school in the Catholic tradition, as his bishop defined it, than become a diocesan school. The school is leasing a former diocesan school building.

Roy Postel, co-founder of the Chesterton Academy in the Chicago suburb of Highland Park, said he has the "full acknowledgement and encouragement" of Chicago bishops, but the school will remain a private school governed by parents. His first freshman class of four students will study in a repurposed Catholic parish school.

Keeping tuition low at the Minneapolis Chesterton Academy is a benefit for parents, but it has also meant giving up features found at other schools, Bengtson said.

"We're in a leased facility," he said. "You won't find a swimming pool or hockey rink or some of the other accoutrements of other schools, but we do have what we think we need. We have daily Mass; we have a dedicated staff; we have very involved parents."

Exciting Learning

Parents and students aren't the only ones gratified by the movement. Those who choose to teach in a classical program are energized by it, Seeley said. "It excites teachers who have a confidence in their own ability to know what they should be teaching," he said.

Students who've been schooled in classical material and thought are prepared in ways that other students aren't, Van Hecke said. "They've got something to hang onto. They've got a net and a ladder. When they fall, they land somewhat safely, and with the ladder, they can climb to [educational and reasoning] heights."

*Susan Klemond writes from
St. Paul, Minnesota.*