

The Culture of the Incarnation

If we are to compose a curriculum based on the central doctrine of the Incarnation, a curriculum for the culture of life, let us begin by defining the concepts of curriculum and of culture. A curriculum is just a plan of study. A plan of study that supports the culture of life is then our goal. But what is culture?

CULTURE

The word culture refers to the activity of bestowing labor and attention upon something in order to bring it into a fruitful relationship with one's self. Outside the self-revelation of God, the labor and attention given to a socially or personally conceptualized deity is simply called a cult. Labor and attention given to the land, making it fruitful, is called agri-culture. When we give our attention to God, the Creator of the material and therefore non-trivial universe, when we remember that He is the Author of life, which is therefore worthy to be lived attentively, and when we respond to His life-giving initiative of love, then we foster the Culture of Life.

The conglomerate of ideas which opposes the Culture of Life is sometimes called the culture of death. This is an apt name, but a kind of oxymoron, since it is not a way of life that nurtures anything; death is unfruitful. I call it the anti-culture because it is parasitic, able to subsist only upon the surrounding resources of the culture of life whilst gradually drying up and destroying that culture -- ever seeking to destroy, stunt, or in some way prevent the influence of those individuals who live and serve from its wellsprings.

OUR FAITH SHAPES OUR CURRICULUM

Our faith in the Incarnation leads us to believe that God desires and intends to enter into and bless the life of man as he lives on earth. Since God may bless only what is good, we ask, how shall we live to obtain this blessing? The single word for "how men live" is culture. God desires then, to enter into and bless that culture which is oriented to His Will.

To the Catholic Church in a unique and profound manner, God has entrusted the revelation of his Life and Will, so we are really asking how culture is formed by Catholic faith.

In our own time, and as the surrounding culture has entered into ever more serious pathways of death, authentic Catholicism has increasingly come to speak of culture which responds to God as "the Culture of Life". Upon reflection, it hardly seems there could be any other culture, for how could a culture of death tell anyone how to live? Indeed, it cannot; it can only offer survival rules for those who have not yet lost the natural taste for life.

But what of the positive culture? How is the Culture of Life to be maintained?

Education is the social means of maintaining and propagating culture. That is the specific purpose of education and the general end of each discipline. The maintenance of the Culture of Life depends on our wisdom in constructing a curriculum which is definitively based upon the Incarnation so that at every point, it unfolds for the student an awareness of God and of the invitation to respond to Him. Such an education will serve in every way to nurture the Culture of Life.

The mystery of the Incarnation itself rests upon an orderly sense of Creation, for it is into His own work that God enters in the Incarnation. How could He enter into anything less? Thus, the curriculum of the Culture of Life takes daily sustenance from the principle that the Divine life can be so fully united to human life that it was possible for God first to create and then to become Man. It follows from this Incarnational principle that every aspect of humanity must be given its full due as an opportunity to live within God's divine life, -- in grace -- as He has invited us. Therefore, education for the culture of life means comprehensive interior formation oriented to the fullness of human life, and ordered throughout by the concept and confidence of the Incarnation.

While the mystery of the Incarnation rests upon the mystery of Creation, it is completed in the mystery of the Cross. It must be so, for otherwise the sorrows and the chaos of sin become an occa-

sion to doubt the goodness of God and then of life. On the Cross, Jesus both opened up and showed us the way through the death-shadowed valley of our sinful situation -- through our personally sinful lives and through the culture of death that surrounds and discourages us -- into perfect life and love.

Traditional Catholic curriculum directly serves Catholic faith by the inclusion of Catholic theology and philosophy, by presenting the Catholic perspective on historical events that involve the Church or the saints, and by including Catholic authors in its literature courses. But Catholicism is a deeper and greater reality, a more profound invitation, than merely a human organization with a self-centered perspective; Catholicism is universal truth. Therefore the love of truth may pervade the Catholic curriculum in deeper ways. This is the theme we need to explore.

TEN FIELDS OF LEARNING

In constructing a curriculum, we are immediately faced with such a multitude of "subjects" and curriculum strands that the confusion is almost overwhelming. What then? Do we wish for the days when the grade school teacher had a volume the size of Merck's Manual listing every detail of every subject she was to cover, year by year? The clarity of such an approach is attractive, but it lacks flexibility, and its vision is buried in its details. This is what I call the Mole Run approach to curriculum, and it serves a good purpose to the extent of the run-maker's wisdom, but even the best mole run changes over time; so somebody must periodically take up the eagle's eye view to prevent the well-meant multiplication of needless corridors, and the well-intended maintenance of useless corridors, but above all the massive confusion of innumerable corridors.

There needs to be a simpler way based on the nature of man and on his transcendental vocation.

Just ten fields of study frame the nature of education, its foundations, its tools, its encounter with the world, and its unity.

1-3 The first three are the foundations of the Culture of Life: theology, philosophy, and Christian

anthropology.

- a) Theology addresses the nature of God, on whom we rely for life and for the confidence we have in all forms of knowledge and in every endeavor of man.
- b) Philosophy addresses the nature of knowledge itself and of reason, and the resulting confidence we have in the possibility of finding truth in any field.
- c) Christian anthropology, or psychology addresses the nature of man, for our nature certainly governs the direction our studies should take. The secular culture, now dipping into a culture of death, calls this study psychology, but, being uncertain of the nature of the soul, is gradually losing its grip on the meaning of the enterprise.

4 The fourth essential field of education is language studies and literature, for reading and writing are precisely what permits education to go farther than the smartest man alive; the breadth -- in terms of the proportion of literate persons -- and the depth of literacy determine cultural progress. Cultural quality depends on faith and reason; therefore theology and philosophy come first, but cultural progress utterly depends upon literacy and learning.

5-10 Given the foundations and the primary tool of progress, the three paired pillars of a well constructed education are as follows:

- a) Math and science pointing to truth.
 - i) The discipline of abstraction, of numeracy, and of the recognition of pattern.
 - ii) The mastery of the material world, which is as it is and whereby the mind is disciplined to encounter a reality outside itself, one that reveals itself to careful observation, measurement, and math.
- b) Civics and history, pointing to goodness.
 - i) The study of right government, of subsidiarity, of constructing society in relationship to the true nature and

destiny of man.

- ii) The study of the rise and fall of culture over time and of the individuals who serve culture.
- c) Art and music pointing to beauty.
 - i) The study and development of the material expression of beauty.
 - ii) The expression of beauty in voice and its echo in artistic compositions of sound and tempo. Music uniquely associates the works of heart and mind and the movement of the Spirit of God. It is both an art and a mathematical expression, a movement of the Spirit and a bodily action. It is the vessel of poetry and the other half of prayer.

HOW THESE ARE COMPREHENSIVE

These ten fields cover the interior life of man, both in himself and in relation to God; they cover the exterior life of man, both in relation to other men and in relation to the material world, both immediately and over time; and they include the two principal tools of culture – words and music.

There are a thousand topics of study open to every student, and each person is called to approach God, and therefore to enter into culture, in a particular way. Therefore the same education will strike two people very differently and the detailed interests that each student freely pursues will differ. Education cannot be properly constructed without offering each student a genuine realm of freedom to pursue personal interests. Just as it would be a poor mother who demanded that every child take up each of the interests of her first born, and in the same order, it will be a poor education that cannot accommodate the individuality of the students.

Thus one student may go deeply into math while another learns five languages. One may take Australasian history as his principal interest and another astrophysics. One may take great care with his penmanship, while another can hardly be persuaded to write a legible signature. Some of these differences will come about because students are different;

some will arise because teachers are different. Some can be readily amended; some set in stubbornly. Above all, some matter and some do not.

But these ten disciplines are foundational and not optional. The decision to bypass one of these – to say, “I am not a philosopher; I only study what I can see,” or “Science does not matter to me because it is merely external, and I care about the interior life,” or “History is a dead subject; I do not care about the past,” or “I am an artist; mathematics interferes with my creativity” – such a decision would result, not merely in an idiosyncratic education, but in an incomplete education. It would be a decision not to enter fully into the intellectual formation necessary to shape and contribute to a full and living culture. The following essay is my argument for that claim.

Key to this argument is the claim that there are right and wrong ways to approach each discipline. If someone believes that one of these ten disciplines is trivial and optional, it may be due to the experience of a wrong -- and thereby a trivializing -- approach. But the vitality of the Culture of Life depends on a common education in the fullness of culture, which depends in turn on a right and full approach to education.

LET US BEGIN:

On this basis, let us ask: What is education? Let us begin with a discussion of the philosophy of education from the perspective of the culture of life and the perspective of the anti-culture. Then we will discuss each of the ten disciplines, always showing how the culture of life approaches that discipline and how the anti-culture distorts it, making it unattractive and unfruitful.