

Classical Education: Beginning in Wonder, Ending in Wisdom

by Laura Berquist

Classical Education is the cultivation of wisdom and virtue by nourishing the soul on truth, goodness and beauty, so that, in Christ, the student is better able to know, glorify and enjoy God.

People who are in the tradition of classical education speak of it that way, that is, of being “in the tradition”. The tradition they are usually talking about is the tradition of Aristotle and St. Thomas. In this tradition education is understood to be of a certain sort and to have various parts which have an order among themselves. In St. Thomas’ commentary on Boethius’ *De Trinitate*, he speaks very clearly of this order.

“The seven liberal arts do not adequately divide theoretical philosophy; but, as Hugh of St. Victor says, seven arts are grouped together.... Because those who wanted to learn philosophy were first instructed in them. And the reason why they are divided into the trivium and the quadrivium is that ‘they are as it were paths (viae) introducing the lively mind to the secrets of philosophy.’”

Further on, St. Thomas says,

“We divide philosophy with respect to the final end or happiness, to which the whole of human life is directed. For, as Augustine says, following Varro, ‘There is no other reason for a man philosophizing except to be happy.’”

Now, the happiness of man has to do with the contemplation of the highest things, for, as St. Thomas goes on to say in the commentary, “divine science [theology] is by nature the first of all the sciences,” that is, all the sciences, and indeed, the whole of one’s life, are ordered to it. St. Thomas makes one further distinction. He says that

“...there are two kinds of theology. There is one that treats of divine things, not as the subject of the science but as the principles of the subject. This is the kind of theology pursued by the philosophers and that is also called metaphysics. There is another theology, however, that investigates divine things for their own sakes as the subject of the science. This is the theology taught in Sacred Scripture.”

St. Thomas points out that this is what St. Paul has in mind in the first epistle to the Corinthians. “So the things also that are of God no man knoweth, but the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of this world, but the Spirit that is of God, that we may understand.”

What are we going to understand? As I said, we are directed to happiness, and that happiness consists of the contemplation of the highest things. In 1971 I went to a brand new, very small, liberal arts college in Southern California. I’m from Minnesota and I was already registered to attend college there. My parents had read about Thomas Aquinas College, just starting that fall, in Russell Kirk’s column in *National Review*, and they were intrigued. All three of us went to visit the college.

At that point I didn’t know what Classical Education, Liberal Education, or the Liberal Arts were. But I found that my first quiz had an important result. Almost the first thing Dr. McArthur, the founding President, said to me was, “So, Laura, what is the best part of you?” (A test, I thought, *already*.) “My mind?” “That’s right,” Dr. McArthur replied. (Whew!) “And,” he went on to say,

"What is the best thing you can do with your mind?" (*Another* test question!) "Think about God?" I replied.

I don't know exactly where that reply came from, because, candidly, I wasn't in the habit of thinking much about God at that point in my life, but Dr. McArthur liked it. He said, slapping me on the back, "Good, good, good! And are you going to come here and do that with your mind?" I thought to myself, "Well, that's not what I had planned when I came here, but it *does* seem like the right thing to do." And I said aloud, "Sure!"

That was my introduction to Classical Education, for that is the education offered at Thomas Aquinas College, which I attended, graduated from, and to which I have sent six of my six children.

Though it was a rudimentary understanding of the point of education, and of life, it was true. In *In Librum de Causi Expositio* St. Thomas says it much better. He says,

"The ultimate happiness of man consists in his most excellent activity, and this belongs to his highest power, the intellect, in regard to the best intelligible object...Consequently, the ultimate happiness that man can have in this life must consist in the contemplation of the first causes [and *a fortiori* the first cause itself]; for the little that can be known about them is more lovable and excellent than everything that can be known about lesser things...and it is through the contemplation of this knowledge in us after the present life that man is made perfectly happy, according to the words of the Gospel: *This is eternal life, that they may know thee, the only true God.*"

So, the first point is that classical education is an education that uses the best part of a man, that faculty that distinguishes him from the lower animals, his mind, to think about the very highest things, and in thinking about them, and especially in thinking about Him, to become in some measure like them and most importantly, like Him.

The next point I would like to bring to your attention is one that was made forcibly to me by a college friend of one of my children. This young man, whom I will call John, had an engineering degree from a prestigious university. But he was starting again as a freshman in my oldest daughter's class at Thomas Aquinas College. I asked him why he was doing that.

He said that he had gone to the other school on a baseball scholarship, and that he had a clear, well defined plan for his life. He was using baseball as a ticket to college, and his college degree would be a ticket to a good paying job, and the job would enable him to buy a car and a house and generally live the good life. John said that there was only one time in college that he had ever questioned that plan, and that had only been a momentary question.

One evening, he said, he had a rather heated discussion with his roommate's friend about the purpose of going to school. John had explained his plan for life, and the roommate's friend said, "John, you've got it all wrong. You don't go to school to get a job. You go to school to get an education. You hope to get a job after school, but that is not the purpose of school."

Well, John said, that conversation gave him a pause, but only a momentary pause. As soon as he thought about it, he *knew* the roommate's friend was wrong. So, John went on to finish school, get his degree, get his job and car and start working on the house. At that point he said to himself, "There has got to be more to life than this." As he was thinking about it, he remembered the conversation he had had in college, and decided that the roommate's friend

had indeed had a point. John decided to go back to school, this time to get an education. That's how he wound up at Thomas Aquinas College.

It is not that John didn't know anything; he did. He had a very good, and very useful, practical education. When he decided to go back to school to "get an education", he wasn't saying that he hadn't learned anything up to that point. He was saying that he didn't have the kind of education that would tell him what life was about. His education up to that point had not given him a knowledge of the end of life, and thus it had not given him what he needed to know so that he could order his life.

Now, mind you, John was not a believer. (He became one at the college.) That makes a difference. A believer knows what life is about, even if what he does for a job is the most menial of occupations. My point is not that everyone must have a classical education, but that classical education is an education that allows one to order his life to the best and highest goods, because it gives one the principles in the light of which such an order is possible.

We are all aware that there is a difference between just knowing a fact and knowing the reason for the fact. One can know that bread rises without knowing why it rises, but if you both know that it rises and why it rises, you know it more perfectly. Classical education is an education that begins in wonder (Why does that bread rise?) and ends in wisdom, which means it ends in an understanding of the first causes of things. (The bread rises due to the release of gasses, and it does so for the sake of making the bread more palatable and digestible.)

Further, or additionally, classical education is properly called liberal education, because it is an education that frees. "Liberal" comes from the Latin "liberare" "to free". It is an education that is specifically human and it is such that the man who has it becomes free in acquiring it. Why? Because, in having it, he has acquired an understanding of the universal principles and causes of things, and a knowledge of the end of human life and the right order of human action with respect to that end. Thus, he has become a free man, for he has a knowledge of what is most worth knowing, and is able to direct his own life and the life of the community. He sees the ends to which life must be directed, and is thus able to order his actions, and to advise others to order their actions, to those ends.

So, we have made some very important points about classical education. It is an education that makes one free, able to direct his own life and the life of the community. It concerns itself with knowledge of the highest things, knowledge that is, therefore, desirable in itself. It will chiefly be concerned with God and divine things. It is ordered to contemplation. Where we want to go finally, then, in terms of education, is to wisdom. We want to know not only the facts, but the reasons for the facts. We want to think about the highest things, the noblest and the most interesting in themselves.

Now there is a very interesting point here. If the end or goal of classical education is the contemplation of the divine, then the goal of this education is identical with the goal of all men, that is, to know and love God.

I recently had occasion to look in the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas for information about how we are made in the image and likeness of God. What I found was very exciting. I urge you to read it. The section is in Q. 93 of the Prima Pars, Articles I and IV especially. The body of Article IV lays out the doctrine clearly and beautifully. St. Thomas says,

“...the image of God may be considered in man in three ways. First, inasmuch as man possesses a natural aptitude for understanding and loving God; and this aptitude consists in the very nature of the mind, which is common to all men [thus we are all made in God's image and likeness]. Secondly, inasmuch as man actually or habitually knows and loves God, though imperfectly; and this image consists in the conformity of grace. [So those of us who are actually knowing and loving God are more perfectly in His image and likeness.] Thirdly, inasmuch as man knows God actually and loves Him perfectly; and this image consists in the likeness of glory.....The first is found in all men, the second only in the just, the third only in the blessed.”

Since the end of anything is defined as that to which it is ordered, to which it tends, we can see that our end is God Himself, whom we will possess in glory, in the beatific vision, where we will know as we are known, instead of “through a glass darkly” as we now do. We will see Him face to face, and love Him as fully as we are capable of doing. Then we will have true wisdom, for we will see as God sees. In philosophical terms, we will have *propter quid* knowledge, knowledge of and through the cause, instead of *quia* knowledge, knowledge of the fact only.

Classical education, then, prepares us for heaven, and brings us as close to that as is possible here. It has the same end identically as the end of all men, the knowledge of the very highest object of truth, God Himself

It is important to see this, but it is also important to see that the achievement of the end involves not only the intellect, but the will. The moral virtues support the intellectual virtues, in many ways, but one clear way is that one must be disciplined and temperate to persevere in the pursuit of the true. It's not easy. It may not be hard in the way digging ditches is hard, but it has its own difficulties.

To successfully negotiate the road of classical education we are going to need the moral virtues. Generally speaking, a virtue is a good habit, but such habits are of two kinds. There are the intellectual virtues, which rectify the mind with respect to the truth, and are usually acquired by instruction and study, and the moral virtues, which are habits of choosing rightly, and are acquired by repeated right actions. Moral virtue, though, is what we are concerned about right now. Moral virtues, like temperance, docility, perseverance, obedience, self-discipline, faith and trust, compassion, friendship, courage, loyalty, responsibility, and honesty, are all needed by those who pursue the intellectual life.

Honesty is a good example of a moral virtue which is essential to the intellectual life. One has to care more about the truth than about oneself. One can't be thinking about how stupid he looks if he makes a mistake. In fact, we should all rejoice in mistakes, because seeing that you have made a mistake means you now know something true that you didn't before. Obedience, to the right authority, is also an aid to the intellectual life, since it saves one from having to figure out everything on his own. By reasoned obedience one participates in the knowledge and prudence of the one he is obedient to.

However, teaching the moral virtues is harder than teaching the intellectual virtues. We all know how to teach intellectual virtues or habits of thought, it's what we do each day in our classes. But the question of how to teach the moral virtues has occupied man as long as there have been men to think about it. The first question of Plato's *Meno* is this. Meno asks, “Can you tell me Socrates – is virtue something that can be taught? Or does it come by practice? Or is it neither teaching nor practice that gives it to a man but natural aptitude or something else?” The reason the question arises is because we all have the experience of knowing that something is

good and worth doing, and yet not doing it, or knowing that something is bad and shouldn't be done, and still doing it. In this matter knowing is clearly not enough.

Meno raises the question, and much of that dialogue is devoted to making the distinctions one needs to answer it. But Plato addresses the question in many other places as well, and one of my favorites is in the *Republic*. There he tells us that if the soul has in it good, true, beautiful, noble, and heroic images, it will become like those things. Additionally, since whatever is true is also beautiful, an appreciation of the beautiful prepares the way for an appreciation of the true. If children love the beautiful they will love the truth, as *truth*, when they are older. Thus, even in terms of intellectual formation, fostering the fine arts is important. Socrates, in the *Republic*, says

“And further, because omissions and the failure of beauty in things badly made or grown would be most quickly perceived by one who was properly educated in music ['music' here includes all the fine arts], and so, feeling distaste rightly, he would praise beautiful things and take delight in them and receive them into his soul to foster its growth and become himself beautiful and good. The ugly he would rightly disapprove of and hate while still young and yet unable to apprehend the reason, but when reason came the man thus nurtured would be the first to give her welcome, for by this affinity he would know her.”

We should foster in our children a love of the beautiful and true, and a corresponding distaste for what is ugly and false. Children's sense of beauty can be encouraged in many ways; including beautiful art and music regularly in our curricula is one way. Attention to such things will aid in the kind of intellectual formation that is the object of a classical education, because it will support the intellectual virtues.

I'd like to point out another interesting facet of this, what I think is a reason for the fact that loving the beautiful and hating the ugly prepares one to love the truth as truth. This reason is that the good, the true, and the beautiful are all aspects of one and the same reality. If something is good, it is beautiful, for it will necessarily have the qualities that make something beautiful. Similarly, if something is true, it is beautiful, for it will have all the qualities that make something beautiful.

St. Thomas Aquinas is wonderfully clear. When a question like “What is beauty?” comes up, St. Thomas is the first person I go to for the answer. In Question 39, Article 8, of the *Prima Pars*, which is part of a discussion of the Trinity, St. Thomas defines beauty in terms of three qualities: integrity, due proportion or harmony, and clarity.

Let's think briefly about these three qualities with respect to something that we are used to thinking of as beautiful. Consider a statue. If all the parts of the statue are there, the statue has *integrity*. If the nose is missing, the statue won't have integrity, and will be lacking beauty by reason of that fact. Now, if the nose is present, but too long, the statue would lack proportion and would not be beautiful on that account. If the statue's parts are in the right proportions, it is said to have the quality of *due proportion*. Now, those two qualities are pretty easy to understand. I think *clarity* is harder.

A statue is said to have clarity when it is distinct and its structure is apparent. So the quality of clarity belongs to an object when the object is clear, and also when it makes something clear that wasn't before. For example, a landscape painting is not only a faithful reproduction of the landscape. In that painting you see through the eyes of the artist. He is showing you what he

sees in a particular way, and because he is an artist he may well see it better than you would without his help.

In the book *The Classic Point of View* by Kenyon Cox (a really interesting book on art appreciation), Mr. Cox points out that the impressionists made light their subject, and sacrificed clarity and the structure of the objects in order to glorify the light. He contrasts this to Leonardo de Vinci, who was very aware of the behavior and effect of light, but chose not to represent it exactly as perceived. I think this passage is worth examining for us to get a better idea of the notion of clarity.

“There are several long passages among his (Leonardo’s) notes describing the effects of foliage as seen by transmitted and reflected light, in which the blue surface lights, the yellowness of transparent leaves seen from below, and the mottling of these leaves by the shadows of other leaves which come between them and the sun, are considered with great particularity. And then comes this warning: ‘Never represent leaves as though transparent in the sun, *because they are always indistinct.*’ And again: ‘The structure of such a leaf is indistinct, and the imitation of it is to be avoided.’ There speaks the true classic spirit. The structure is indistinct, and no amount of illusion will compensate, to the true classicist, for the lack of clarity and the lack of structure.”

So, at least to two artists, the notion of clarity involves making the object distinct and revealing the structure. That makes sense in terms of the ordinary understanding of beauty. If the parts are not distinct, the object can’t be seen, and then the beauty of the statue would not be apparent. I think it would be like having everything about the statue be slightly smudged.

So every beautiful thing has the three qualities: integrity or wholeness, proportion and clarity. But that is true of every true thing, and of every good thing. Think about it.

All of this is to say that in our pursuit of wisdom, in our classical education curricula, in our pursuit of the liberal arts, philosophy, and ultimately, theology, we have to remember the importance of claiming the heart of our students, of helping them achieve in some measure the original justice that was lost in the Fall. In Adam, before the Fall, the reason proposed and the will followed, and the appetites lined right up with both. It wasn’t like it is now, where there is an internal war between these elements.

How do we encourage the moral virtue in our students which will help them achieve the end of classical education and the end of all life, the knowledge of God? We give good example, most of all. We try to foster their relationship with God and His only Son, our Savior. But we also expose them to the beautiful. Our curricula should include beautiful art that is looked at closely, so as to impress itself in the mind and heart of the student. I use the *Child Size Masterpieces* from Parent Child Press, and *Art Memo* in the early years with my students, (We throw out any ugly pictures.) We go to art museums, after the students are prepared to go. We first get reproductions of the beautiful pictures in the museum, become thoroughly familiar with them, and then, when we go to the museum, we have a “treasure hunt”, looking for those particular pictures. It’s fun. We read great literature, literature that encourages the children to see and admire the noble, which is beautiful, for it has integrity, proportion and clarity. Bill Bennet’s *Book of Virtues* and *The Moral Compass* are useful, but so are many of the classic children’s literature books. *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates*, *The Secret Garden*, *The Little Princess*, *Pollyanna*, *The Girl of the Limberlost*, *Horatius at the Bridge*, *The Selfish Giant*, *The Lion in the Gateway*, *The Gifts of the Child Christ*, *Sense and Sensibility*, *The Little Lame Prince*, *A Tale of Two Cities*, one could go on and on. Also the books that are specifically about those who have

lived for Christ, the saints and heroic Christian figures are helpful. It is important for our goal of classical education that our children have this cloud of witnesses to the truth in front of their eyes, lighting their way on the path to contemplation of God, the goal of classical education. Beautiful poetry should also be included in the curriculum, as it moves the emotions rightly, in accord with right reason. My anthology of poetry, *The Harp and Laurel Wreath*, has many such poems in it. But perhaps most importantly in this line there is the question of music.

The thing about music is that people seem to have a real need for it. If one is not exposed to beautiful art, chances are good that he just won't develop an appreciation of art. He is unlikely to develop an appreciation for ugly art (It seems to take real training to do that.) Or if he doesn't read great literature, he will not necessarily gravitate to trashy reading. But if one doesn't develop an appreciation for the beautiful in music, he will almost certainly develop a love for ugly music.

Unfortunately, in our culture, there is a pervasive use of ugly music that makes it harder to bring children to an appreciation of truly great music. We are all exposed, day in and day out, to rock and rap and punk and whatever other kinds of music. Older children who have not been exposed to classical music from the beginning will have to learn to like it. It is more complex and therefore more demanding than much of what they are used to hearing.

In my experience, a regular exposure to good music when children are young leads to a love of classical music when they are older. They develop favorites among composers and their works, and listen regularly to music they choose. As with art, field trips to the 'real thing' are very helpful in developing appreciation. Look for live concerts to go to, and prepare for the event by listening to the music ahead of time. Then the children will have the pleasure of recognition added to the experience of listening to fine music well performed.

All of these activities involving the beautiful require leisure, for none of these can be comprehended hurriedly. Our curricula, dedicated to learning about the highest things in the right order, have to allow children time to absorb into their souls the true, the good and the beautiful. We want them to come to a true appreciation of these things. To do that there has to be a kind of correspondence between the object and the soul of the student. Anybody can learn to recognize particular pictures of pieces of music or works of literature. But to appreciate them there has to be reflection of the mind, and that requires time. We are a goal oriented society, and there are many good things about that. But we mustn't let the cultural norms interfere with the contemplation of the beautiful that leads the soul to love of it.

Our goal is to get to heaven, where there is infinite leisure for contemplation. We prepare for that here, and there are stages in that preparation. Children (and for that matter, adults) are prepared by a threefold exposure to beauty, goodness, and truth.

We need to have the hearts of our children. We need to talk to them, and spend time with them. We need to give them the example of moral virtue and of love for and the pursuit of the truth. We need to see their education as the cultivation of both intellectual wisdom and moral virtue arrived at by nourishing them on all that is good. All of this is done in Christ, for it as Christians that we do all that we do. Christ is the vine and we are the branches. We are what we are because of our connection to Him.

God is so good. He prepared men for the fullness of classical education by showing it to us in the natural order first, in men like Aristotle who did not have the benefit of Divine Revelation. Then He showed us that this natural order is itself ordered to something greater, namely the

supernatural order. St. Thomas taught us eloquently about the end of such an education, and showed us clearly that the end of such an education is the end that all men share – to see God face to face. In pursuing classical education for ourselves and for our children we are preparing for glory with and in Him. Thanks be to God.