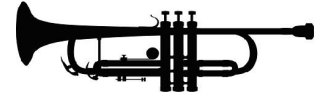


The Clarion



Sounding the Call for Educational Excellence

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Disciplining the Intellect: A Matter of the Heart

In the first issue of The Clarion, Mr. Evans discussed the importance of three truths of education—viz. education is enculturation, classical education is hard work, and the goal of education is to train up virtuous men and women who love and serve Christ. The second issue discussed the clarification of our mission as a school community, refocusing our attention on the importance of our common purpose. Both discussed important “first things” which define our school community and fuel our desire to raise our children to be Christ imitators in viewing the world, in seeking wisdom, in pursuing holiness, and in disciplining the habits. It is upon this last point that Scott R. Forrester builds in this third issue.

One of the things which binds our community is our mutual acknowledgement of the importance of what is traditionally called liberal education, which has as its goal not merely vocational security or financial success but freedom of the soul. Modern education “neither encourages reflection nor inspires reverence for the good.” It is incomplete and, as Richard Weaver put it in his seminal *Ideas Have Consequences*, “develops only part of a man; a man partially developed is deformed.”¹

On the other hand, liberal education such as we strive to provide at Providence has as its goal the creation of a true human being. A student who has read and contemplated what great minds of the past have written, who has worked hard to attain the fruits of wisdom and who continues his pursuit of humanity as a life-long journey, is indeed more fully human than his contemporaries. He is more reflective, more compassionate, more selfless, more independent. He is, in short, truly free. Free to show courage “to fight for the good [and] to accept loss and injuries for the sake of truth and justice.” Free to practice “temperance which protects him from the self-destruction of pleasure-seeking.” Free to show “himself prudent by rejecting a vision of reality based on his own desires.”² He is able to think and act for himself supported by the wisdom of the ages.

As Christians we know that to be fully human is to be like Christ, the one true Man. We are not only to cultivate the virtues of temperance, prudence, courage, and justice, but to exercise the greatest virtues of faith, hope, and charity. If we are to be like Christ, we must imitate Him and this means making education a priority for ourselves and our children, striving to make ourselves in temporal reality what we are in the eyes of God in eternity—viz. saints. We will not wholly succeed, of course. The very best of us will not come near perfection by a long shot, but the trying is all important. As Weaver puts it, “If the primary need of man is to perfect his spiritual being and prepare for immortality, then the education of the mind and passions will take precedence over all else.”³

In taking up the challenge of liberal education, we face three primary cultural barriers, proclivities of our age which if succumbed to will put an end to our hopes of engendering true humanity. First, we live in an entitlement culture. As a 21st century American, I am tempted daily to believe that I actually *do* “deserve a break today,” that “I’m worth it,” that it is, in fact, *my* world. I am tempted to believe that I have a right to the benefits of education whether or not I have put in the work which brings them about, to think that I ought to get an “A” for effort, to claim that free time is my right, instead of acknowledging that the ability to sustain life at all is a blessing from God.

Second, we live in an entertainment culture which believes that education, like everything else in life, ought to be fun. If it’s not fun, it’s not worth doing for who would ever choose to do something which is not enjoyable? The competition education faces here is, of course, TV, movies, the mall, vacation, sleep, social activities—all good things as far as they go, perhaps, but the fact of the matter is we cannot expect true education or a “love of learning” to result in the midst of a continual devaluing (whether directly or indirectly) of the work which is intrinsic to it. We cannot stimulate mental vigor until we cultivate the

virtues of prudence and temperance, until we cease to sacrifice the future on the altar of the immediate.

However, this is difficult because we live in an enervated culture. America lacks mental vigor. We want the benefits of moral behavior without the difficulty of intellectual training. Harry Blamires, in his book *The Christian Mind*, warns of the dangers of discipline which seeks to bypass the intellect, and Thomas Aquinas reminds us that the “exercise of the moral virtues . . . is of great importance for the acquisition of knowledge.”⁴ However, in our modern thinking, we have divorced piety from intellect so that we do not recognize the irony (let alone the danger) of a man of great capability but poor character. The dichotomy is a false one: the discipline of the intellect and the training of the affections are inseparable.

What then are we to do? In light of the uphill battle we face in fighting the anti-educational spirit of the age, it seems there are three steps which can be taken to mitigate the cultural onslaught, to defend against the continual pressure to cave in to entitlement, entertainment, and enervation. First, we as a community must seek Truth with all our heart, soul, and mind. In all of life—whether at home or in school—we must make seeking Truth our first priority. It is the goal of our worship, devotion, and prayer; it must likewise be the object of our study. As teachers and parents we must truly be seekers, as well. We cannot expect our students to pursue what we follow after only reluctantly or half-heartedly. We must lead by exemplifying an appetite for Truth!

We must also work hard, making it clear by our example that hard work is not an evil to be avoided but a natural and beneficial good. We must teach by word and action that only labor earns the rewards of labor just as inevitably as laziness brings about its natural result. We must demonstrate that hard work is expected—that it is a fact of life in God’s universe and that excuses are unacceptable. We must remind our students that the truism that “nothing worth having comes easily” is indeed true.

Finally, we must cultivate true leisure in the midst of our urgent, fast-paced, agenda-driven society. We must not confuse busyness with true study. Both in school and at home, students need an atmosphere of calm, quietude, and reflection in which to study—an atmosphere without the distractions of entertainment, phone calls, the internet, or gadgets. The pursuit of

Truth requires reflection, patience, and care. A true student, whether teen or adult, cannot “multi-task” or hurry if he wants to truly learn. Our flurry of activity is the result of being task-oriented and schedule-driven; study requires peace and quiet, a mind fixed on eternity. It is easy to forget that it is who we are that goes with us to Paradise; our checklists and our cell phones do not. True leisure is not merely relaxation but meaningful, thoughtful liberty—“free time” put to the use of freeing the mind. It is a *condition* as well as a *goal* of education. Working in an atmosphere of calm and quiet helps to create within our souls an inner sense of rest and peacefulness which makes reflection and insight possible.

How then are we to begin? Consider replacing one hour of time normally spent watching television or at the computer with an hour of reading a book which will enable you to seek the Truth. Parents of secondary students may consider reading the book their student is reading in literature class and discussing it with the family at dinner. For those with younger children or who would like relevant guidance in thought and discussion of their reading, a helpful general introduction to reading the important works is *Introduction to the Classics*, by Os Guinness and Louise Cowan which provides insights from a Christian viewpoint. Similarly, Mortimer Adler has created an excellent program called *The Great Ideas* which constitutes a series of readings with questions for self-guided study which could also be undertaken by the family as whole or by a group of parents in order to discuss your reading with others—a highly recommended venture. (I’d love to be invited!)

Notes: ¹ Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), 56. ² Josef Pieper, *An Anthology*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 8-9. ³ Weaver, 49. ⁴ quoted in A.G. Sertillanges, *The Intellectual Life*. (CUA Press, 1987), 21.

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